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## A Phenomenological Study of Graduate Chinese Students' English Writing Challenges

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## A Phenomenological Study of Graduate Chinese Students' English Writing Challenges

### Abstract

More students from China are looking to the United States for learning opportunities. However, such students have serious English writing deficiencies. This is due to significant differences between the two languages. This phenomenological study of five Chinese, graduate level students in the United States, informs us of these issues and provides a basis upon which we can explore viable instructional strategies to deal with such issues. The key findings suggest that the participants feel marginalized due to English language deficiencies, which is complicated by a deficiently structured English language instructional system. Based on these findings, several themes are presented that underpin the core challenges faced by the participants, as well as participants' views of desirable support mechanisms to help their English writing process.

### Keywords

Pedagogy, Chinese, English, Writing, Logo Graphic, Alphabetic, Curriculum, Graduate, Higher Education

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## A Phenomenological Study of Graduate Chinese Students' English Writing Challenges

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*More students from China are looking to the United States for learning opportunities. However, such students have serious English writing deficiencies. This is due to significant differences between the two languages. This phenomenological study of five Chinese, graduate level students in the United States, informs us of these issues and provides a basis upon which we can explore viable instructional strategies to deal with such issues. The key findings suggest that the participants feel marginalized due to English language deficiencies, which is complicated by a deficiently structured English language instructional system. Based on these findings, several themes are presented that underpin the core challenges faced by the participants, as well as participants' views of desirable support mechanisms to help their English writing process. Keywords: Pedagogy, Chinese, English, Writing, Logo Graphic, Alphabetic, Curriculum, Graduate, Higher Education*

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As an emerging global partner in the educational arena, the United States welcomes students from many countries to study in its institutions. Of these, Chinese students represent the largest segment with approximately 304,040 learners constituting 31.2% of the international student population in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2015). The high volume of this population warrants paying close attention to any issues such students may be facing, to continue having a mutually beneficial collaboration. One issue that needs immediate attention is that Graduate students from China within the United States continue to face challenges when writing in English, despite being exposed to the English language over a considerable period in China and in the United States (Li, 2012). This suggests ineffective teaching practices in China and inadequate support in the United States for such learners in the context of English proficiencies. This problem warrants examination as the volume of Chinese students continues to grow in the United States, and the associated cultural and financial implications are significant (NAFSA, 2013). For example, in 2014-2015, the Chinese students in the United States collectively contributed \$9.8 billion into the nation's economy through tuition and fees (IIE, 2016). In addition, literature suggest that working with students from foreign countries may enhance communication skills and the understanding of global communities for native learners (Morse, 2012; Peck, 2014; Yun, 2015).

Writing is especially crucial at the Graduate level, since students write not only for academic reasons, but also to prepare for professional fields, particularly in education. At the graduate level, students are expected to be efficient consumers and producers of research, which requires a higher level of writing competency. Holders of Graduate degrees are likely to seek employment opportunities in academia. Therefore, weak writing skills can be detrimental to their success as educators and negatively impact their future students (Bair & Mader, 2013; Moulding & Hadley, 2010; Mullen, 2006). Currently, there is scant literature on the challenges faced by Chinese Graduate students' English writing (Bair & Mader, 2013). In an attempt to get a deeper understanding of such challenges, and to make recommendations for stakeholders in China and in the United States, this paper seeks to provide insight to teachers that may assist with curriculum redesign for such international learners. This study sought answers to the question:

*What are the perceptions of Chinese graduate students regarding experiences of writing in the English language?*

## Literature Review

### Language Socialization Theory (LST): Theoretical Frame

**Overview.** Ochs's (1989) language socialization theory (LST) states that people learn language through socialization and socialize through language. Thus, language socialization involves simultaneous learning of a language and associated culture. "Many formal and functional features of discourse carry sociocultural information. Part of the meaning of grammatical and conversational structures is sociocultural" (Ochs, 1986, p. 3). This provides much needed insight as to the complexity and difficulty that Chinese learners face with the English language due to the deep cultural differences between them and the native-users.

