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Maria Leedham

Abstract

Many Chinese students in the PRC hope to study abroad at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Common destinations for Chinese students are 'inner circle' English-speaking countries such as the UK or US (Kachru, 2006). In the UK, Chinese students now comprise the largest international student group yet, despite this, little is known about their university-level writing and the challenges they face. The study reported in this paper draws on the British Academic Written English corpus - a large corpus of undergraduate student writing collected in the UK in the early 2000s - to explore Chinese students' written assignments in English, contrasting these with assignments from British students across a range of university disciplines.

The majority of corpus studies on student writing have contrasted first language (L1) and second language (L2) student groups in terms of what is *missing* or *deficient* in the writing of the latter. ETiC is unusual in taking a stand against this deficit model and promoting a range of acceptability in language use (e.g. see Issue 5 on the acceptability of writing in English as a Lingua Franca [ELF]). Based on the findings from the current corpus study, this paper similarly proposes that scholars need to consider expanding the notion of what constitutes 'good' student writing in order to encompass a range of intercultural styles.

Introduction: Chinese students in the UK

The number of international students in the UK has been rising rapidly in recent years and currently stands at over 600,000 per year, estimated to be worth 8.5 billion pounds to the UK economy (The British Council, 2013). Within the group of all non-UK domiciled students, the single greatest provider of international students to the UK is the PRC, with Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan also among the top 10 non-EU senders. Hence, Chinese people now comprise the largest single overseas student group in the UK with more than 105,000 Chinese students registered at all UK educational institutions in 2012 (The British Council, 2013), representing a year on year increase.

Once in the UK, Chinese students must adapt to the writing required, overcoming difficulties such as tutors' lack of articulation as to exactly what they require (e.g. Crème and Lea, 2003; Lillis, 1997); tutor and students' varied ideas of what a particular assignment entails (Lea, 2004) and different perceptions of what constitutes 'good writing' (e.g. Lillis and Turner, 2001). At university, assignments are framed within a particular discipline and, in contrast to previous assumptions of academic writing being a monolithic 'one size fits all', many researchers have emphasized how university students have to learn to write in ways prescribed by their discipline in order to have their voices recognized (e.g. Harwood and Hadley, 2004; Hewings, 1999). To achieve this goal, a high level of competence in English language is required, including awareness of discipline-specific conventions (e.g. Santos, 2014).

Given the scale of Chinese students' presence in UK universities and the difficulty of the task ahead of them, it might be expected that there would be a considerable body of research into this group's academic writing at all levels. However, the majority of large-scale research studies are limited to the short argumentative essays within learner corpora (e.g. see Paquot, 2010) rather than the longer discipline-specific writing at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

The study reported on in this paper is a comparison of two corpora: one comprising Chinese students' writing in English at undergraduate level in UK universities and the other British students' writing with the same conditions of production. The next section provides an overview of the data and methodology followed and the following section explores one aspect of the findings.

Data and methodology of corpus linguistics

The data for this study was extracted from the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus (Nesi and Gardner, 2012). This corpus (or collection of texts) was collected between 2000 and 2008 at the universities of Oxford Brookes, Reading, Warwick and Coventry in the UK and comprises around 6.5 million words within approximately 2,900 student assignments from over 30 disciplines and four levels of study (three undergraduate years and one Masters year). All writing in BAWE is deemed 'proficient' student writing, defined as graded assignments receiving the UK Honours degree classifications of Upper Second ('merit') or First ('distinction'). The data was narrowed to texts from undergraduate L1 Chinese students in a range of disciplines (notably Biology, Economics, Engineering) whose secondary education was mainly in their home country. The same conditions were applied to the L1 English students, resulting in the corpora below.

	L1 Chinese corpus 'Chi123'	L1 English corpus 'Eng123'
Number of words	279,695	1,335,676
Number of texts	146	611
Number of students	45	70

Table 1   Number of words, texts and students per corpus
(NB 'Chi123' denotes the Chinese corpus, undergraduate years 1, 2 and 3.)

The assignments extracted from the BAWE corpus are primarily investigated through the methodology of corpus linguistics. This enables the comparison of one corpus or collection of texts with another, larger, reference corpus: in this case the L1 Chinese corpus was compared with the larger L1 English corpus. Procedures focused on the investigation of keywords and key lexical chunks (items which are key words or chunks occur more often in one corpus when compared to another than would be expected by chance).

The main means of exploring each dataset in the study was through the corpus linguistic technique of keyword analysis. 'Keywords' are those words or n-grams (two or more consecutive words) which occur statistically more frequently in a small corpus than in a larger 'reference' corpus, relative to the total number of words in each corpus. A keyword is thus a word which occurs with unusual frequency in a text, or 'what the text "boils down to"' (Scott and Tribble, 2006, p.78), and as such offers some insight into the differences between two corpora. Many of the keywords uncovered were from semantically coherent areas, and

these were grouped together into 'key categories' (see Leedham, 2015 for a fuller description of the keyword process and the whole study).

Four key categories were uncovered through the keyword analysis:

1) connectors (e.g., *on the other hand, last but not least*);
2) informal items; e.g., *lots, a little bit*);
3) use of the first person plural (e.g., *we, we also need to*); and
4) references to data or visuals within the text (e.g., *the figure, according to the*).

For reasons of space, the remainder of this paper focuses on the final of these key categories.

Findings: High use of visuals, lists and formulae

Student use of lexical items relating to visuals, lists and formulae has not previously been reported on in the student writing literature. This category includes numbers (whether single digits or lengthy numerals), formulae (mathematical, chemical or other), and references or directives to data items (e.g. *according to the + figure/appendix/equation* [or *eq*]*, refer to (the) + figure/table +* [number]). Here, a 'table' consists of any graphic presented using rows and columns while a 'figure' covers any graph, diagram, image, picture, or drawing. A 'list' is a regular list of noun groups or similar fragments of prose, whereas a 'listlike' is formatted as a list but the list items are given in complete sentences.

