



THE CULTIVATION OF CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN ENGLISH WRITING TEACHING IN CHINA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LINGUISTICS

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ABSTRACT

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English teaching mainly covers five interdependent and interrelated basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. English writing is considered an important part in English output stage, which is often an ultimate goal of language learning. However, the current English writing teaching in China is not so satisfactory, and a disadvantage exists in Chinese traditional approach of writing-focused instruction: Students' writings often fail to achieve the aim of effective information expression and communication. Cultural linguists, social linguists and cognitive linguists believe that there is an inseparable relationship between language and culture, so cultural connotation of language cannot be ignored in the English writing teaching in order to realize the precise use of language. The paper is attempted to discuss the cultivation of cultural consciousness in the English writing teaching in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and text under the structure of linguistics so as to improve teaching efficiency of Chinese English writing in some sense.

Contribution/Originality: This study documents the ways of cultural consciousness cultivation in English writing teaching under the guidance of linguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

English writing teaching (EWT) is an indispensable part of English teaching, which is aimed to cultivate students' ability in using vocabulary, syntax and discourse accurately to narrate the process of the events, elaborate people, things and objects around them and express their viewpoints about some phenomena or problems in written form. Traditionally, English writing teaching in China is often treated as a type of language skill training alone, thus the overall teaching effect is not so satisfactory. The teaching of writing for the sake of writing would cause the problem that the writer is unable to deliver the information he or she wants to convey exactly to the potential message receivers, or even sometimes provoke misunderstanding of messages. To improve the teaching of language, the cultural attribute of language cannot be ignored.

It is the fact generally accepted among the linguists that language is the carrier of culture, and they are closely related. As the American linguist Edward Sapir expressed in his *Language* that there is something behind the language, and language cannot exist without culture (Edward, 1921). Charles A. Ellwood, a western linguist, also conveyed similar viewpoint, believing that language is the first part of human culture as well as the media of other

cultures (Ellwood, 1927). All these philosophies from the cultural linguists clearly demonstrate the importance of culture to language.

Culture is an extensive concept, including various aspects such as literature, art, history, geography, religious belief, traditional customs, value concept, thinking way and so on. It possesses the properties of communication and transmission as well as the features of telling one language from another (Wang, 2012). Therefore, to teach language without culture cultivation, it would be hard to realize effective language teaching and learning, and would fail to achieve the expected teaching efficiency. English writing teaching, as an important output link of English language teaching, is no exception; hence it is necessary to provide culture teaching and foster students' cultural awareness in English writing teaching.

2. CASE STUDY---THE NECESSITY OF CULTURE TEACHING IN EWT

In English teaching and learning, writing is often a tricky part for Chinese English instructors and learners due to the greatly different expressing habits, thinking ways and cultural customs between Chinese and English. While writing in English, some Chinese students still think and express in the Chinese manner, so their writing are quite Chinglish, especially in diction, sentence writing and discourse organization. The following is a piece of writing about the topic "travelling" from a senior student of English major:

With the number of economic growth in China over the last decade, people are finding it increasingly easy to travel at home and abroad. Professor Zhang from Tsinghua University declared after a survey "Percentage of inbound tourism is much higher than outbound tourism during the past year". In my eyes, people have the tendency to travel at home. it is acknowledged by the general public that travel at home is easier than travel abroad in terms of tourist spending and time cost.

Undoubtedly, people go no traveling for different purpose. Some hold the view that they could relax themselves by appreciating scenic spot during traveling after a period of high pressure job. However, the others may start traveling just to escape from reality, they got blank mind in the process of traveling to think and to reflect so as to be absorb in what they will do after traveling. The common point in this two is that both of them may get steady income and enough time to travel. In China, people often take a trip in group in specific holiday, such as spring festival or other national festivals. But the group of college student is an exception; they are easy to travel as long as they want. What is prevail most is that they are likely to make thorough plan for trip in the coming summer or winter vacation. For one thing, part of regional economic growth rely on tourism, and travel at home promote cultural exchange and advance the protection of wild and rare animals. For another, gradually, under the strong push of benefit from tourism, tourism infrastructures built in mountains and rivers or natural reserve become a new normal. It is the exploration of nature for tourism purpose that contribute to pollution on water resources, Once in a while, it has aroused much concern in public.

To the best of my knowledge, the advantages of traveling far outweigh its disadvantage. Going on traveling is an expression of our improving living standard in modern society. It is suggested that every one of us need to mind our behavior when traveling.

