



The Impact of Background Knowledge Input on the Development of English Writing Skills Among University Students

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Abstract: In recent years, Chinese university students studying English have shown notable improvements in their writing skills. However, without mastering the relevant cultural context, their writing cannot achieve optimal effectiveness. This paper examines the challenges Chinese college students face in English writing and argues that insufficient background knowledge of the target language's culture hampers their performance. Current writing often reflects mother-tongue thinking, leading to "Chinese-style English" and structural mismatches between Chinese and English discourse. The study highlights the importance of cultural awareness as an integral component of comprehensive language competence and reviews how domestic English textbooks increasingly embed cultural information. To enhance students' writing, the paper proposes several strategies. By enriching input and fostering a British style linear discourse mode, learners can develop clearer focus, better coherence, and more authentic expression in English compositions. The findings suggest that systematic enrichment of cultural background knowledge is essential for improving Chinese students' English writing proficiency.

Key words: cultural background, university students' writing ability, effective methods

Introduction

Sapir, an American linguist, asserted in his 1921 work *Theory of Language* that indeed fundamentally "language cannot exist without culture".^[2] Lado, a renowned linguist, emphasizes that effective language acquisition is unattainable without mastering cultural background; language constitutes a cultural element, and genuine proficiency demands comprehension of cultural patterns in the target society and normative conventions for communicative success and integration.^[6] The curriculum for English majors at universities explicitly incorporates cultural competence into the program's cultivation objectives and development for English majors. It is evident that language learning necessitates grasping the relevant cultural background, particularly in English composition and expression. In recent years, domestic students' overall English proficiency and standardized test scores have risen markedly, yet their English writing competence and associated writing scores have not advanced proportionally as expected in academics. The underlying cause is that, beyond insufficient mastery of English linguistic knowledge, inadequate comprehension of target-language cultural background knowledge also constitutes a significant factor limiting students' capacity to produce context-appropriate written discourse and reducing communicative effectiveness.

Literature Review

In recent years, research on the low proficiency of Chinese college students in English writing and its underlying mechanisms has been increasing. Ellis emphasized that language input is a crucial factor in second-language acquisition; abundant and comprehensible input can promote the internalization of language by learners.^[5] Kaplan highlighted that differences in cultural backgrounds lead to distinct written discourse patterns, and the tendency of native-language thinking can result in negative transfer during writing, giving rise to "Chinglish".^[4] Building on these insights, domestic scholars have conducted empirical analyses of the manifestations and causes of Chinglish. Chen Botao, in *An Analysis of Chinglish Phenomena and Countermeasures in College Students' English Writing*, found that students often map vocabulary and structures directly from their mother tongue, producing expressions that do not conform to English-thinking patterns and thereby compromising writing quality.^[1] Moreover, the 2024 study *Analysis of Chinglish in College Students' English Writing* systematically categorized Chinglish manifestations at the lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels, emphasizing that enhancing students' sensitivity to Sino-English cultural differences is the fundamental way to avoid Chinglish. These findings provide theoretical support and practical guidance for reforming English writing instruction in higher education. The paper suggests a range of strategies to improve students' writing. By providing richer input and encouraging a linear discourse, learners can achieve sharper focus, stronger coherence, and more authentic expression in their English compositions.

Reasons for Inputting English Background Knowledge

1. The Current Situation of Students' Writing

Recent research indicates that Chinese college students' English writing is characterized by the following features:

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Students' writing relies on mother-tongue cognition, which permeates the entire second-language writing process and exerts both positive and negative influences. Chinese and English belong to distinct language families; although some positive transfer from Chinese to English occurs, substantial differences exist in phonology, lexicon, grammar, culture, discourse structure, and cognitive patterns. These linguistic divergences affect lexical selection, syntactic ordering, and pragmatic conventions, thereby shaping learners' written output. Chinese students' English writing represents a shift from a Chinese cultural-thinking mode to an English cultural-thinking mode.

