Beyond the text: A textography of Chinese College English writing

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ABSTRACT

The study described in this paper is a textography of the writing component of Chinese College English tests. In China, College English refers to compulsory English classes that non-English majors are required to undertake as part of their degree. At the end of their studies many students need to pass a nationally administered College English Test in order to graduate from their degrees. These are also important tests for gaining employment in China. This paper examines the writing component of the two main Chinese College English Tests, College English Test 4 (CET 4) and College English Test 6 (CET 6). The study was carried out in order to gain an understanding of the expectations and requirements of this section of the test so that these could be accounted for in College English writing classes. Insights were gained into the assessment of Chinese College English writing that would not have been gain-

ed by looking at the test, examples of students' texts, or curriculum statements alone.

INTRODUCTION

This study is a textography of the writing component of Chinese College English tests. A textography is an approach to genre analysis which combines elements of text analysis with ethnographic techniques in order to examine what texts are like, and why. It is, thus, something more than a traditional piece of discourse analysis, while at the same time less than a full-blown ethnography (Swales & Leubs, 1995). A textography examines written texts as well as uses techniques such as interviews and other kinds of information in order to get an inside view of the worlds in which the texts are written, why the texts are written as they are, what guides the writing, and the values that underlie the texts that have been written (Katz, 1999).

In his book *Other Floors, Other Voices,* Swales (1998) carried out a textography of the kinds of writing people who worked in his building at the University of Michigan were engaged in and the kinds of texts that they wrote. He looked at their texts as well as interviewed a number of the writers to get an understanding of why they wrote the kinds of texts that they did. He found that people on each floor of his building wrote quite different texts, even though they were all working at the same institution. He also found the writers' professional and academic histories, and their life commitments and projects, had an important impact on what they wrote and how they wrote it.

A study that looked at the theses that art and design students write in their masters' degrees took a similar approach to Swales' work on textographies (Paltridge, 2004; forthcoming). In this study, a study of the texts was combined with an examination of the texts that surrounded the texts as well as interviews with students, advisors, and examiners of the texts. This was done in order to explore the particular nature and character of the texts, the values

that underlay the texts, and the role the texts played in the particular academic setting; that is, to examine the texts, role and context of the texts (Johns, 1997).

The study described in this paper is a textography of the writing component of the two main Chinese university College English tests, College English Test 4 (CET 4) and College English Test 6 (CET 6). In China, College English refers to compulsory English classes that non-English majors are required to undertake as part of their degree. At the end of their studies many students need to pass a nationally administered College English test in order to graduate from their degrees. In universities where this is not a requirement, as is the case in some 'big name' universities such as Peking, Tsinghua and Fudan universities, many students still choose to sit the test as a statement of their English language proficiency as well as to help them gain employment in China. Students who gain a score of 85 percent or above in CET 4 are able to take part in a further exam, the CET Spoken English Test (CET-SET). The grades that students receive on these texts, thus, have a number of important impacts.

This study was carried out in order to gain an understanding of the assessment process, expectations and requirements of the writing component of the test so that these could be accounted for in College English classes. At present the only material available for use in these classes are sets of sample tests, and course books which mirror the format of the tests. There are few public statements on the assessment process, expectations and requirements of the test.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF WRITING

Grabe and Kaplan's (1996) notion of an ethnography of writing was used as a framework for examining the writing section of the two tests. This framework includes an analysis of the setting in which the texts are written, as well as a consideration of how various aspects of the setting in which students write impact upon what they write and how they write it. The analysis considered:

- The setting of the students' texts
- The purpose of the students' texts
- The content of the students' texts
- The intended audience for the students' texts
- The assessment criteria used for evaluating the students' texts
- The relationship between readers and writers of the texts
- The background knowledge, values, and understandings it is assumed students will share with their readers
- The relationship the students' texts have with other texts

Each of these impacts on the students' texts in terms of what they write, as well as why and how they write it. For example, a student's text may be different if it is written in a high school, in a first year university course, in a postgraduate program of study or, as is the case here, in preparation for sitting a test. The purpose of the student's text may be to show a certain level of language proficiency, to display knowledge of a particular topic, to demonstrate particular skills, to convince the reader, to argue a case, to critique, or a number of other possibilities. The content of the text will vary depending on the task that has been set as well as the setting in which the student is writing. Some points of view and claims, for example, may be more acceptable in some settings, than in others. The intended audience for the text will also have an influence on the text as will the reader's role and purpose in reading the text. This includes how the readers will react to the text and the criteria they will use for assessing the text. The relationship between readers and writers of the text also impacts on the texts that students write, influencing what they say in their texts and how they say it (Johns, 1997).