In fact, the above essay is not a perfect one in terms of both grammar and expression. First of all, there are a lot of minor grammatical mistakes like capitalization, plural form of nouns, misuse of parts of speech, and the third person singular form of verbs and so on. For example, "it" in line three of paragraph one should be capitalized; "purpose" and "disadvantage" in the first sentence of paragraph two and paragraph three respectively should be in plural form; "prevail" is a verb, but it is used as an adjective in line seven of the second paragraph; and "contribute" in the line but the last line of paragraph two should be changed into the form "contributes". As for these problems, they could be eliminated by checking after writing, because these errors are minor ones caused by carelessness.

More importantly, some in-depth problems in expression are found as well in the essay, including improper use of words, semantic confusion of sentences, unclear logic structure, etc. Here are some examples from the above writing. Above all, in the second paragraph, the student is obviously confused at the usage of words "holiday" and "festival", and is unable to tell the connotative shades among the synonyms "normal", "standard", and "criteria". Furthermore, the expressions like "got blank mind", "to think and to reflect" and "absorb in what they will do after traveling" in the underlined sentence in paragraph two are paradoxical and incompatible, so the readers, especially

foreign readers, cannot understand what the student wants to convey even after careful reading. In addition, the whole essay, from the beginning to the end, has no consistent main idea. Every paragraph has its own point: “people have the tendency to travel at home and abroad” in the first paragraph, “people go travelling may get steady income and enough time to travel” and “there are some advantages for travelling” in the second paragraph, and “the advantages of traveling far outweigh its disadvantages” in the last paragraph. The readers might be bewildered at what the key viewpoint really is. The writing fails to give out a main point which could cover and control the whole text, and the opening paragraph does not play its due role in this aspect.

To conclude the reasons for these deeper problems mentioned above, it is apparent that all of them are caused by varied linguistic habits, thinking mode and cultural representation between Chinese and English, which belongs to the cultural issue; therefore, to improve or address these problems, conducting culture teaching is essential and necessary in English writing teaching.

3. PRACTICE STUDY—THE FEASIBILITY OF CULTURE TEACHING IN EWT

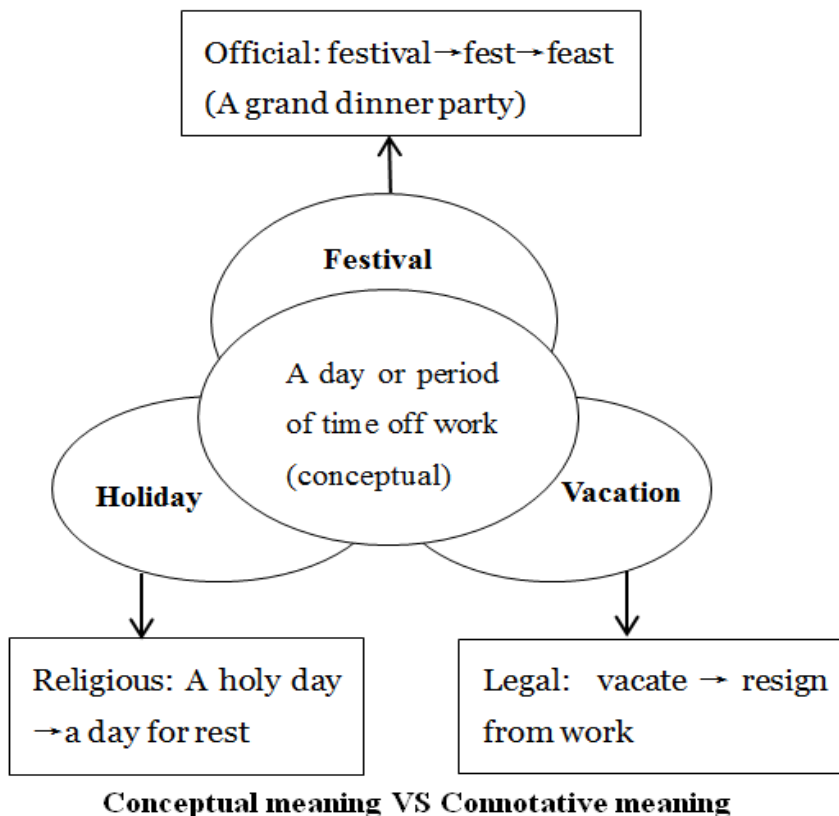
As discussed in the case study, there are some inappropriate vocabulary use, ineffective sentence expression and chaotic textual structure found in the student’s writing. Actually, the phenomenon is not individual, but common among Chinese English learners, so it is imperative to improve the present situation of English writing. Culture teaching in English writing teaching is considered a useful way. The part is to explore the feasibility of culture teaching in EWT on the levels of vocabulary, syntax and text from the perspective of linguistics.

