

Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) Learners' Representation of Voice in Argumentative Writing

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This study investigates how a group of advanced-low level American undergraduate students constructs their voice as they learn to write Chinese argumentative essays in an intensive study-abroad program. We collected students' written essays as well as the sample essays used by the instructor to teach Chinese argumentative writing. We analyzed students' representation of voice in their essays and compared it with the way in which voice is represented in the model essays, focusing on the linguistic devices used in the construction of voice. Our findings suggest that the American learners of Chinese are generally unaware of the importance of constructing their own voice in Chinese argumentative writing, and are in need of explicit teaching of effective linguistic devices that can be used to express their voice.

1. Introduction

Since the early 1980s, when the concept of "voice" was first used by Elbow (1981) to address the question of how writers establish an authorial presence in writing, there has been heated discussion about the application of the concept of "voice" in English L2 writing class. Much of this discussion (Atkinson 1997, Fox 1994, Li 1996, Wu & Robin 2001) argues that such an authorial presence of self in English writing features an individualized world view, which is difficult to achieve for learners from so-called "interdependent cultures" (i.e. East Asian cultures). Along this line, some researchers have proposed that voice exists in all cultures, just as it exists in all the various types of English across the world (e.g., Kachru 1999).

While research of voice has grown tremendously in recent years, such studies in language education have mainly concentrated on the possibility for learners from a collective cultural background to be assimilated into western culture and establish an individualized voice. These studies are illuminating in that they point to the cultural differences of voice construction among writing systems of different languages; however, the comparison is often quite simplistic, as the researchers tend to focus their analysis

on English writing conventions only, and rarely conduct a close examination of the writing systems in so-called collective cultures (e.g. Chinese).

The present study highlights two fundamental problems in current research on voice. First, research related to intercultural differences on voice mainly draws on conclusions from cultural psychology studies, and few studies have examined how voice is presented linguistically in Chinese L1 texts. Second, although many empirical studies have examined English L2 learners' construction of voice in writing, there is a significant lack of empirical research on how CFL learners construct voice in their Chinese writing. To fill in the gap, this study aims to address the following two research questions: (1) What linguistic resources do experienced Chinese writers draw to construct voice in their L1 writing? (2) How do CFL learners establish voice as they learn to write in Chinese?

2. Methodology

2. 1. Participants and data collection

Our study was set in an intensive Chinese summer study-abroad program located in a mid-sized city in East China. The writing course we observed was adopting a genre-based approach, and focusing on argumentative writing at this level (advanced-low). As is stated in the course syllabus, the goal of the writing course was to help students "learn how perspectives, opinions, critiques, etc. are organized and presented in Chinese argumentative writing". Throughout the program, the writing class meets five days a week in the morning, with each meeting lasting for 45 minutes. Students were assigned a specific writing topic and required to write an argumentative essay no less than 800 characters on a weekly basis. In-class activities include: brainstorming on the given composition topics, co-analyzing model texts with the instructor's guidance, and in-class writing exercises. Besides regular class meetings, each student had a 20-minute one-on-one writing tutorial session with the instructor every other afternoon, where they discuss how to revise and improve the drafts.

The participants of our study consist of the course instructor who is a native Chinese speaker with ten years of Chinese teaching experiences, and all of the nine CFL students whose native language is English. Students were recruited from five different American public universities, and thus had different Chinese L2 learning experiences. Only two of them had been to China for a short period for traveling purposes prior to the study-abroad program.

Our data was collected as part of a larger project on CFL learners' learning experience of Chinese argumentative writing. With the permission of participants, we audiotaped the writing class sessions three times a week in order to obtain a general picture of how Chinese argumentation was taught to these foreign language learners. We also collected students' written essays, and interviewed the Chinese-speaking teacher as well as five key participants about their perceptions regarding Chinese argumentative writing. The data we analyzed in this paper is from the second week when students wrote

argumentative essays on the phenomenon of son preference in China. Although our interviews were not directly related to voice, we still obtained much useful information from our interviewees about their perceptions of how they presented themselves in argument construction.

2.2 Data analysis

In order to investigate how linguistic resources are utilized to construct voice by Chinese native speakers, we first analyzed the model essay assigned by the instructor in class. To improve inter-rater reliability, the two researchers, both native speakers of Chinese, first read the model essay separately, and each of us highlighted all the key words, phrases, and sentence structures that we believed were used to express the author's assertiveness and autonomy of his/her arguments. All these tentatively coded data were then cross-checked to ensure that they made sense to both of us. Any inconsistencies between us were discussed until we reached agreement.