Generally, learners default to their native language rather than the target language, which can trigger negative cultural transfer, causing the same content to be rendered very differently in English. Such transfer often manifests in literal translations, inappropriate collocations, and misaligned discourse markers. For instance, Chinese idioms praising an ox such as “力大如牛”, “气壮如牛” are typically expressed in English as “as strong as an ox.” Similarly, the Chinese expression “力大如牛” is rendered directly as “as strong as a horse” in English. Different languages embody distinct cognitive frameworks; sometimes they diverge dramatically, other times they align oppositely. For instance, Chinese narrative structures frequently employ a “big-to-small” progression, whereas English prefers a “small-to-big” or linear development. To mitigate such mismatches, learners must develop an awareness of the differing cultural backgrounds. Thus, cultural competence is essential.

2. Requirements of University English Teaching Materials

The primary objective of the domestic university English curriculum for fostering intercultural communication skills is to develop learners' comprehensive language proficiency at the tertiary level. Cultural awareness constitutes a pivotal element of this proficiency and ensures appropriate language use in both written and spoken forms. Language inherently carries rich cultural connotations that shape meaning.^[8] Currently, college English textbooks in China emphasize the cultivation of cultural knowledge and affective attitudes alongside the development of linguistic knowledge and skills. In textbook selection, the significance of cultural background knowledge receives heightened emphasis.^[9] Each chapter of the textbook provides extensive information on history, geography, customs, traditions, art, values, behavioral norms, and cultural contrasts between China and other nations today. In summary, a distinctive feature of these textbooks is the expansion of cultural background knowledge to comprehensively enhance students' overall language competence and lifelong learning.

Ways to Enlarge Background Knowledge of Target Language and Improve Students' Writing Skills

1. Enriching Background Knowledge

Language input can promote learners' language acquisition, and there is a close relationship between language input and learners' language output. Scholars believe that although language input cannot directly lead to language acquisition, language input plays a facilitating role in language acquisition. Language and culture are inextricably linked, and learners' background knowledge of English language and culture constrains their language acquisition. Therefore, rich background knowledge is particularly important in students' English writing.

Enriching background knowledge means broadening the horizons, increasing the input of background knowledge and enriching the content stored in the mind. How to enrich background knowledge? The methods are as follows:

(1) Utilize the textbooks in hand, expand and supplement them appropriately to enrich the background knowledge

Make full use of the textbooks at hand, expanding and supplementing them appropriately to enrich students' background knowledge. Each unit of the selected textbook centers on a specific topic; learners can treat that topic as a knowledge node and actively seek additional information—such as related historical events, cultural customs, or scientific facts—to deepen their understanding. In addition, teachers should incorporate current newspapers and magazines, selecting articles that relate to the unit's theme, to provide authentic, up-to-date contexts and further broaden students' cultural and linguistic horizons.

(2) Utilize newspapers and magazines to carefully select writing materials and accumulate rich background knowledge

Relying solely on textbooks for background knowledge is insufficient. Newspapers and magazines offer diverse topics, stay current, and blend information with interest, making them highly effective for broadening contextual knowledge and enhancing systematic background-knowledge input across disciplines for students' academic development and lifelong learning.

2. Exploring Chinese Thought Patterns and Language Divergences While Developing an English Academic Discourse Mode

The British discourse mode is linear: the main idea is stated first, then supporting points follow, and each sentence adds to the argument in a clear, step-by-step order. In contrast, Chinese paragraph organization is spiral; it gradually widens the perspective before reaching a conclusion, often presenting the issue from several angles before stating the main point. Because of this difference, Chinese learners of English often struggle with thesis articulation and logical flow. Their essays tend to have an unclear focus and lack overall coherence.

Due to limited awareness of numerous phonetic contrasts between Chinese and English, learners frequently breach English writing conventions in lexical choice, paragraphing, overall structure, argument development, and related dimensions. To craft a British-style linear essay, begin by formulating a single, concise thesis that clearly states the main claim—for instance, “Online learning offers greater flexibility, personalized pacing, and access to diverse resources, making it a superior educational model for many learners.” Next, identify the three supporting arguments that mirror the order of ideas presented in the thesis: flexibility, personalized pacing, and resource diversity. For each argument, write a dedicated paragraph that opens with a strong topic sentence introducing the point, then follow with concrete explanations,

examples, or evidence that elaborate on the claim. Finally, conclude the essay with a brief closing sentence that restates the overall benefits and extends the discussion by suggesting a broader implication, such as the need for wider institutional adoption. This sequential structure—thesis, ordered supporting paragraphs, and a summarizing conclusion—ensures logical progression and clear focus throughout the composition.