General expectations and conventions for the text are also important for students (and teachers) to consider as are the particular expectations, conventions and requirements of the student's field of study (Dudley-Evans, 1995). There are often preferred ways of setting out texts and referencing, for example, in particular areas of study. The ways in which students use source texts, how they quote, and the level of critical analysis required of them (or not) is

often particular to certain areas of study and the particular writing task. The level of originality expected of students in their writing, and the amount of negotiation that is possible, or not, in terms of assessment requirements also varies from setting to setting (Benesch, 1999; 2001). Students need to be aware of the background know-ledge, values, and understandings it is assumed they will share with their readers, including what is important to their readers and what is not (Johns, 1997). The relationship the students' texts have with other texts and other genres (such as lectures, set texts, journal articles, research reports etc) and how this relationship should be shown also needs to be considered.

In order to explore these issues in relation to College English writing, the study looked at sample tests, College English teaching materials, model texts provided in College English textbooks and the published curriculum requirements for College English courses. Focus group discussions were held with College English teachers. Examiners of the test were also interviewed.

WRITING IN CET 4 AND CET 6

The writing task that students are required to complete in CET 4 and CET 6 is a guided exercise of no less than one hundred words for CET 4 and one hundred and twenty words for CET 6. Students lose marks for writing below the word length so it is important they are aware of this and write to the word length for the particular test. The student's text usually consists of three paragraphs, made up of a topic paragraph, a developing paragraph and a concluding para-graph. A maximum of 15 points is awarded to the piece of writing, accounting for 15 per cent of an overall 100 points for the test (Du, 1998). Figure 1 shows an example of a CET 4 writing task**.** In this example the instructions are in English. In the actual test, they are in Chinese.

FIGURE 1
A sample CET 4 writing task (Huazhong University of Science and Technology, nd)

You are Thomas Palmer, Dean of a famous management college. You received a letter from John Smith, inviting you to attend a special luncheon meeting.

Read the following letter, and write a letter of reply, accepting Mr. John Smith's invitation.

Dear Mr. Palmer
On behalf of the Management Committee of the Company, I would like to invite you to attend a special luncheon meeting at 11:30 a.m., Wednesday, February 12, at the Great Plaza Hotel.

The committee is in the process of designing a management development program for the company employees. We are aware that your college offers similar development programs. We hope that you will be willing to share your experience with us.

Will your busy schedule permit you to attend? We look forward to having you as our guest.

Very sincerely
John Smith
President

The students' texts are located within English language courses taught in Chinese universities as well as in the overall context of the College English tests that the students sit. The exam aims to assess to what extent the learning goals set out in the Chinese College English curriculum requirements have been met. The Chinese College English Education and Supervisory Committee (2004: 24) describe the purpose of College English as to "develop students' ability to use English in an all-round way" so that they will be able to use English

in their future work and in social interactions. College English also aims to improve students' 'cultural quality' so they can "meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges".

Typical test topics relate to student life, social, economic, environmental, ethical and technological issues and developments. Personal views are allowed, indeed, in many of the texts they are expected. Often particular points of view are encouraged in the texts that students write, although it may be difficult from the writing task to know what these might be. Students, thus, need to draw on their social and cultural knowledge of the setting in which they are writing to do this.

The audience for which students write is both their teacher and the examiner of the test. That is, the texts have both a primary readership (the examiner) and a secondary readership (the teacher). As Brookes and Grundy (1990) point out, the notion of primary and secondary readerships is often not discussed in the second language writing literature, even though it is often of considerable importance in the assessment of student writing. It is the primary reader who, in this case, counts the most and whose views most need to be considered, even though it is the secondary reader, the teacher, who gives students advice and feedback on what they are their writing. This is a complex situation as the teacher gives students feedback on their in-class writing but does not see, and has no access to, the texts that students write in the exams.