**LST and Chinese learners.** A learner's learning environment plays a critical part in language acquisitions. A learning environment includes settings, contexts and cultures that shape a learner's knowledge development process (Jonassen & Land, 2012). Ochs (1986) explains "children come to understand lexical items first in terms of their role in particular situational contexts of use and later in terms of properties that generalize across contexts of use" (p. 3). This means that for language competency to occur, learners must have knowledge of both grammar and contexts of use. Additionally, learners must be exposed deeply to the target language's culture. With respect to Chinese learners, even though they may have English lessons in schools from a very young age, the focus is mostly on grammar and not contexts of usage. Most Chinese students have very little exposure to the Western culture during the developmental stages of their English language learning, which takes place mostly in China. This creates a magnitude of cultural differences that impede Chinese students' ability to gain true English competencies, as they are novice learners when it comes to the English language. Since language socialization is critical for language development, the challenges of novice learners are compounded when they do not have access to the culture of the language they seek to learn (Duranti, Ochs, & Schieffelin, 2012).

### Chinese and English Writing Systems

**Usage and structural differences: Scripts/logos vs sounds.** Significant differences exist between English and Chinese languages' writing systems, which are critical in defining the ontology of language learning. Writing systems are foundational to a culture's communication structure and play a key role in acquiring and transferring language. The Chinese language belongs to the logographic systems while the English language is housed in the alphabetical systems (Ager, 2015). The core difference between these systems relates to the characters and scripts used, as well as the internal relationships between them and the ideas they represent. Scripts are primarily classified into logographic (semiotic) and phonetic (sound), based on how they represent language. Logographic relates to "logo" or word plus "graph" or "written sign." English alphabets are sound based, wherein each alphabet represents a specific sound.

Chinese written characters are script and picture (logo) based, wherein each logo/script represents a specific meaning, irrespective of how they are said or pronounced. Both script systems have their unique processing and reading methods. In English, letters represent sound that in turn, converts to meaning. In Chinese, each character of the script simultaneously represents a unit of meaning (morpheme) as well as a syllable. It is this characteristic that allows written Chinese to be pronounced differently in different dialects, and even though these

dialects can be mutually unintelligible, all Chinese can still share the same language. Such a phenomenon cannot exist in a phonetic (syllable to sound) language like English (Ager, 2015; Sun Liu, Hu, & Liang, 2014; Wang & Goodman, 2014). Khansir (2012) contends, “One of the major problems in the learning of a second language is the interference caused by the structural differences between the native language of the learner and the second language” (p. 1028).

**Learning differences.** Processing differences between the two writing systems must be considered during any attempt to transfer language skills between the two systems. Native users of English language learn how to translate spelling to sound from childhood. As English language learners grow up, they become more and more proficient in this translation, as they store word recognition patterns that match the spellings from long-term memory. Thus, for proficiency in English usage, the recognition pattern for an alphabetic set of characters representing the script resides within the users’ long-term memory, which is not the case with logographic users. Logographic users follow a different pattern of learning their language, which relies on entirely different patterns and sounds (Ng, 2006; Taylor & Park, 2005). When suddenly immersed in a new culture, Chinese learners have significantly less time and fewer resources to make the necessary shift from one pattern to the other.

**Cognitive functioning differences.** Even though some researchers consider Chinese to be morpho-syllabic or morpho-phonological, in addition to being logographic, phonological assembly or linking phonological units like alphabets into syllables and words, is not possible in Chinese language. Essentially, there are “basic difference in how the writing systems map spoken language – graph to phoneme in one case and graph to syllable in the other” (Peretti, Liu, Fiez, Nelson, Bolger, & Tan, 2007, p. 133). Therefore, language learning requires changing how the brain deciphers and encodes incoming information, which can take a lifetime of practice (Peretti et al., 2007).

Studies on Visual Word Form Area (VWFA) have led to the hypothesis that the human brain’s left mid-fusiform cortex plays a significant role in reading and that “years of experience reading native language change the visual expertise of this region to be especially sensitive to the visual form of native language” (Xue, Chen, Jin, & Dong, 2006, p. 1315, Abstract). Thus, cognitive functioning is an essential element of language learning, which is why, to produce words in one language, bilingual speakers must inhibit the schema for word production in the other language. Their long-term proximity and familiarity with their native language requires even greater inhibition when learning a second language. This explains the greater language learning challenges for Chinese learners (Huili, Hongjun, Wenyu, Jian, & Yan, 2009; Wang, Xue, Chen, Xue, & Dong, 2007).

## **Bilingual Language Acquisition for Chinese Students**

**Language mingling challenges.** Language is a non-genetic cultural trait and habit, which is why it takes longer to change, since its utility and value is assimilated deeply within the user’s consciousness. This makes language literacy a context bound process, reliant on cultural contents, which is why native users of any language have long-term memories of that first language or L1. In turn, this explains why L1 becomes a potential hindrance to the successful acquisition of the second language or L2. Thus, it is exponentially more challenging to acquire competency for a language that belongs to another system, and is as radically different as English is from Chinese, as opposed to different languages within the same writing systems as English and Spanish (Durgunoglu & Verhoeven, 2013).

