

**‘Enjoyable’, ‘okay’,
or ‘like drawing teeth’?**



**Chinese and British Students’ Views
on Writing Assignments in UK
Universities**

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Why explore attitudes?



Academic writing is a 'high stakes' activity

- **Yet...** it's difficult to work out the 'rules of the academic achievement game' Newman, 2001:470
- And 'the majority of students... not prepared for the type of literacies they would encounter at university' Hardy & Clughen, 2012:33

Little work has been done on students' *attitudes* towards assessed academic writing

- Do they enjoy/hate/endure assessed writing?
- Is it useful?
- How far do students feel they are prepared for tertiary-level writing?
- Do they feel they improve over time?
- Do L1 and L2 English students have different views?

Student questionnaire data



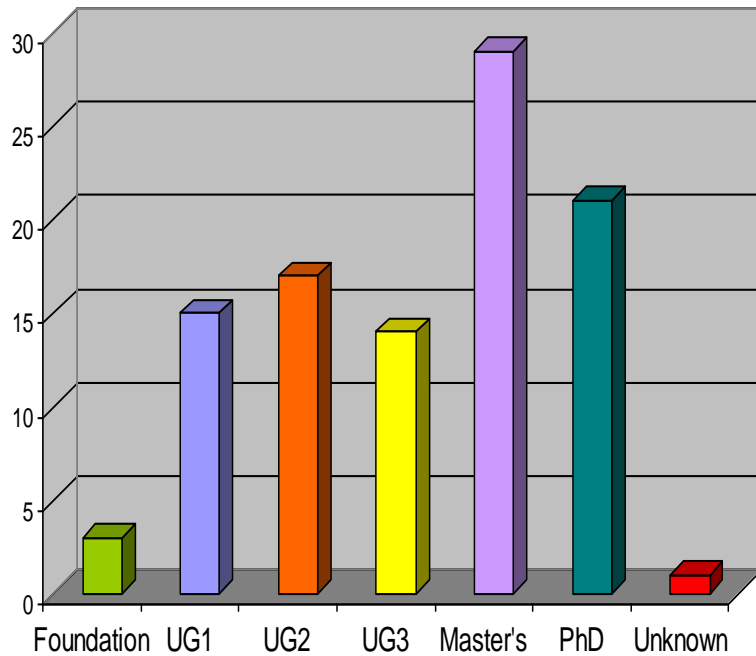
- Online survey - 202 responses from Chinese and British students
- Wide range of disciplines, 37 universities and all yeargroups (Fdn, UG, PG)
- Responses were coded twice, with a year interval in between, for greater intra-rater reliability
- Follow-up questions by email with 55 respondents
- Third round of questions by email (11 students) or f2f/phone interview (6)
- Part of a larger (corpus) study of Chinese and British students' writing in UK universities (see book flyer!)

Student questionnaire data

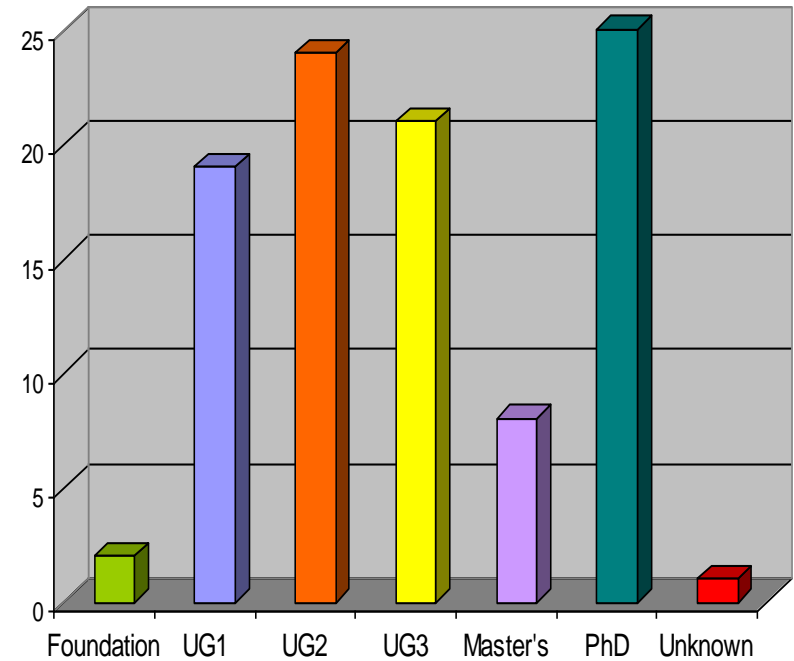
Year Groups (as %)



Chinese (n=75)



English (n=127)



How do you plan and write your assignments?