The examiner's role in reading the texts is to assess the student's language proficiency, including their use of language and content in relation to the particular writing task. CET writing assessment uses global scoring and 'ranger finder' texts (model answers at five different levels) to make an initial judgment as to the quality of the student's text. Examiners then add or deduct marks from their initial grading in relation to how close the student's text matches, or does not match, the language and content found in the range finder texts.

There are two aspects to the assessment criteria used for assessing the students' texts: content and language proficiency. This

includes accuracy of grammar, accuracy of sentence structure and appropriate use of text structure. Students are also expected to show an ability to follow writing instructions, which are written in Chinese. Students are expected to show clear organization in their texts as well as the ability to develop an argument. They are also expected to show they are able to write texts that are 'complete in content' and 'appropriate in diction'; that is, they need to include appropriate content for the writing task and show an ability to use appropriate vocabulary for the text that they write. If students do not cover the content asked for in the instructions, marks are deducted from the students' grade.

Students are required to demonstrate clear expression of ideas, suitable use of English expressions to express these ideas, and an ability to write in a range of writing styles. The use of English proverbs is highly valued as are the ability to use complex grammatical constructions (versus overuse of simple sentences structures) and the ability to write to the word limit. The physical presentation of the text also needs to be clear. The student should have good spelling and punctuation and clear handwriting as examiners mark a lot of exam scripts very quickly, as many as 380 scripts in a day. Examiners spend one day studying the range finder texts, then start marking on their second day.

In the CET exams the students are writing for someone with higher language proficiency than their own. They are not, however, writing for a native speaker. It is not, then, 'native speaker norms' that hold. It is not always clear, however, what norms do hold. This is a complex issue with a complex answer. Looking at the assessment criteria for the texts, the curriculum requirements for College English, and talking to College English teachers and examiners is one way of gaining an idea of what these might be.

Students are expected to be able to express personal opinions in their texts. In doing this, students need to assume a shared a certain set of social values with their readers. This includes a sense of what is important to their readers and what is not. Students, thus, need to

draw from their knowledge of the particular social and cultural setting in which they are writing to do this. They cannot obtain this from sample teaching materials or from the College English Curriculum guidelines.

No use of source texts is required in the students' texts to support an argument, which is different from much English academic writing. Memorization of model texts is approved of in some testing centres, the College English teachers said, but not in others. The relationship between the student's texts and 'range finder' answers which examiners use in training for, and the grading of College English tests is also important; that is, the extent to which the student's text is similar to one of the set of sample texts (which students never see) in terms of content and use of language.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to examine requirements of the writing component of CET 4 and CET 6, important examinations in Chinese university English language education. The study revealed a number of criteria that are particular to College English test writing, such as the use of English proverbs, the expression of personal opinions, the used complex sentence structures, the need to write to the word limit, and the importance of clear handwriting, as well as assessment processes, such as the use of range finder texts to make an initial assessment of the quality of students' writing which someone unfamiliar with College English writing tests may not expect to find. The use of sample texts, for example, is not uncommon for rater training (see e.g., Weigle, 2002; White, 1984). Range finder texts are used in the training of raters for the GRE (Graduate Record Examinations) in the US, for example (Education Testing Service, 2004). It is, however, less common for range finder texts to be used in the actual assessment of students' texts.

Many of these authors have discussed issues in the teaching of English in China (see e.g., Cheng, 2002; Cortazzi & Jin, 2006; Du, 1998; Du, 2002; Feng, 2001, 2003; Huang & Xu, 2006; Jin & Yang,

2006; Lam, 2005; Nguyen *et al*., 2006; You, 2004a, 2004b). A number of writers have discussed the effect of the College English tests on English teaching in Chinese universities and have shown how important these tests are in Chinese students' lives. Du (1998) has shown how the tests constrain what teachers can do in their classes. College English classes are also usually large, making it difficult to meet students' needs in the teaching of English. Of all the resources available for English teaching in China, as Du (2002: 82) points out, "teachers are the most important". The kinds of observations made in this paper about the nature of College English writing and the ways in which it is assessed are as important for teachers to know as knowledge about the test itself. While this paper is only a modest attempt at examining some of the features that students need to know in order to succeed in College English writing, it does, however, point to the benefit of going beyond the text (Freedman, 1999) in an investigation of this kind and looking for text-external factors (Bhatia, 2004) which impact on what students write and how they are expected to write it.