**Social context of bilingual proficiency.** Family support and home language environment play a key role in Chinese learners’ bilingual language acquisition efforts (Jia, Chen, Kim, Chan, & Jeung, 2014). Many times, non-native language users’ families may not use or encourage the use of a foreign language at home. In such conditions, even if children

learn a foreign language in school, they may not retain that skill for long due to a lack of literacy support at home (Scheele, Leseman, & Mayo, 2009). English language learners (ELL) face serious constraints as they try to fit in with the expected norms of the dominant, English-focused academic and social culture. A large part of this relates to their ability or lack thereof, to interact with peers and mentors. For a non-native, assimilating into a community may require long-term immersion (Pliatsikas & Chondrogianni, 2015). In the context of Chinese ELLs, the absence of language-culture synthesis with the foreign culture may mean greater difficulties in acquiring competency in the foreign language. In addition, such learners who arrive in the United States are expected to display socio-communication skills equivalent to the natives, which they do not possess. This can feel demoralizing.

**Learning environments.** Due to the inherent differences in learning environments, the ways in which native language users decipher and translate foreign languages can create issues of meaning transfer and accountability. This may lead to confusion and gaps in the ELL's ability to express ideas in the way native users do or expect (Quigley, 2009). There are considerable variations between the two countries' teaching and learning styles. Chinese students are accustomed to learning knowledge mainly from teachers' lecture, and out of class activities or homework serve only as agents of revision. In American colleges, there is a greater emphasis on constructivist learning, and lectures given by the professor may serve merely as guidance. Additionally, most high schools in China do not train students on writing academically, since that is not tested in national college entrance exams. The focus is mainly on rote memorization of information and grammar. Thus, students from China may lack in academic writing skills, including familiarity with the significance of citations or how to cite properly (Chou, 2010). This may have several negative repercussions, including loss of academic standing and even expulsion. Using information from a report published by WholeRen and its representative, Kutner (2015) suggests that during 2013-2014, 8000 Chinese students were expelled for low academic performance or dishonesty. This could be attributed to the fact that Chinese school teachers seldom mention the seriousness of plagiarizing other people's work, and instead encourage students to memorize what famous philosophers or scholars have said and cite them directly in the compositions. This omission underlies Chinese culture in which memorizing works of good role models is highly valued (Chou, 2010).

**Policy impacts.** The language policies of regional and national authorities could determine the fate of native language learners. Typically, if a country follows a policy of language segregation, it can become difficult for learners to develop cross-language skills. An example could be the policy of the Chinese authorities to control English language speaking, which is detrimental to the true skill acquisitions of English language learning. English courses in China mostly use the traditional grammar-translation approach that facilitates higher scores, but not necessarily corresponding higher skills in learners (Li, 2010). When students from this kind of an academic background come to dominantly English speaking countries, they are faced with challenges of critical thinking and communicating at a higher cognitive level when using English.

Additionally, socio-cultural and political factors play a crucial role in the English language development of such learners. For instance, despite efforts to push English language learning for its citizens, the Chinese government is trading quantity for quality. The "Gaokao System" of English training in China focuses solely on preparing students for test taking, which does not prepare students for real applications of the language in communications (Li, 2012; Wong, 2015). Zhao (2014) blames the authoritarian nature of Chinese education for a majority of issues with students' lack of applicable knowledge. "Such an education system, while being an effective machine to instill what the government wants students to learn, is incapable of supporting individual strengths, cultivating a diversity of talents, and fostering the capacity and confidence to create" (Zhao, 2014, p. 9).

## **Methodology and Methods**

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Methodology**

Phenomenology focuses on gaining an understanding of social, cultural and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved, including careful and thorough data gathering on how people perceive something, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, and have conversations about it with others (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015; Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Thus, phenomenology was most suitable for this study, as it examined the lived experiences and perceptions of Chinese graduate students regarding the phenomenon of writing in English. Following a Hermeneutic approach to frame the research design, the findings emanated from the researchers' interpretation of the participants' stories about their relations to and perceptions of the world around them in the context of the study's focus. Even though there are no fixed set of rules for a Hermeneutic approach, several suggested techniques such as in-person interviewing, rigorous reading, reflecting and interpreting text for codifying, the use of anecdotal narrative for creating a hybrid text to provide justice to the life world stories of the participants, and researcher reflexivity were used (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Kafle, 2013; Langdridge, 2007; Sloan & Bowe, 2014; van Manen, 2007).