L1 Chinese students (n=51)

Most write straight to a computer

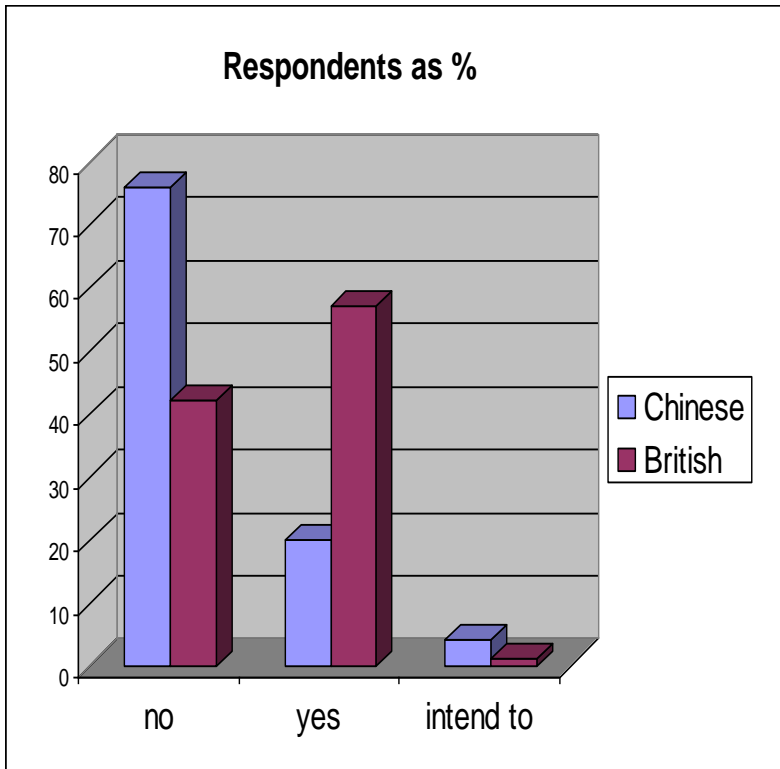
- yes, i write them on computer straight away, but I make changes afterwards
- a draft plan in my brain and straight on to the computer
- Usually I use a computer to plan and outline the writing
- make a plan, do some research, write a draft

L1 English students (n=109)

Most plan on paper first

- Long-hand essay plan, then on the computer.
- I make a rough plan... Then I go through books and journals and take notes on paper. Then I put all my notes into word in note form and then I arrange all the notes...its a very long way round but its the only way I can do it!
- Plans, drafts, suffering, more plans, more drafts, and submission

Have you changed the way you plan and write? (i.e. while at university)



Chinese (n=51)

- no, just a habit.
- I had been used to write in Chinese firstly and then translate it. But afterward I switch to writing and planning at the same time.
- Sometimes I think in Chinese... I know it's not good but it's inevitable.
- Still I am not good at planning things. I would start straight ahead.
- Yes, more systematic