This paper also shows how projects which combine both textual and other information in the examination of second language writing can strengthen the observations made in these studies. As Jorgensen and Phillips (2002: 153) point out, every research perspective "produces a particular understanding of the phenomenon under study." The use of one approach in combination with another can be used to provide a fuller, and more explanatory perspective on the question under investigation than just the use of a single approach (see Taylor, 2001a, 2001b, for further discussion of this). Textographies are one way in which research approaches might be combined in second language writing research, providing a more situated and contextualized basis (Swales & Leubs, 1995) for understanding second language writing in the setting in which it takes place than might be obtained by just looking at students' texts alone.

CONCLUSION

The project described in this paper provided insights were gained into the assessment of College English writing that would not have been gained by looking at the test or examples of students' texts alone. The information that was gathered in this way is as important for students to know to succeed in College English tests, as information about the tests themselves. If foreign teachers arrive in China to teach College English writing, as many Australian teachers do, an analysis of the kind described in this paper can tell them things they need to know that they may not expect, or anticipate, from their teaching of academic writing elsewhere in the world. McPherron (2006), for example, describes exactly this situation where he went to China to teach in a Chinese university and, as he did so, became aware of the pressures of College English tests on the students' view of what they wanted to be taught. Armed with communicative methodologies he went there (and was encouraged by his employer) to help students improve their spoken communicative abilities. The students, however, asked for more grammar and writing practice knowing, no doubt, how much they needed to be able to write for the College English tests. Looking at College English textbooks, model answers and practice tests would have provided him with examples of the kinds of texts his students needed to write. It would not, however, have given him an understanding of what students in this particular setting need to know 'beyond the text' in order to succeed in this kind of writing, and what teachers need to know in order to help them do this.

Understanding the nature and character of College English tests is also important for teachers in other parts of Asia, such as Singapore, which is increasingly receiving students from China to study in its academic institutions. It is also important for teachers in English-medium institutions in other parts of the world where there are increasing numbers of Chinese students now studying. It can help teachers better understand the particular nature and focus of Chinese students' English language education (Feng, 2001) as well as

their understanding of what 'counts as good writing'. It also helps us better understand how Chinese students writing in English-medium academic settings will see (and, at times, mistakenly consider) what is important and appropriate in their academic writing.

College English tests, then, have an enormous washback effect (Weigle, 2002) on College English teaching in China, as do other tests such as TOEFL and IELTS in other parts of the world. An important difference, however, between the TOEFL and IELTS is that these tests are primarily used for assessing the language proficiency of non-English speakers wishing to study in English medium academic settings (although in some countries they are used for migration purposes as well). The College English tests, however, are used for other quite different purposes. They are a requirement for many students who wish to graduate from their degrees. College English tests are also used as a way of indicating language proficiency to future employers. As one student studying international trade said recently in the Shanghai Star:

> *I have tried many companies. All of them require CET certificates. CET 6 certificate is more popular, so I think it's fortunate that I passed it when I was a sophomore.*

Equally, as the same student said, if students do not pass the test their days of job-hunting "will be dimmed somewhat" (Xu, 2005, online).

College English tests are also used as a way of measuring the quality of College English teaching (Du, 1998; Feng, 2003; Xu, 2005) as well as, through the publication of statistical data in official documents, as a way of establishing academic reputations for individual institutions (Feng, 2003). Student pass rates in College English tests are also important for individual teachers for their prospects of promotion (Feng, 2001).

Jin and Yang (2006) describe the washback effect of College English tests. They point to the focus on oral communication in CET-SET (the CET Spoken English Test), a new College English test, as an

important impetus for teachers and students to increase their focus on spoken English in College English classrooms. Prior to the introduction of CET-SET oral communication skills were generally ignored in College English classrooms as they were not tested (Feng, 2001). Jin and Yang (2006) also point to the wealth of test data that is produced from CET tests that is analyzed and fed back to College English teachers as well as provides the basis for improving the validity of College English tests. As they conclude:

> *the ultimate objective for the College English Teaching at the tertiary level in China is to equip college and university students with an adequate English proficiency, which will enable them to use English effectively in oral and written communication in their work or further study abroad after graduation (Jin and Yang, 2006: 35).*

Understanding the very particular requirements and expectations of College English tests is one way in which teachers can help their students achieve this.

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