### **Participants**

Selection was made from a Midwestern four-year college, with a high volume of Chinese students. After receiving approval from the institution's IRB authorities, five graduate level students from China were selected as final participants, using purposeful sampling to identify those with special knowledge, experience and interest in the phenomenon being studied (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2015). These participants have been in the United States for more than three years, but have been engaged in learning English from school level in China. Initially, twelve prospective participants were asked to complete a short online survey, using a 12 multiple-choice question set, pertaining to demographic information (age, education level, country of origin, time spent in the United States). The final five participants were selected based on their time spent in the United States, country of origin and graduation level.

### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

Data sources were one-hour, semi-structured interviews, and participants' writing samples/written tasks that served as examples of the writing quality, which was essential to the study's intent. Interview questions provided insights into the core research question, as well as elicited maximum information from the participants on background, perception, feelings and knowledge about the phenomenon (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, verbatim. The interview transcripts analysis drew from Saldana's (2009) recommendations for coding that includes reduction, summarizing, distilling and/or condensing data. Thus, transcripts were first examined with an eye on critical elements relatable to the RQs, then codified.

### **Trustworthiness**

Steps were taken to ensure that the findings were accurate from the standpoints of both the researchers and the participants. This was done using deep reflexivity and discussing biases,

rigorous interview transcript coding process, and participant confirmations of analyzed text (Creswell, 2014; Rolfe, 2006). In addition, Interrater reliability for coding was established by having two coders code separately, and then matching the codes. Member Checking was done by sending the raw transcripts and analysis script to the participants for verification. Face and content validity of surveys was done via pilot testing using three students. Interview protocols were pilot tested using two students for interview questions. Imaginative variation was achieved by including rich, thick descriptions, and sharing examples, using quotations from the data, and establishing rapport wherever possible (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008; Lin, 2013; Slone, 2009; van Manen, 2007). Additionally, to retain the authenticity of the writings and exemplify the degree of competency issues, verbatim quotes from the transcripts, with no changes made to correct the issues, have been used.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Phenomenology demands the application of both subjective and objective/critical lenses, as well as researcher subjectivity (Lin, 2013). In this context, the authors are deeply empathetic towards the target population, having personally experienced English language learning as non-native users. As a professor of English Language and Composition, the first author has the privilege of teaching large number of students from China. Her close association with them over a considerable period did shape some of the concerns and questions regarding the support mechanisms and pedagogical approaches that are being used in the United States and China today.

### **Findings**

The findings answered the research question: What are the perceptions of Chinese graduate students regarding experiences of writing in the English language? No evidence was found to support the widely-held belief that immersion in a culture increases language competencies, in particular writing skills. To the contrary, it was evident that despite being immersed in the United States culture for three years or more, participants still had serious writing issues, as was evident from their writing samples and confessions within the interviews. The results of the text analysis are given below, using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

### **The Lure and the Catch**

Several of the participants revealed how they or their families were enticed by the “American lure” that encouraged them to come to the United States. For example, Harry mentioned, “When I was doing my bachelor degree, I was thinking about... if I can just go to America to see what the first powerful country in this world is like,” and Sam disclosed similar feelings, “I think America is very diverse, so I like the diversity.” All participants’ families encouraged them to study in the United States. However, the “catch” to such a lure was that when within the United States, some of the realities did not live up to their expectations, leading to negative experiences, feelings of discomfort, and inferiority complexes. The participants’ initial worldview of the United States led to disappointments in several ways, since they had not accounted for the kind of difficulties they could face due to the language barriers.

Chelsea confessed to her high levels of discomfort when interacting with her American peers in high school, as she was unable to figure out if they were making fun of her heritage, were being sarcastic, or were seriously interested. “I have really difficulty to like really understand how people express their feelings Yes, yes especially if dragons were a joke or sarcastic something like that.” Harry had issues communicating with his peers in class because,

“All of my classmates are English native speakers, so I sometimes feel difficult talking with them... they don't speak like standard English and also because they may speak very fast and use different words which I never learn before, so this make some difficulties for me.” Dana expressed similar frustrations, “sometimes I don't know other people's feeling. Uh, I feel it is, like other people don't understand me.... so... in America, lots of people don't understand Chinese.” Galetcaia's (2014) study on ELLs infers similar findings in that participants developed a “wide range of inferiority complexes, thereby diminishing the learner's confidence.” (p. 4274), and their “sense of self was diminished by not being able to express adequately their thoughts and feelings” (p. 4273).