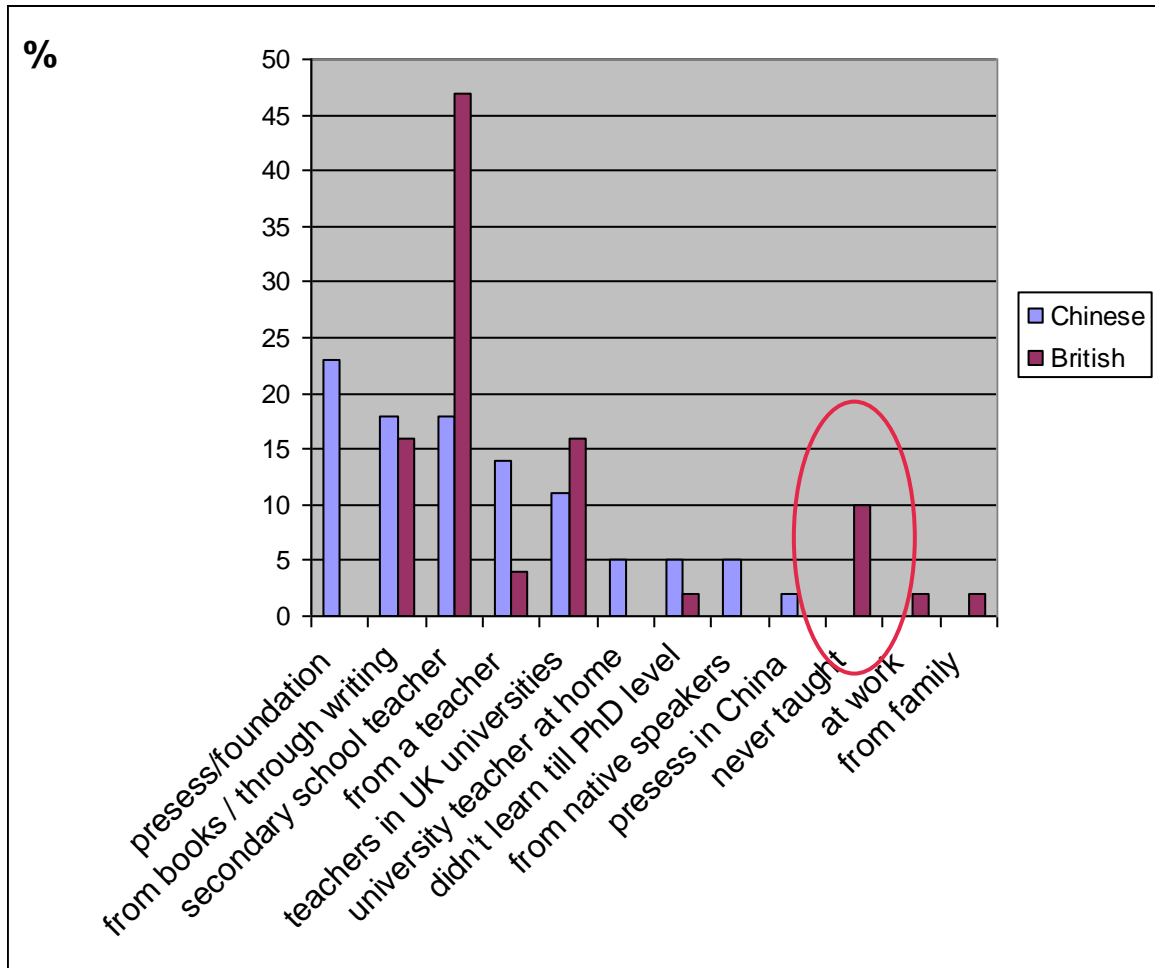
British (n=106)

- No, I use the same method I learnt at school and it still works for me!
- Not really. I'd like to plan more, perhaps but time simply isn't there.
- Yes, I spend more time planning and checking through or re-drafting.
- Yes - I plan them before I write. Also, I've absorbed some of the 'style' appropriate to the discipline.
- i've developed it since starting uni, before did it all by hand

Where and how were you taught about academic writing?



By this, I mean the kind of assignment writing you do at University, e.g. At Secondary school/In a pre-sessional in the UK/We used a textbook/the teacher gave us tips'



Where and how were you taught about academic writing? - Chinese students



90% said they had received teaching but many said this was....

Vague or minimal

- At High School, I learnt academic writing for IELTS text. i don't think I've been taught about academic writing till I came to UK
- I was never seriously taught about academic writing. The teacher in foundation course only gave me the tips in writing in IELTS. (Masters in Film and Theatre)
- I think for me I only learn it after I started my PhD study, from reading papers and getting corrections from my supervisor. (PhD in Computer Science)

Learning through 'trial and error'

- Most of it is by reading, and loads of practice i guess.
- Follow textbook guidance, self-practice, through trials and errors and reading examples of academic writings. (Year 2 in Interdisciplinary Studies)

Where and how were you taught about academic writing? - British Students



Again, **90%** said they'd been taught how to write, but still said this was....

Vague or minimal

- When doing 'A' level English the teacher said something about listing a few points and making them into paragraphs but that was all. (Year 3 Philosophy)
- I have reams of notes which were virtually thrown at us to learn in our own time. (Year 3 Electrical and Electronic Engineering)
- I'm surprised how little help we get with writing our assignments at university, especially considering the fact that we had a whole module in a semester on how to use a PC. (Year 2 Business Studies)
- I have never been taught about essay writing at GCSE I did very little and I deliberately chose A levels that didn't involve essays (Year 3 Adult Nursing)
- never taught apart from some hints and tips at university (PhD in Astrophysics)

Where and how were you taught about academic writing? - British Students



Trial and Error

- i have never been taught how to write academically, I'm slowly learning during the Master's course, learning through the mistakes I make. (MSc in Maths Education)
- At uni I had one seminar in the first year but apart from that I have learnt through reading study skills books and trial and error, I still don't even know if I am doing it right but as I have passed so far I guess its ok. (Year 3 Adult Nursing)

10% said they'd never been taught

- I think I pretty much just picked it up as I went along. (Year 1 French)
- I feel I didn't really get any insights into academic writing until I started at Masters level. (PhD in E-learning)
- The percentage here and elsewhere is given as an approximation, as it involves an interpretation of student responses.