3. Enhancing English Writing Proficiency Through Increased Regular English Summaries

An English summary extracts the main points of a scholarly article and presents them as an independent short composition in the writer's own language; it is not a mere excerpt but a re-creative rendition faithful to the original meaning. To produce an effective English summary, a student must first grasp the cultural context, the core message, and the structural organization of the source material, analyzing each section's function and logical flow. Systematic and repeated practice of this process not only expands learners' target-language background knowledge, but also sharpens their logical reasoning abilities, enhances critical thinking, and strengthens both planning and overall textual layout skills in academic writing contexts.

To master English summarising, students should first understand the cultural and disciplinary background of the source, then break the text into functional sections (problem, evidence, conclusion). Next, they need to formulate a concise thesis that captures the overall argument, rewrite each section in their own words while preserving the logical sequence, and finally polish the paragraph for clarity, cohesion, and independence from the original wording. Repeating these steps will expand academic vocabulary, sharpen logical reasoning, and improve planning and overall textual organization in English academic writing.

4. Emulating Exemplar Essays to Enhance the Acquisition of Writing Skill Competence

Model writing has been considered an effective strategy for enhancing English writing proficiency, and simultaneously it enables learners to internalize linguistic input efficiently while elevating the quality of their output in academic contexts and professional settings. Model writing not only provides learners with linguistic exemplars drawn from the model text, but also allows them to appreciate the author's artistry, thereby inspiring them and stimulating a stronger desire to write. Imitation may assume diverse forms, including sentence-level copying, paragraph-level replication, or whole-article emulation as pedagogical strategies today.

Students should imitate a wide range of exemplary essays, conducting meticulous analyses of the author's conceptual framework, material selection, organizational planning, lexical choices, idea articulation, and rhetorical techniques; through repeated imitation they become acquainted with diverse English styles and registers, acquire the ability to employ cognitive patterns for structuring texts, learn to identify central themes, develop them coherently, and master the progressive transformation of words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into complete compositions, emphasizing cohesion, coherence, and an appropriate academic tone, for scholarly communication purposes.

5. Enhancing Cultural Literacy Among English Teachers: Strategies and Imperatives

Cultural background knowledge, broadly encompasses the politics, economy, history, geography, religion, customs, etiquette, morality, ethics, psychology, and all facets of social life in the target language nations; this includes but is not limited to their institutional frameworks and societal values. Narrowly, language serves as a principal conduit of culture, including everyday usage, proper nouns, idioms, folk proverbs, and other expressive or silent linguistic forms that convey extensive cultural information.

Educators should investigate diverse literary genres, such as poetry, drama, and contemporary prose. They may also engage with various literary works, view distinguished foreign films, appreciate refined English music, and employ media, including podcasts and archives, to grasp European and American cultural contexts, pursue learning, and enhance their cultural competence, thereby delivering English instruction that feels "alive".

To operationalize the development of cultural background knowledge, teachers should first select authentic, multimodal resources. In each lesson, students begin by activating prior knowledge through a brief discussion, then engage with a specific source—such as a news article on current political issues, a podcast discussing religious values, a literary excerpt (poetry, drama, or contemporary prose), a film clip illustrating everyday etiquette. After the exposure, learners identify and annotate the cultural information and the linguistic forms (proper nouns, idioms, proverbs, silent cues) that convey it. They then practice re-producing the content in their own words, shifting registers as appropriate, and finally synthesize their findings in a multimodal presentation. This cyclical process of exposure, analysis, production, and synthesis not only deepens cultural competence but also makes English instruction feel "alive" and directly relevant to learners' future communicative contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the persistent gap between Chinese college students' overall English proficiency and their actual writing performance underscores the pivotal role of cultural background knowledge in second-language acquisition. The paper proposes a five-fold teaching framework. Collectively, these strategies aim to transform English writing instruction from a purely linguistic exercise into a culturally informed practice. By deepening both learners' and instructors' intercultural awareness, universities can better equip students to produce coherent, idiomatic, and academically rigorous English texts, thereby narrowing the gap between test scores and genuine communicative competence.

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