3.1. The Cultivation of Culture Consciousness on the Level of Vocabulary in EWT

The selection and using of words is the first step in English writing teaching. As a Chinese saying goes, one minute on stage takes ten years of practice. It is not simple to teach students how to select and use words aptly, which needs long-time training and the guidance of lexicology. Lexicology is one of key branches of linguistics, systematically demonstrating that vocabulary is a complicated and dynamic category of language. Influenced by the factors such as times, history, environment, and culture, vocabulary is changing semantically during the course of using, and the semantic change would take place in the following forms: meaning broadening, meaning narrowing, meaning shift, class shift and folk etymology, which cause the variability and abundance of lexical meaning.

According to the classification of the linguist Leech, the meaning of a word covers seven levels, that is, conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, stylistic meaning, emotional meaning, associative meaning, collocated meaning and thematic meaning (Geoffrey, 1981). Therefore, it is not enough to remember words’ basic meaning to make a proper use of them in English writing. In another word, to master a word so as to achieve its accurate using in English writing, students are required to grasp its conceptual meaning and other meaning like connotative meaning as well. Although the conceptual meaning is always the focus of vocabulary learning, the cultural and social connotation of vocabulary, with the development of cultural linguistics and social linguistics, become more and more important.

The same word has diverse connotative meanings in different language, and specific cultural connotation in the given culture. English has a large and rich vocabulary, among which many words, after experiencing the transition of old English, medieval English and modern English, carry various cultural information, i.e. political philosophy, historical geography, religious legend, literature, art and so on. The variety of diction is significantly demanded in English writing, and it is embodied in alternative using of synonyms. Therefore, English writing teaching can begin with delicate shades of meaning among synonyms to instruct students to comprehend the cultural connotation of words and to pay attention to the cultural color of words in hope of achieving precise diction. Take a set of synonyms like “holiday”, “vacation”, and “festival” used in the sample writing above for example. Although the three words frequently used words in English writing are similar in basic meaning, their cultural connotation are varied in term of lexical origins, which is shown in the following graph.



As mentioned in the above schema, the original meaning of the word “holiday” is of religious flavor, mainly referring to “the day for rest”; “vacation” is often used to signify “a period of time off work”; “festival” principally means “a day or period of time off for the purpose of celebrating events”. Therefore, it yields such lexical collocations as “Spring Festival”, “Winter Vacation” and “Holiday Season”, or such statements as “To celebrate the coming of New Year, Chinese take a holiday for Spring Festival, while Americans for Christmas; however, both holidays are during the winter vacation.” in English writing. In the statement, “holiday”, “vacation”, and “festival” are presented frequently and used alternatively, so students are easily confused about their usage because of their similar conceptual meaning. Under the circumstance, their cultural connotations will help students understand and master the delicate shades among these words, which is much useful to get them realize the correct using of these words. Without cultural comprehension of these words, the narration, description or presentation would not be as effective as expected.

Even “holiday”, “vacation”, and “festival”, which are fairly common words in English vocabulary, can be taught by this means, other vocabulary must be in the same way. Thus it can be concluded that English writing teaching can start with the lexical variety to lead students to keep their eyes on subtle differences in cultural connotation among words so as to assist them to use words precisely through culture teaching on the level of vocabulary.

3.2. The Cultivation of Culture Consciousness on the Level of Syntax in EWT

Sentence writing is a basic skill of English writing. The quality of sentences directly influences the effectiveness and readability of the article. In order to improve the quality of sentences, some writing principles and linguistic structure rules should be observed. Syntax, another key branch of linguistics, is the linguistic rules on the level of sentence. Syntax studies the inner structure of sentences, which includes some basic parts like the subject, the predicate, the object, the attribute, the adverbial or the complement. According to the structural constitution, sentences can be classified into simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentence and compound-complex sentences, but no matter what sentence structures, simple or complex, are used, English writing should comply

with the following five writing principles: Completeness, coherence, consistency, conciseness and variety. In a word, a sentence should express a complete main idea concisely and variously with integrated and consistent structure.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, a famous German linguist, emphasized the creative and national traits of language. The creativity of language is demonstrated in producing limitless utterances under the limited linguistic rules; the nationality of language signifies that language is the external manifestation of national spirit, and every language has its own specific view about the world (Yao, 1995). The cognitive linguist Leonard Talmy takes language as a cognitive system related to other cognitive systems such as sense, affection, mind or culture (Talmy, 2000). In other words, every sentence unconsciously conveys the culture behind the language while expressing the information or the central idea it aims to deliver, which fully explains in theory the feasibility of cultivating cultural consciousness on the level of sentence. The interpretation of the conciseness principle in sentence writing is a good case in point.