### **Magnified Level of Confusion and Resultant Learning Challenges**

The conversations suggested that considerable confusion may emanate from the inherent differences between the Chinese and English languages, perceived in language structure, grammar rules, vocabulary confusions, and denotation-connotation complexities. Chinese students have a tough time making sense of English grammar rules, as nothing comparable exists in their native language. Chelsea made several observations supporting this. “We usually don't use clause. We have little expressions like “which.” We usually have a long adjective out of descriptive words before the noun. We do not usually say comma, “which is,” “who is.” For her, this is extremely challenging as, “it is a difficult transition for me, to in my mind, translate it from Chinese.” Sam expressed something very similar, “Spanish is very similar to English. So, for those people it's easy to become English, but for us everything is different. We have to forget Chinese first, then we can speak English. So, it's right. It's a totally different language.” Lena provided an interesting outlier in that she believed “English language have rule, very clear, Chinese rule isn't clear.” However, Lena's difficulty stemmed from the vast difference in the volume and texture of the vocabularies. “Understanding Chinese is easier if you know the history behind the picture. If you know China vocabulary, 3000, you can read article in newspaper, you can write, but in English vocabulary is more, more, more.”

### **Self-Propelled Stereotyping Leads to Lower Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy**

This is manifested in the way native or non-Chinese writers and reviewers may view how Chinese writers write in English language. In stereotyping, people assimilate their impressions of targeted individuals to form an impression about the group to which the targeted individual may belong (Rothart & Lewis, 2006). Chinese ELLs may also be subjected to this as they are constantly, and sometimes painfully, aware that when people read their writing, they treat it as inferior, because they may suspect that it was written by a Chinese writer. This is self-propelled stereotyping that can manifest itself in lessened zeal to do better. Several of the participants provided poignant expressions of this. For example, Chelsea stated, “But sometimes I am not very confident when thinking about... oh... The one who is reading my article is thinking I'm a Chinese and this has a whole lot of errors and this doesn't make any sense,” and how that “kind of blocks me from really wanting to express something.” In a similar vein, Sam explained, “I want to write like a native speaker you know. It's very important for me. I don't want people to see my paper and they “Oh this is-- it must be like a non-English speaker write this.”

### **Challenge of Cognitive Reconditioning**

As discussed in the literature review section, the tenets of Language Socialization Theory indicate that language learning during the formative years can create long-term

memories, which may hinder rewiring of language concepts or reconditioning. All participants admitted that they began learning English as early as in third grade. Yet, the way in which they learned English in China during their foundational years may have contributed to their English writing challenges. Since native users of English use grammar to decipher a combination of thoughts into their respective combinations of words, it is necessary to have knowledge of not only grammar, but also how to use that to translate thoughts into words. “Grammar is Nature’s substitute for telepathy; for it to function properly, though, we have to pick a particular codebook and stick with it” (Yang, 2006, p. 94). In the case of the participants, learning grammar at an early age was not enough to develop writing competencies, because their formative training did not prepare them to apply that grammar knowledge to recode their Chinese codebook. Participants indicated that even though they learned had grammar, it was focused entirely on providing a rote-for-test skill, and not actual implementation or application of that knowledge. This was also substantiated by the pre- and post-written tasks submitted. For example, it was interesting to see that although Harry was able to complete all identification-of-grammar-error questions with a hundred percent accuracy, he had more than ninety percent grammar and structural errors in his four-paragraph essay! Similar issues were found in varying degrees in all participant essays. Please see Appendix A for writing samples.

Harry commented on the different approaches to writing between the languages. “In China, we need to use some adjective words before you can really express your ideas. So I think English writing here is more direct and in Chinese, we always want the readers to feel what we want to express.” Sam expressed similar feelings, “even like a word choice, for me it's so hard because for you guys you know -- okay these two words are different, what -- why it would be different, right? But for me they mean the same thing you know” This suggests the existence of a critical issue with their current learning process. “Grammar cannot simply be a list of sentences we have previously memorized—Rather, the grammar must be a compact device that encodes the regularities of how sentences are formed in our language, one that we can use to create and understand new sentences” (Yang, 2006, pp. 95-96).

## Support Mechanisms

**Feedback.** A key focus of the study was to examine perceptions of support mechanisms that participants believe are essential to facilitate Chinese students’ English writing process. All participants agreed that feedback is vital to their language acquisition process. For example, Chelsea complained about some professors not giving any feedback, “My adviser gave me some feedback on my writing with papers that we were going to submit for conferences and publication, but for other like course papers I didn't receive anything about my writing. I don't know where it went.” For Chelsea, being treated like this was a problem, because it prevented her from gaining the competencies she desired. Participants unanimously indicated that the scope of such feedback should be intensive and inclusive of grammar, critical thinking, structure and vocabulary. Participants also agreed that simply pointing out grammar errors is not enough. Having several iterations of the same writing piece was the favorite feedback choice.