We then categorized the codes according to the different types of linguistic devices used by the author of the sample essay to express voice. The focus of our analysis includes lexical items (i.e. first-person pronouns, modal verbs, and content words that express the author's emotions, stances and attitudes), syntactic structures (i.e. rhetorical questions and exclamation sentences), as well as how the author integrates evidence in the argumentative essay to construct voice.

After analyzing the model essay, we then took a similar procedure to code and categorize the nine students' compositions. We highlighted all linguistic devices that express the student author's voice, making notes on the margin of any unit of data that is similar to or different from how voice is linguistically represented in the sample essay. Categories of students' linguistic construction of voice were made by each of us independently and then cross-checked until certain kind of consensus was obtained.

In the following section, we will first present what and how linguistic devices are utilized in the model essay to express the author's voice; then we will compare students' voice construction with the model essay. Relevant pedagogical implications will then be discussed.

3. Analysis of voice in the sample essay

3.1. Linguistic devices used to construct voice

In the sample essay, both lexical items and syntactic structures are used by the author to establish an authorial presence. Lexical items include "I"-phrases that signal the author's forthcoming opinions, modal verbs that express the author's attitudes, emotions, or tones, and various content words that explicitly express the author's emotions and attitudes. Table 1 is a brief summary of the voice-expressing lexical items in the sample essay and their related functions.

Table 1: Lexical items used to construct voice in the sample essay

Lexical Items	Examples	Function
"I"-phrase	我试论, 我想, 我觉得, 我期待, 在我看来 I try to argue, I think, I feel, I hope, in my opinion'	Signal the author's forthcoming opinions
Modal Verbs	可以, 应该, 要 may, should, ought to	Express emotions, attitudes or tones
Content Words: Noun, Verb, Adjective	牺牲品, 痛心疾首, 可笑的 victim, aggrieved, funny	Express emotions, attitudes

Besides the lexical items, syntactical structures are the other type of linguistic resources used to establish the author's voice. Syntactic structures consist of two subcategories: rhetorical questions which are used to convey an emphatic tone, and exclamation sentences that are used to express strong emotions. Examples from the sample essay are:

- (1) 放眼社会, 像我母亲这样的受害女性难道还少吗?
'Are female victims like my mom few in this society?'
- (2) 她们是多么可悲啊! 希望在不久的将来可以看到在家庭中男女平等得到真正的实现!
'How pathetic they are! Hope in the near future we can see sexual equality in families come true!'

The use of rhetorical questions and exclamation sentences, rather than neutral statements, not only expresses the thoughts and ideas of the author, but also conveys strong emotions and attitudes.

3.2. Use of evidence to convey voice

The author's voice is not just embodied in the arguments, but also reflected in the way in which evidence is used and organized. The author's use of evidence allows readers to easily tell the attitudes and tones conveyed in the sample essay, and therefore is by no means neutral or objective.

- (3) 当我妈妈相继生下我姐姐跟我的时候，我奶奶的反应是“怎么是一个女儿”，“怎么又生了一个女儿”，而在我妈妈坐月子时，我奶奶不像别的婆婆一样对媳妇照顾有加，反而是置之不理，甚至是冷嘲热讽。而那些亲戚也只是看看就走，表面寒暄几句而已。

‘When my mom gave birth to my elder sister and me consecutively, my grandma’s reaction was “how come it is a girl,” “how come she had a girl again.” When my mom was in postpartum rest, my grandma was not like other mother-in-laws, who take care of the daughter-in-laws carefully, but ignored my mom, and even humiliated her. Those relatives also just visited and left, having few careless conversations with my mom.’

In example (3), the author uses her mom’s experience as an anecdotal evidence to support her argument about the phenomenon of valuing boys more than girls in Chinese society. Although in this excerpt we cannot see the author’s main thesis, but from the emotional words that she used such as “置之不理” and “冷嘲热讽”, we as readers can still speculate that the author is strongly against the phenomenon of sex discrimination in China. Her mom’s story is not narrated neutrally without any emotions, but is used strategically to express the author’s strong opinions about the injustice of preferring boys to girls.

3.3. Connections between evidence and one’s own opinions

In the sample essay, evidence is not treated as pure isolated “fact”, but is closely weaved into the author’s argument construction. The author always comments on her evidence and makes it clear what her intentions are and why particular evidence is used.