In English writing, conciseness means that an effective sentence should express the most sufficient implication with the least words without any redundant expressions to avoid verbosity and to achieve brevity finally. In interpreting the principle, Chinese students' misunderstanding and misusing in sentence writing can be applied to cultivate their cultural awareness. For example, students may make such a sentence in their writings: Mary is a quiet and careful woman (Ding, 2013). Mary, in English, is a name for female, which already shows the gender of the subject, so there is no need to add the word "woman". To revise the sentence, it can be changed into "Mary is quite and careful". When elaborating the point, the teacher could discuss the name culture during the instruction, i.e. the cultural connotations of English names, or the origin and significance of some famous people's names, thus fostering students' culture consciousness.

Similarly, there is also a sentence in the first paragraph in the sample composition violating the principle of conciseness: "*With the number of economic growth in China over the last decade, people are finding it increasingly easy to travel at home and abroad.*" In this sentence, the word "growth" means "a process of becoming larger or longer or more numerous or more important", already covering the concept of "number", so the word "number" is superfluous, and should be deleted in order to make the expression briefer. In the meanwhile, the relationship between economic growth and tourism development can be discussed and analyzed as a cultural point to help students build up relevant cultural background information in anticipation of writing in clear logic and organization.

Furthermore, cultural interpretation of English proverbs is also an available way to train students' cultural awareness in terms of syntax. Cognitive linguistics includes proverbs into the category of sentence study as a special sentence structure. In English writing, employing some general and summary proverbs is a significant method of improving English writing, which can add grace and charm to the article. Thus, it is useful to discuss the cultural connotation of proverbs in English writing teaching with the purpose of cultivating students' cultural awareness. In English, there are a wide variety of proverbs, involving religion, history, economy, culture, education and so on. The specific examples are as follows:

Subject	English Proverbs	Culture teaching
Religion	God heals and the doctor takes the fee.	Christian culture
Economy	In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes.	Tax system
Learning	Every sort of mastery is an increase of one's freedom.	Individualism
Education	In education we are striving not to teach youth to make a living, but to make a life.	Creativity
Spirit	A man can be destroyed but not defeated.	Hemingway literature

As presented in the above table, these proverbs cover the subject of religion, economy, education, etc., but in the specific expressions appear some cultural points like Christianity, tax, individualism and literature, which are worth learning and discussing. While interpreting the meaning and structure of these proverbs, the teacher could

adequately extend the analysis into the cultural connotation hidden in them, which is beneficial to deepen students' understanding of the proverbs so that they can make a proper use of them, and is helpful to cultivate students' sense of culture. Hence, through the case study and interpretation of the conciseness principle and English proverbs, it can be seen that it is practical to train students' awareness of culture by means of cultural teaching on the level of syntax.

3.3. The Cultivation of Culture Consciousness on the Level of Text in EWT

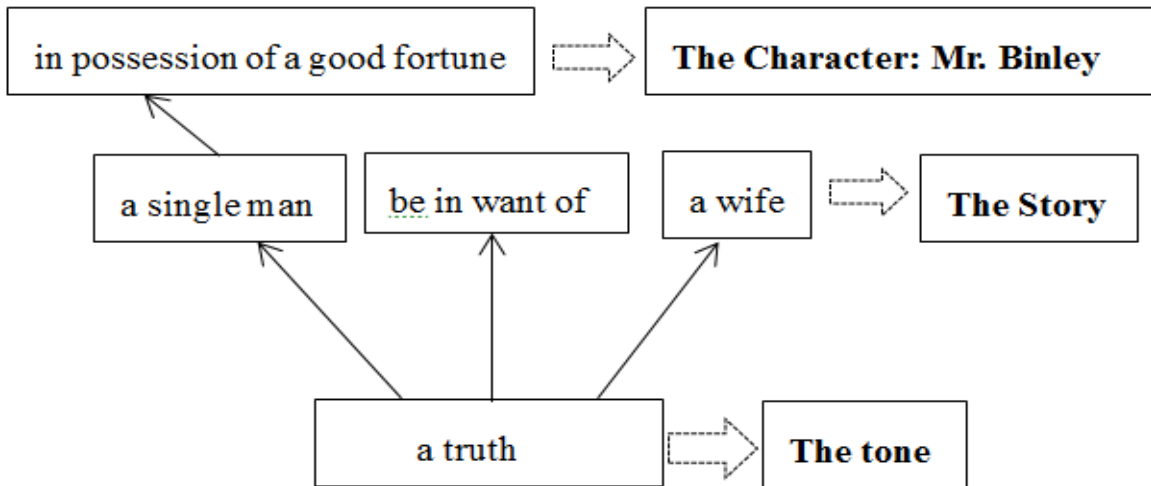
Paragraphs and passages are two different linguistic units of a text. A paragraph is composed of one or several related sentence groups, and it is the epitome of a passage, so a paragraph and a passage share some similarities in structure and function: both express only one main idea as a whole and use cohesive devices and transitional ways to present their inner logic and coherence. Therefore, paragraph writing and passage writing could be performed simultaneously in English writing teaching.