**Help with self-efficacy.** The dialogues also suggested that teachers’ desire and compulsion to accommodate ELL students can backfire, depending on the level of control teachers may exert on the students’ learning process. For example, Chelsea mentioned how some of the professors would give grace points or overlook English errors, and though she appreciated this, she was more comfortable with being told how her work could improve. All participants expressed the desire to become as competent as native English users, which is why they were looking for interventions that went beyond conventional methods and attitudes of hands-free or total control kind of teaching.

**Customized learning support.** In response to the question regarding what supports, other than feedback, would be desirable, a recurring theme was customization of support. Chelsea visualized how a “learning camp” like environment would be very helpful, wherein Chinese and non-Chinese students could congregate and participate in socially charged learning activities, and be supported by “instructors who are hanging around with us and trying to connect the different activities to like some core elements in language so that I can have a more international feeling of how this language is going on.” All camp members could be contributors to provide innovative ways to help one another learn. Sam supported that vision by suggesting that we create customized learning solutions for Chinese students. Additionally, participants listed several other desirable support items related to technology, personal interfacing and creative pedagogy as preferred support mechanism other than or along with feedback. After interpreting and analyzing the responses, six themes emerged from the recommendations, as displayed in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1. *Customized Learning Camp Themes*

<b>Reading</b>	<b>Learners engage in intensive reading, alone and in groups; academic and non-academic materials</b>
<b>“Artifacting”</b>	Learners engage in creative ways to share knowledge like creating multi-media artifacts; example: create a video based on understanding of a topic; combine audio-visual materials; create learning games
<b>Writing Practicing</b>	Learners engage in writing practices and share with peers. Engage in creative, non-academic as well as formal writing
<b>Learners as Contributors</b>	Learners act as conscious contributors and support others through shareware; share resources like useful websites (e.g., Hemingway Editor), learning experiences
<b>Instructors as Contributors</b>	Instructors provide ongoing feedback; detailed, one on one whenever possible, as part of their teaching responsibilities, as well as volunteering for it; give learners plenty of options to practice non-academic, informal, creative writing
<b>Self-Efficacy and Social Learning blend</b>	Learners are self-determined and engage in self-learning, while using the social support

Table 2. *Innovative Support Transcript Samples*

<b>Transcript Sample</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Harry: Because I have to read many articles from the readings, I can learn something. I don't know I just feel that if I read more of those original articles I can write more fluently	Intensive reading, Articles (in course, outside course?)
Harry: “I think I just maybe someone can make a plan considering my personal backgrounds for my English so they can make plan to improve that aspect”	Customized and planned support
Harry: Q: Do you learn better with the graphics, videos, audio, just reading or a combination of all of this?	Creative interactions

<p>“I think combination”</p> <p>Chelsea: I could also like create something or create a video based on my understanding of a topic, or we can come up with games and we create our own games, knowing how to use language using it to clearly express rules and make completely sense to all of us.</p>	
<p>Lena: “I talk to my friend... He told me, when he was in graduate school, they wrote journal every week. I think maybe it’s a good way to do it. So maybe I will start it. When I write a book I’m interested in, so I won’t care what’s all the vocabulary or all the grammar or the lot of stuff they use. It’s just a cool story.</p> <p>Sam: I’ll say, to write more, do more practice... I mean when I write a paper, got a paper to draft it down I have to talk to my friends and I show them the draft and let them do the revision stuff</p> <p>Chelsea: So, with writing, of course I cannot only learn writing just by writing. I have to also talk to people, and read something and watch movies that kind of give me a feeling of how this language flows so that I can re-organize and restructure the expression. So, yes. I cannot say I want to learn writing English and I only write papers and get feedback. It is just like too rigid a not flexible</p>	<p>Practice writing in formal and informal settings</p>
<p>Chelsea: I think I’d like to go camping. So, in a camp we can talk to people, we can play games and we can watch movies and do writings even like making poems using that language and there are instructors who are hanging around with us and trying to connect the different activities to like some core elements in language or something like that, so that I can have a more international feeling of how this language is going on</p> <p>I am thinking about my role as a communicator in that situation, so the interactions between me and the other fellows in that camp with the instructors can be like a kind of contribution. I could also like create something or create a video based on my understanding of a topic, or we can come up with games and we create our own games, knowing how to use language using it to clearly express rules and make completely sense to all of us. We can also make songs or something. As long as you are one part of one component of that community you can contribute something.</p>	<p>Interacting with other persons; one on one feedback; learning through socialized camping</p>
<p>Dana: Sometimes you face this challenge, have many problems, sometimes you want to give up (laugh) yea, yea, but I don’t want to give up, because it’s a long time life, you know, if you give up, like, you can blow up future</p>	<p>Self-determination; Learners doing self-studies</p>
<p>Harry: I think writing... improving writing is still a process. I can be very worried about it... I just need to be patient about improving it and also just have some free resources for help. If I want to hire someone I need to pay them but it’s still quite a lot of money.... Now I also use</p>	<p>Free resources: websites, Voluntary organizations,</p>