- (4) 而有的男人更可恶，见自己的老婆给自己生的是女儿就对老婆拳打脚踢，要想想，这给女人在心灵上和身体上造成了多大的伤害，女人难道就是生小孩的机器吗？而有的竟还把女婴送给别人抚养，更变态的是还有直接杀死自己亲生女儿的刽子手。可怕的男权制度已经直接伸出了罪恶之手结束还未接触世界的小生命，这种泯灭良知，丧失亲情的做法，何人还能眼睁睁看它存在于这个社会上？

‘But some men are more detestable. They beat and kick their wives when they see their wives bear daughters. Please consider the harm that this kind of behavior brings to women’s mind and body. Are women machines of bearing babies? Some men even have their daughters adopted by others. Some even directly become killers of his own daughter. The terrible patriarchal system has already extended his evil hands to those little lives even before they come to the world. Who can allow such conscienceless behavior to exist in this society?’

Excerpt (4) is an example of how evidence and the author's opinions are interweaved in the sample essay. In this example, the author's descriptions of men's various discriminative behaviors against girls are always followed by her comments and arguments. As a result, readers are clear that the purpose of listing certain evidence here is to express the author's opposition against the patriarchal society that treats girls unfairly.

4. Analysis of voice in students' compositions

4.1. Linguistic devices used by students to construct voice

In this section, we will analyze students' construction of voice in their compositions and compare it with the way in which voice is represented in the model essays. Table 2 summarized the linguistic devices used by students in their compositions.

Table 2: Linguistic devices used by students to construct voice

Linguistic devices	Examples	
"I"-phrase	我觉得, 我发觉, 我认为, 我相信, 在我看来, 对我来说, 从我自己的立场说, 我希望 I feel, I discover, I think, I believe, in my opinion, for me, from my point of view, I hope	(5) 希望在不久的将来可以看到中国家庭中男女平等。 'I hope in the near future we can see sexual equality in Chinese families.'
Modal Verbs	可以, 可能, 会, 不会, 不能 may, probably, will, will not, cannot	(6) 这原因有可能是大城市比较开放, 会受到一些西方的影响。 'The reason probably is that big cities are more open, and more inclined to be influenced by the western countries.'
Content Words: Noun, Verb, Adjective	最基本, 最重要 the most basic, the most important	(7) 家庭被称为社会的最基本及最重要的单位。 'Family is called as the most basic and most important unit of a society.'

Comparing with the model essay, we found that no syntactic structures, such as rhetorical questions or exclamation sentences, were used by students to express their

tones or emotions. Although most students had already learned these structures in their grammar classes, they still had problems applying these structures to serve their voice-constructing purposes.

On the other hand, “I”-phrases were used by most students correctly. One student mentioned in our interview that the instructor’s handout provided them with a list of “I”-phrases which she found very helpful. In example (5), a student directly borrowed a phrase from the model essay “我希望” to express his wishes. As for modal verbs, most students were able to use them correctly on a grammar level. But when we further interview them about their intentions, we found major mismatches between students’ intentions and the native-speaking readers’ interpretations. As in example (6), this sentence is the conclusion of the whole composition which represents the student author’s thesis. However, the use of “可能” greatly weakened the strength of the authors’ argument. The third type, content words, was rarely found in students’ compositions to express their voice, which may be due to their limited vocabulary knowledge as a Chinese foreign language learner.

4.2. Students’ use of evidence

In section 3.2, we discussed that in the model text, evidence is described in such a way that readers can easily interpret the author’s stances, attitudes and perspectives. However, few students were aware of such a skill when they were writing their argumentative essays. Most students tend to adopt a neutral tone as they describe their evidence, which makes it hard for readers to tell their attitudes from the evidence.

- (8) 我祖父母曾经说他们要靠我弟弟来传下梁家的姓。他们的原因是因为梁家所有的女生嫁出去的时候会把姓改成丈夫的，所以只会留我弟弟来传下梁家的姓名。
 ‘My grandparents once said they would rely on my younger brother to pass down our family name of Liang. Their reason is that when girls in our family get married, they would adopt their husbands’ family names. So my younger brother is left to pass down our family name of Liang.’