Examples of prose referring to the use of visuals are given below:

(1) According to the program and *refer* to the *figure* 4.1.1, it is easy to find… (Chi123, Engineering).

(1) As shown in *Figure* 3, IHG even shows a better performance than… (Chi123, HLTM).

(2) According to the 3 sets of data calculated above… (Chi123, Food Science).

The existence of frequent references to visuals does not in itself mean the Chinese students use more of these features in their assignments than the British students: it could be that the former are simply naming and referring to external visuals using a small set of lexical items which thus appear many times and become keywords. The next step in the study was thus to count the number of tables, figures, formulae, lists and listlikes. This revealed that the Chinese students made greater use of all of these features than the British students (Figure 1).
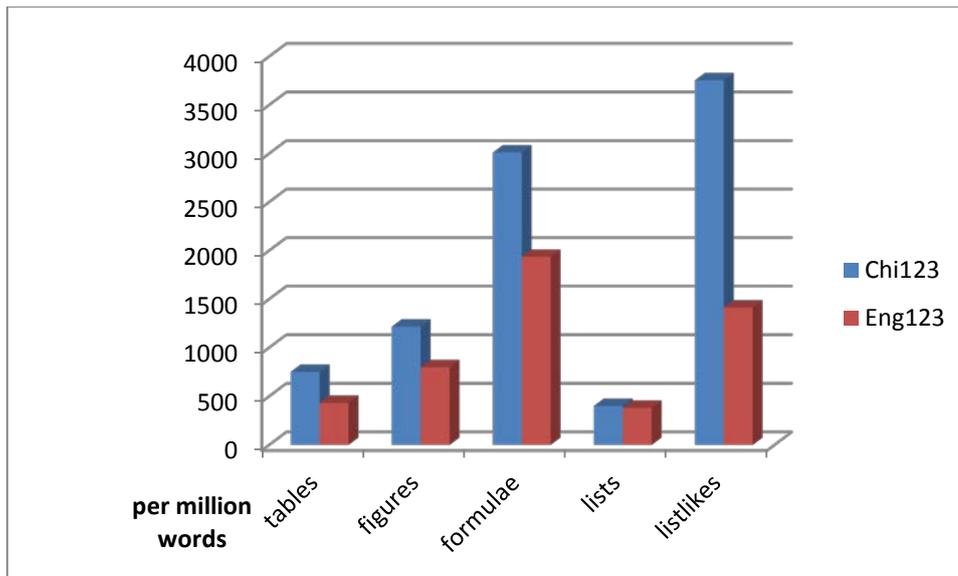
Figure 1 Visuals and Lists in the Two Corpora

(Significantly greater use by Chinese students for all features except lists. p<.0001)

One possible explanation for this higher usage of visuals and lists is that employing a table, figure, list or listlike to present information in an assignment is an attractive option for Chinese students since it reduces the quantity of connected (L2) prose required. A great deal of information may be given succinctly in a table or figure, resulting in shorter wordcounts; similarly, lists and listlikes reduce the need for connecting chunks and again reduce the wordcount. More positive explanations for the differences are that visuals and lists are viable alternative means of giving the required information, that they do so concisely, and that they also help more visual readers to process information.

Detailed exploration of writing within Biology, Economics and Engineering suggests that using visuals and lists are different, yet equally acceptable, ways of writing assignments. In a follow-on interview study, lecturers in Biology, Economics and Engineering suggest that visuals and lists are highly favoured in these particular disciplines (see also Leedham, 2012). For example, one Biology lecturer commented that students should 'do whatever it [takes] to make it clearer… tables, pictures, dividing into subsections… whatever helps you'. This degree of flexibility allows for a wide range of variation in answering the assignment question, enabling students to present their data within a table if this is more appropriate, or to provide an image and prose in explaining the method they used in an experiment. An open-minded approach to the display of knowledge and use of a range of multimodal resources to persuade the reader was prevalent among the lecturers interviewed.

Conclusion

The keyword analysis of the two student corpora suggested that the use of visuals and lists is a significant area of difference in the writing of L1 Chinese and L1 English students. Given the challenges involved in writing at undergraduate level for all students (e.g. uncertainties over the rubric, the wide range of genres required, the discipline specific lexis and disciplinary conventions required) and the additional difficulties for L2 students, it is unsurprising that a range of strategies are developed. Since the writing of both student groups has been judged by discipline specialists to be of a high standard, it seems that differences in the use of

visuals and lists illustrate the broad range of acceptability of these features at undergraduate level.

Important features for discipline lecturers – and also EAP tutors – are a level of reflexivity in exploring the 'taken-for-granted' procedures and practices in order to demystify academia (Lillis, 2012, p.245), as well as a flexible attitude in considering what might be acceptable. This open-mindedness moves beyond lexicogrammatical considerations (e.g. the acceptability of *I* or the choice of passive/active voice) to also exploring assignments and multimodally (for instance, the acceptability of a table to display results, presenting a conclusion as a bulleted list). Breadth of vision allows tutors to recognise different ways of achieving the same end goal in writing, and to embrace the different cultural backgrounds L2 English students bring to their studies.

Note

The data in this study come from the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus, which was developed at the Universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford Brookes under the directorship of Hilary Nesi and Sheena Gardner (formerly of the Centre for Applied Linguistics [previously called CELTE], Warwick), Paul Thompson (formerly of the Department of Applied Linguistics, Reading) and Paul Wickens (Westminster Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes), with funding from the ESRC (RES-000-23-0800).

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