<p>some you know the websites to work on my articles... Various websites like the Hemingway, it's about just upload your paper to the website and they will give you very simple correction but it's a very simple way. They will only check some grammar mistakes and some words. So I will use those websites</p> <p>Dana: I went to a local Adult Resource Academy... Read articles online, watches ABC news, attends college to learn Business vocabulary, uses Wiki sources</p>	<p>teacher feedback</p>
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### Discussion

It has long been suggested that exposure to a foreign language is required to gain proficiency including one to three years of English socialization to give ELLs the social language level of their peers, which they can then use to enhance their academic language competencies (Cummins, 2008; Duff, 2007; Jong & Howard, 2009; Kristmanson & Dicks, 2014; Pacific Policy Research Center, 2010). However, the study clearly contradicts this and shows that despite being immersed in the native culture and socializing with natives over a substantial period of three years or more, participating Chinese graduate students failed to develop the competencies as predicted by literature. As indicated by the findings, participants shared what challenges they faced as Graduate students engaged in English writing activities. They also shared several instructional approaches that they believed would help mitigate such challenges and facilitate their English writing process. The data suggest the need for a fresh approach. Participant statements suggest a need for a globally infused pedagogical approach to teaching English to Chinese learners that includes the following two recommendations: Detailed feedback and alternate teaching techniques.

- 1. Rethinking feedback techniques.** The participants unanimously agreed that feedback is the most important intervention that they need to improve their competencies. However, they also unanimously perceived that certain feedback techniques are less effective for their English writing competency needs. Thus, instead of focusing only on one kind of feedback, teachers must attempt to fuse several feedback styles. Corrective and peripheral or constructivist feedback (pointing grammar errors, providing outside resources, not in-depth, focused on learners' self-learning process) is far less valuable if not married to intensive feedback (close reading, critical thinking, providing different iterations, one-on-one tutoring). Although literature supports the value of each of these styles (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Jiang & Xiao, 2014; Jordan, Carlile, & Stack, 2008; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2013; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2007; Shao, 2015; Varnosfadrani, & Basturkmen, 2009), as participants indicated, a singular approach is less desirable in the context of Chinese learners' English writing process.
- 2. Alternate teaching techniques.** Additionally, the data suggests some other ways that teachers may revamp their teaching techniques when it comes to helping Chinese students with English writing. This could include being available for more one on one time, encouraging more peer to peer interaction, perhaps organizing learning camps, and encourage the students towards self-efficacy instead of merely accommodating them with grace points and extra time to complete work

### **Limitations**

Despite promising and revealing findings, the study has limitations in the scope of inquiry in that it only focuses on Graduate level students. We believe that more research needs to be done using Undergraduate students as well as faculty who teach Chinese students and faculty who are from Chinese backgrounds with similar issues. Having such data will provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the issues surrounding English proficiencies in the context of Chinese students. It would also be beneficial to develop and investigate the effectiveness of technology based initiatives that may provide meaningful learning support to Chinese students in bilingual competencies.

### **Conclusion**

As the participants revealed in the interviews, they went through a rigorous English language learning process, from the third grade in China, through high school and then undergraduate college in the United States. Yet, they did not gain the desired or predicted competencies and continued to have unique issues. Based on the findings and discussions, it is clear participants want comprehensive feedback and alternate teaching techniques. Since Chinese education systems do not provide evidence-based learner-centered techniques, it falls on the United States education system to provide alternatives, if it is to continue to admit Chinese learners into its education system. Participants in this study recommend that learners are given opportunities to engage in creative, non-academic as well as formal writing, and share their experiences and pieces with native and Chinese background peers. Learners must be encouraged to act as conscious contributors and support others through shareware such as resources like useful websites (e.g., Hemingway Editor). This will allow learners to be self-determined and engaged in self-learning, while using the social support. Regarding instructors, they should provide ongoing feedback, preferably detailed and one on one whenever possible. These recommendations can be implemented easily and immediately.

