

# Informal essay



I received an education from elementary school through college in Shanghai, China. As Shanghai is an international city, its education authorities greatly value the importance of English learning and English is thus one of the mandatory subjects taught beginning in elementary school. Chinese students can score high marks and even outscore native English speakers on tests such as the GRE and GMAT, but on writing sections, Chinese students' performance lags far behind the average. Why does this happen?

What should be the proper teaching strategy in an ESL/EFL writing classroom? This paper shares my perspectives on English writing, teaching, and learning, based on my own experiences. My English writing classes started in middle school. Before that, my English classes mostly emphasized the teaching of vocabulary and grammar. However, even though I was now a middle school student, English writing was still not treated as an important part of English learning. There was no separate English writing class.

Once or twice every month, my English teacher would give us a 40-minute English writing lecture. The ironic thing is, as I see it today, this lecture was still more of a reading class than a writing class, because most of the time my teacher would assign us a certain amount of reading, ask us to underline the sentences we thought were “good” and write them into our notebooks. Although I agree that reading is the foundation of writing, I disapprove of this way of teaching writing.

In my second year of middle school, teachers started to “formally” teach writing. We would be given certain simple topics to write about such as “The most unforgettable thing in your life” or “My family”. To begin the writing task, my teacher would first read several examples and carefully help the

class analyze why each composition was excellent and explain what we should be aware of when writing about this topic. Another thing worth mentioning is that these examples were usually assigned as rote learning.

The only criteria for a composition included length, absence of spelling or grammar mistakes, and the use of new vocabulary. As we can see, the content of the compositions was completely overlooked; instead, grammar and vocabulary alone still played the key roles in our writing education. Limiting the scope of this paper, I will not continue on with a summary of my high school and college English writing education, because I believe these early experiences already suffice to represent the usual methods of teaching writing in China. Today, whenever I reflect on my past learning experiences in writing, I meet with some difficult emotions. I can say I am a skilled writer in my native language, but I still lack confidence in English writing. I feel I am a victim of English education in China because I always have a hard time outputting what is in my mind with decent English. Whenever that difficulty arises, I feel awful, as if I am linguistically and cognitively deficient.

Also, having been educated for so long in China, where repeatedly writing model compositions is the fundamental approach in improving writing, another weakness of my writing is its lack of creativity and critical thinking. My thoughts are restricted into a limited space and I am just accustomed to recalling whatever is already filed in my repertoire of writing expressions, drawn from those model compositions. One year ago, I enrolled in a GRE writing course in Shanghai to prepare for my GRE test in which the only materials handed out were two books.

One was a 28-page book with all kinds of model sentences this organization had arranged in a list, and the second was a thick book covering all the likely topics (about 130 topics in all) to be tested in the GRE writing section with sample compositions. Although the instructor offered some insightful writing skills, the implication was obvious to everyone—for those unable to write a composition themselves, just repeat the sample sentences and compositions; hopefully, the topic you are tested on happens to be the one you have learned by rote.

Having undergone these frustrations and confusions in English writing, I realized that good English writing skills do not come from popular writing instruction books, no matter how appealing the titles—whether “ Learn to Write in 10 Minutes,” or “ Be a Writing King,” one cannot develop into a skilled writer by simply memorizing the tips they offer or memorizing the sentences they list. You can never become a skilled writer by only recalling sample compositions, or even by focusing only on correct grammar and spelling.

From my own experience, I do benefit from reading books and newspapers written by native English speakers and recording the brilliant sentences or ideas from these resources. This might be the only aspect of the Chinese English education system I applaud, and I still keep this habit today. However, it should never be the sole method of learning. The second strategy I recommend to ESL writing students is to reject whatever appears first in their mind when searching for writing resources, because this might also be another’s first choice.

Seven out of ten students might choose Marie Curie for the topic “Female Scientists;” erase the thought of Marie Curie and instead choose Ada Byron or Rosalind Franklin. You need to think carefully in order to make your compositions outstanding from others’ and leave your readers with a lasting impression. In my opinion, not everyone can produce the superior sentences or command the vast vocabulary of Mark Twain, but we can certainly distinguish ourselves by our content.

Having practiced English writing for several years, I think the two most salient differences from my Chinese writing style and English writing style are the writing tone and the method of organizing a composition. Chinese writing styles are typically reserved while American styles are more often straightforward. Chinese people pursue collectivism while Americans value individualism. To most Chinese, maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships is vitally important.

Moreover, the Chinese government exerts invisible power over people through words, so people are cautious in expressing their opinions in order to avoid unnecessary trouble. As a result, My Chinese writing style is relatively more tactful than my English writing. I tend to call for the collective good in the last sentence of my Chinese compositions. In contrast, when I write in English, I prefer to express my voice without worrying about breaking harmony with others because I know individual rights are highly recognized in Western society.

The second difference between my Chinese writing and English writing is the method of organizing compositions. The basic English composition structure follows the pattern of introduction-body-conclusion while the Chinese

structure is characterized as beginning-following-turning-concluding, which is the same as the Japanese style. The turning section is expected to be surprising, and the whole composition reaches its climax at this point. This also is related to what I have mentioned above—collectivism and individualism.

When writing in Chinese, I like to make my writing beautiful, lively and ornate for my readers. In other words, I feel I have responsibility for my readers and hope they will regard reading my writings as an enjoyment. However, when writing in English, all I think about is how to make my ideas clear to my readers. From my personal experiences of learning and writing in English, I can see what an influential role culture plays in writing in a second language. My students might come from different cultural backgrounds and hold different beliefs.

These all have a great influence over both what they write and how they write. As an ESL instructor, I think my job is not simply to teach them to comply with the Western way of writing and tell them to reject their original ways of writing. Instead, I think what is valuable for ESL instructors to know is how to guide our students toward writing truly excellent compositions. Their writing must be clear enough to be appreciated by the Western world, but should also maintain the cultural characteristics of their native language writing, because multiculturalism enriches our writing, bringing it color and vibrancy.