With the result....

- I've always been very bad essay writer and it's contributed to the spectacular failure of my academic career. (Year 3 Philosophy)

Generally, how do you feel about assignment writing at the moment? e.g. do you enjoy it/feel it's useful? Has your attitude changed over your time at University? If so, in what way?



- Chinese students (n=51)

Challenging, yet enjoyable

- After I finish it, I have a sense of accomplishment.
- I like assignment writing, I prefer it to exams.
- It's useful but hard
- yes. I change from abomination to custom.
- writing assignments is challenging but rewarding... I enjoy it because I can see my improvement.
- Before I came to study here. I was not good at writing. Now I seem to enjoy it. It is a good way to manifest my English skill.
- At beginning, it's tough as the way is very different from what I was required in my homecountry.

Generally, how do you feel about assignment writing at the moment? - Chinese students



I don't enjoy it

- I do not enjoy it because I always have to rush to meet the deadline.
 - I don't enjoy it. but it improve my English as well.
 - Nervous
 - It should have been much more useful if there had been an assignment clinic.
 - I don't really like it... maybe it's because I'm so bad at writing, so I don't write often and don't want to show it to others.
 - it's really difficult. I always worry about my grammar and my expression.
-
- a tough process
 - useful but hard
 - a hard nut for most Chinese students

Generally, how do you feel about assignment writing at the moment? – British students (n=96)



Love....

- useful and enjoyable
- I really like writing assignments because you feel a sense of satisfaction... especially if you get a good mark
- Enjoy it, learn a lot. But i stress about deadlines.
- helpful for thinking things through.
- I like writing but just procrastinate
- Love it. I've always enjoyed writing. I find it useful for consolidating my thoughts.
- i enjoy essay writing over other forms of assessments, eg exams, posters

.....hate relationship

- I find writing painful, stressful, like drawing teeth... I don't think it gets easier - but more and more difficult.
- time consuming and boring
- Much of it rather pointless
- I hate it! I struggle to put the ideas together
- It's OK once I've really got into it but I struggle to get started and am finder this harder and harder
- Writing is always a challenge for me; when it's going well, time passes while I am unaware. When I am struggling, it is the hardest task in the world.

Generally, how do you feel about assignment writing at the moment? – British students



Misunderstanding the assessment rubric

- misinterpreting the rubrics,
- providing insufficient supporting evidence
- giving ‘the wrong kinds of information’
- failing to show an adequate level of criticality.
- ‘ambiguous’ question rubrics.

Working across disciplines

- Follow-up questions of British undergraduates taking combined honours degrees suggest awareness of different writing styles
- English and Sociology student - in English she tried to use ‘more sophisticated’ vocabulary and in Sociology she is ‘more straightforward’.
- A Sociology and Anthropology student - Sociology essays ‘more colloquial’

PhD students' reflections



- I find writing painful, stressful, like drawing teeth [...] I don't think it gets easier - but more and more difficult. (PhD in Sociology)
- akin to suffering from bi-polar disorder. There are times when the writing isn't flowing and I feel depressed and worthless. When I complete something I am happy with I feel elated. (PhD in Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics)
- always a challenge [...] when it's going well, time passes while I am unaware. When I am struggling, it is the hardest task in the world. (PhD in Applied Linguistics).
- [I was] willing to take the hit of being marked down accordingly to do work which I wanted to do' ((comment on knowingly deciding to produce different work to that required in the assignment; PhD in Educational Technology)
- social sciences require a discursive writing style, whereas technology requires a more precise and detailed technical style (PhD in sustainable transport).



Implications

- No smooth path from UG to PG.
- Student writing is characterised by struggle and deadlines throughout....
- Both student groups feel under-prepared
- 5:3 like: dislike for both student groups
- L1 Chinese students - utility of writing
- L1 English students - stronger views
- Implications for the transition of British students in moving from writing at secondary school in the UK to university as well as the preparation for L2 English students on foundation courses.



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