The evidence in example (8) is quite similar to example (3) from the model essay. Both the student and the author of the model essay used their own experiences as anecdotal evidence. However, while the author of the model essay used emotional words such as “冷嘲热讽” to express her strong emotions against her grandma’s behavior, we could not tell the student author’s attitude and emotions from her use of evidence in example (8). The student’s experience is narrated as pure fact in a neutral tone with no authorial perspective conveyed. The same problem exists in example (9) as well.

- (9) 一位美国律师 Christine M. Bulger 在 2000 年写了一个文章题为《中国职场上斗争男女歧视》，文章讨论职场上的计划生育的问题，讲述 Sun Lili 的描述。Sun

Lili 怀孕的时候没有计划生育的批准，已经流产两次，她跟丈夫决定生孩子。因为她没有批准，所以她的雇主解雇她。她尝试上诉雇主的行为，但全体审判员维护雇主的决定。

'An American lawyer Christine M. Bulger wrote an article, "Gender Discrimination in Chinese Professional Fields" in 2000. This article discussed the effects of one-child policy on professional fields. According to Sun Lili's description, she had two abortions because she had no birth permissions. But she and her husband still decided to have a baby. Her employer fired her because she didn't have the birth permission. She tried to sue her employer, but all the judges affirmed her employer's decision.'

In example (9), the student was using a story from a newspaper article as her evidence to explain how unfair it is for the company to fire the woman employee simply because of her child-bearing needs. However, the student made no effort to adapt the newspaper story to help construct his own argument; thereby the evidence still keeps its original newspaper style. All words in this excerpt are relatively neutral and objective with no emotions of the student author expressed. Without reading the rest of his article, readers could hardly hear this student's voice.

4.3. Lack of connection between students' opinions and use of evidence

When comparing students' compositions with the model text, we also noticed that the connection between evidence and authors' arguments is different. In the model text, the author connects her evidence with his argument closely, and always comments on the evidence and makes it clear why she uses certain evidence in a particular place. However, for our students, the evidence and arguments are often loosely connected. Sometimes, it is quite difficult for readers to understand why certain evidence is used in the essays.

(10) 因此做完这个调查采访我认为中国是重男轻女的国家，但是现代化的年轻人中，这个思想开始慢慢的消失，特别是在比较大的城市。这原因可能是大城市会比较开放，会受到一些西方的影响。

'So after this survey I think China is a country valuing boys more than girls. But for the modern young people, this thought gradually begins to disappear, especially in big cities. The reason probably is that big cities are more open, and more inclined to be influenced by the west.'

Excerpt (10) is the conclusion part of a student's composition. Before writing, the student first conducted a survey to several native Chinese speakers in order to gather some background information about son preference in China. In her composition, she first summarized her survey results in several paragraphs with a neutral tone, and

postponed her own arguments to the last paragraph. The problem of her organization is that the evidence is purely listed without enough comments. And the thesis is left isolated in the end with no support. If we further examine the relationship between her evidence and conclusions, we will see that the evidence she used in the first several paragraphs does not support her core argument in the end about how the phenomenon of boy preference is gradually disappearing among young people in big cities. The lack of connections between students use of evidence and their voice construction is a common problem for most student participants we observed.

5. Pedagogical implications

Based on our preliminary analysis of a sample argumentative essay and students' compositions, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the advanced-low CFL learners in our study do not seem to have an awareness of constructing a clear voice in their writing. Although most students did learn about possible linguistic devices (e.g. "I"-phrases, rhetorical questions, exclamations questions) in grammar classes, they are generally unsure of what purposes can be achieved through the use of these linguistic resources. Consequently, the student authors were not quite capable of expressing their arguments about a controversial issue in writing even though they had strong opinions. Therefore, it is critical for the foreign language instructor to step in and introduce the rhetorical functions of certain phrases and structures to help learners apply them in their own writing to construct voice.

When incorporating the concept of voice in curriculum design, CFL instructors can strategically use model essays to raise students' awareness of voice in argumentative writing. The analysis we did here is for research purposes, but the same type of analysis can also be helpful for instructional purposes. If students are able to notice and understand how experienced Chinese writers utilize certain linguistic resources to construct voice, they are more likely to be successful in imitating what the experienced authors do in their own writing. In our data, it is clear that students are aware of the importance of learning from the model text and borrowing words and phrases, yet they are generally unable to tell the purposes and objectives of the use of certain linguistic devices that they have chosen to borrow. In such a situation, the instructor can play a key role in facilitating CFL learners as they try to identify the rhetorical purposes that can be achieved through the use of particular syntactic and lexical devices.

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