Additionally, technology using computer mediated communication may help improve both teaching skills of instructors responsible for teaching English to Chinese students and Chinese learners' English language skills (Angelova & Zhao, 2014). Another option is to consider using the support of existing projects and programs, or adapting some of the strategies these programs are using successfully. For instance, Oxford Community Schools in Michigan and Northeast Yucai Oxford International High School in China are collaborating using Virtual Education Exchange programs to successfully assist Chinese learners (Ash, 2012). One of the collaborative efforts of the United States Department of Education and the Ministry of Education in China resulted in the "Forgotten World" project that used gaming, immersion, voice recognition, problem-based learning tasks. The findings indicated that the motivation of Chinese students to learn English had increased and that teachers approach to teaching became more learner-centric (Greene, Sha, & Liu, 2011).

Chinese educators must change English learning processes in China. As several participants pointed out, the "Gaokao" system is not helpful for English language learning and alternatives must be found (Gil & Adamson, 2011; Qi, 2016). One recommendation is to consider immersion teaching or content based language teaching (CBLT), where instruction is done using a target or second language, allowing bilingual competencies to occur at a more effective and faster pace. Although still considered an innovative trend, with some unique challenges, immersive teaching and CBLT has had success in Canada, United States, Spain, Finland, and Ireland (Fortune & Tedick, 2008; Livaccari, 2016; Lyster & Ballinger, 2011).

In China, English related CBLT is yet to become mainstream, even though it is being used on an experimental basis in some schools (Hoare, 2010; Qiang & Siegel, 2012). Efforts

should be focused on teacher training and professional developments to develop and support Chinese teachers who promote new and evidence-based methods (Feng, 2007; Lyster & Ballinger, 2011; Qiang & Siegel, 2012). English language proficiencies for Chinese learners is desirable, valuable and possible, if all stakeholders work together to make it happen. We cannot afford to ignore the issues Chinese learners face with English competencies, as we foray deeper and deeper into an intercultural and multinational educational arena.

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**Appendix A: Excerpts from Participant Essays**

Dana	<p>In my life, something made my heart break for many years; my close relative let me down. I had asked myself that what I should do. From the disappointment to forgiveness and free, it was a struggle and difficult process to me. As below is a real sorrow with no end to the tragedy.</p> <p>The overall feeling is sadness. Last summer, as God help, I was calm and was be returned myself at last and slowly I could tell my kid this occurrence real story how to happen, what I struggle and pain experience. In my heart, the emotional is pain.</p>
Chelsea	<p>Based on my understanding, culture shock is the discomfort, or more severe symptoms either/both physically or/and mentally that a person experience when he/she moves from a very familiar place to a less familiar one</p> <p>Thus, the feeling of excitement and interestingness was fading. Followed by the fading joy was a discomfort in the lifestyle. The first problem is food. I don't like American food, especially burgers, pizza, and cheese. There were some Asian restaurants and markets in the city,... But it was not convenient to go there every day.</p>
Harry	<p>However, this simulating experience can cause problems Players would not get any hurt when having accidents during playing, which rarely happens in daily life. It would be very dangerous if someone gets to her/his car after crazily fast driving in a game.</p> <p>For another aspect some people may seek for comfort and confidence in virtual world especially when they do not behave well in reality. In video games, players can be successful as other roles, and this can present them illusion that they have achieved wealth and fame. As the conditions goes on, people would feel hard to get out of the virtual world and treat it as reality.</p>
Lena	<p>Travel with companions not limited to your friends or people you know, you can find tons people online have same interests with you and prefer to travel to the same destination. Sometimes, you will pay more when you travel alone, not only the money</p>

Sam	Unfortunately, bad things sometimes happen during traveling if things are not prepared well, such as robbery and theft. To avoid occurrences. Of unexpected things, two people can protect each other. Research has shown that travelling alone is more likely to become a victim of criminals than travelling with a group.
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### Author Note

Papia Bawa is an English Professor and Institutional designer with more than fifteen years experience being involved with institutions such as Purdue University and Ivy Tech Community College. Her research focuses on learner-centered learning environments, cultural inclusiveness issues in online and offline courses, and technology centered curriculum, including game based learning. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [pbawa@purdue.edu](mailto:pbawa@purdue.edu).

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