The text study has already developed into an independent discipline, namely, textual linguistics which holds that the form and meaning of language should be studied within the context. J. R. Firth, an outstanding English linguist, pointed out that the meaning of language should be understood in the linguistic background and language could not be discussed without talking about culture (Wang, 1980). Paragraphs and passages are the external expressions of linguistic culture and thinking way, from which students can sense a lot of information, i.e. society, history, culture, or psychology of a country or a nation. Due to the differences in cultural value, thinking modes and linguistic cognition among different languages, the organizational structure of paragraphs and passages are varied as well, which provides theoretical base for the comparative teaching of Chinese-English cultural differences.

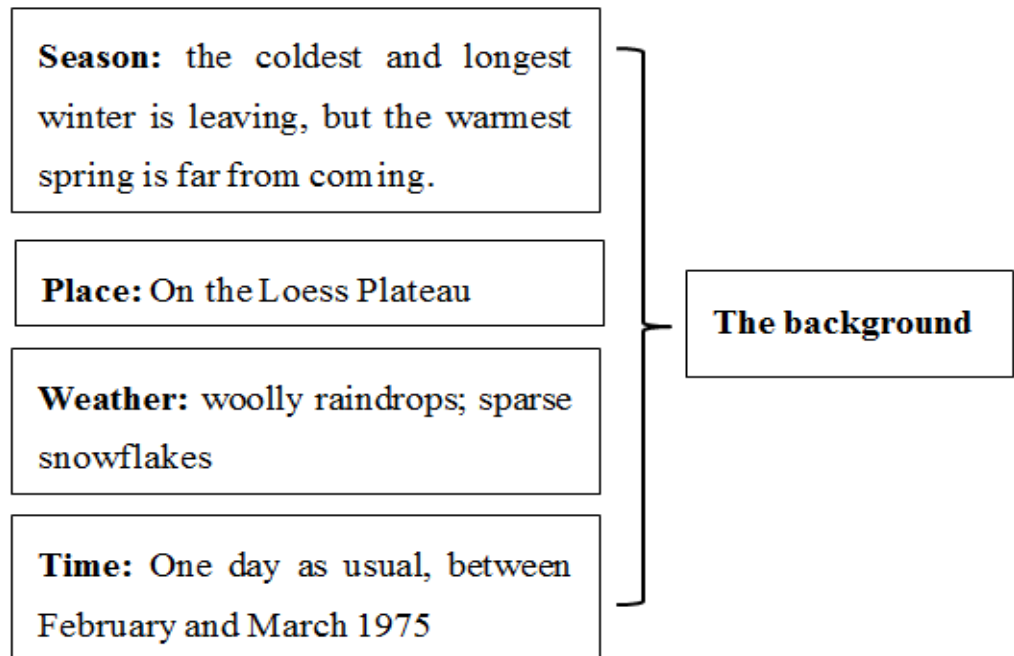
English writing is supposed to be the output part of language learning and teaching. According to the cognitive linguists, language learning is the process of handling language information, undergoing a developing process of input, memory and output. An effective output comes from a sufficient input. As for writing, reading classic works is regarded as the best source for a good input. Just as a Chinese saying goes, having pored over ten thousand volumes, one can write with godly power. If one wants to own a gifted pen, he or she should read a large amount of works or books. Moreover, classic reading makes classic writing, especially comparative classic reading, which is more conducive to instruct students to writing with thoughtful ideas and cross-cultural mind.

Everything must start from scratch, so is the text writing. The text writing teaching can begin with the opening paragraph writing by taking classic opening paragraphs in literary works as the entry point to lead students to understand differences of language and culture between Chinese and English caused by varied thinking ways so as to achieve conscious writing. English female writer Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and the celebrated Chinese writer Lu Yao's *The Commonplace World* are both world-famous masterpiece in literature, and the opening paragraphs of two works are known for their brevity and conciseness, however, their linguistic expressions, imprinted with their own cultural brands, are greatly different, demonstrating diverse thinking features.

As for *Pride and Prejudice*, the opening paragraph is only one complex sentence which goes as "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife". On the contrast, the opening of *The Commonplace World* consists of several short sentences with weak logic connection: "One day as usual, between February and March 1975, it is sleety; the woolly raindrops blended with sparse snowflakes are floating the way down to the earth. Insects will awake from winter sleep soon, how can the snow stay any longer? Mostly, the flakes have disappeared totally before they touch the earth. On the Loess Plateau, the coldest and longest winter is leaving, but the warmest spring is far from coming." These two classic opening paragraphs actually represent two kinds of typical language codes and thinking habits between English and Chinese. One is of direct paradigm with tree structure, while another is in indirect mode in bamboo structure. The detailed information is demonstrated below:



(1) *Pride and Prejudice* (direct; tree structure)



(2) *The Commonplace World* (indirect; bamboo structure)

Through the comparison in the above two diagrams, the differences in these two kinds of language can be seen obviously. The first paragraph of *Pride and Prejudice* goes straight to the point by using several key words like “a single man”, “a good fortune” and “in want of a wife” to inform the readers that the novel tells the story about how a wealthy single man finds a wife and starts a family. The opening sets the tone for the whole novel and introduces the presence of a single rich man Mr. Binley in the novel. However, *The Commonplace World* opens by a detailed account and specific description, which is composed of several short simple sentences organized in bamboo diagram without complicated sentences. They only explain time, place, season and weather, in which the story is going to happen, but nothing more about the following plot can be inferred from the opening. In addition, there are no much conjunctions in the whole paragraph to show the internal logic among sentences, nevertheless, Chinese readers can still understand the meaning Mr. Lu Yao wants to convey, which is unconceivable and unacceptable in English writing.

The differences in these two opening paragraphs well embody the thinking differences between Chinese and English: Chinese people like the implicit and inductive means of expression by putting important information at the ending parts, while English prefers deductive writing style by placing key messages at the beginning. It gives us inspiration in English writing teaching that the teacher should emphasize the writing of topic paragraphs of passages and should train students' deductive thinking so as to write idiomatic English text and to avoid a useless opening as analyzed in the case study. Meanwhile, during the process of appreciating the classic opening paragraphs, the teacher could present students such cultural information as the social circumstance of China around 1975 hidden in *The Commonplace World* as well as the class concept, educational system, dress culture and marriage phenomenon of English society in the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century contained in *Pride and Prejudice*, which is also beneficial to optimize students' cultural literacy.

Besides, based on what discussed above, the first paragraph of the student's sample writing could be revised into a deductive one with a key point. It is as follows: "*With the economic growth in China over the last decade, people are finding it increasingly easy to travel at home and abroad. No matter where they travel or what their travelling purposes are, growing tourism brings advantages as well as disadvantages. In my eyes, the tourism tendency is beneficial as a whole.*" The improved opening deductively provides the readers with reasonable prediction about the following paragraphs, which conforms to the linguistic habits of English. In sum, to write in English needs to think in English and English thinking training demands the support of culture teaching, therefore, it is compulsory and workable to teach cultural knowledge in English writing teaching on the level of text as well.

4. CONCLUSION

The majority of linguists, social linguists, cognitive linguists and cultural linguists, hold the viewpoint that language and culture are greatly related and could not be separated from each other. Therefore, language could not be taught in an effective way without cultural teaching, otherwise, language teaching would become an empty word, and students could not learn the language well in the right direction. English writing is significantly important in English teaching, and it is a crucial means of checking the quality and level of students' English written output. There is still room for the traditional English writing teaching to promote its effect, thus, in order to improve or change the status quo of English writing teaching in China, culture teaching should be adequately introduced and integrated into English writing teaching on the levels of vocabulary, syntax and text to make students digest the writing differences between English and Chinese and get to know the abundant cultural information hidden in English. The practice helps students build up their cultural awareness, "assisting students comprehend the environment in which language comes into being and fostering students' ability of linguistic construction in the environment" (Li, 2016) which would finally support students to reach the performance of accurate and effective writing.

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