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## The Dynamics of English Writing Development in Advanced Chinese Learners

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# Chapter 1

## General Introduction

## Chapter 1 | 14

The present dissertation consists of 5 journal articles that have already been published or are under review. This first chapter briefly describes what originally motivated the dissertation and how each sub-study led to the next one. Originally, the study was intended to investigate whether Chinese learners of English as a foreign language at university were right in their complaints that they made little progress in English despite the fact that they spent about 5 hours a week on studying English, perhaps only to pass the required tests.

There is no doubt that English test scores are important in China. The large population has created a highly competitive employment market in China and selection criteria for many jobs are often based on test scores provided in the Chinese educational system. There is also a widespread belief among parents and students that tertiary education is the best way to secure employment and a good life. Because English test scores, like those of some other subjects, have played an important role for years, English teaching in China has become a nationwide endeavor, pursued at all academic levels, from kindergarten to university and different tests are administered at different levels of education. These tests are often viewed as a means to an end as the scores are also used as selection criteria at different levels of education. Therefore, teachers devote their time to find effective teaching methods to help students improve their test scores. Students and teachers concentrate on practicing tests, convinced it is the most useful and helpful way for students to improve testing scores. Probably the most competitive test is the College Entrance Examination (CEE), with the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) as a required subtest, which all students in China take at the end of their high school career to help determine admission to different universities. Once at university, students have to take and pass two more College English Tests (CET) at different levels, the CET-4 and CET-6, and especially the CET-6 (estimated at the B2-C1 level in the European Framework of Reference) is difficult to pass for many students. For a university it is important that as many students as possible pass the CETs as it gives it status. Also for the students, a pass and a high score on the CET is an asset in the highly competitive job market. On average, students spend about 5 hours per week studying for each test, but

students often complain that studying English at university is a waste of time. They do not feel they improve much after high school.

To investigate whether these complaints were justified several studies were conducted. The first study (Chapter 2) is the actual introduction to the dissertation. It is a survey study among university students that explores their attitudes towards the English language and their English classes, their studying habits, their exposure to English outside class and whether it is true that they are mainly driven by the tests to develop their English proficiency. The subsequent study (Chapter 3) explores to what extent students make progress in their respective academic levels. Two texts written by students who were studying for the NMET, the CET-4 and CET-6 were collected at the beginning and two texts at the end of their respective courses. Writing samples were used as they are considered free response data in which learners can show different aspects of language proficiency simultaneously (Schmid, Verspoor & MacWhinney, 2011) and both holistic and analytical scores were used in the pre-posttest study. The high school students and CET-4 students showed progress in various measures, but the advanced CET-6 group showed very little change despite their 18 month English course. As these results were difficult to believe, the decision was made to scrutinize development more in this particular group. It was hypothesized that the students might have reached ceiling effects in the commonly used developmental measures and progressed in more subtle areas of language, such as the use of idiomatic language and text quality in terms of cohesion and coherence. The next study (Chapter 4) investigated whether the students in the CET-6 group increased in their use of idiomatic language, operationalized as chunks. The first two and final two texts of these 18 learners were hand-coded for many different kinds of chunks and several measures were used to see how they correlated with the holistic scores from the previous study and to see if any progress was made in any of these measures over their 18 month course. The results showed that the learners had indeed progressed in the use of collocations and another particular measure: chunk coverage. Basically, this measure is the number of words in chunks divided by the total number of words in the text, suggesting that the learners used either more chunks or longer chunks overall. The final group study (Chapter 5) explored improvement in cohesion and coherence in both

## Chapter 1 | 16

automated and hand-coded measures. Cohesion was operationalized as the explicit mention of cohesive devices (local cohesion) and the semantic overlap between sentences and paragraphs (global cohesion). Coherence was operationalized as topic-based coherence in which the number of moves between related concepts are counted and both their density and distance are calculated. The results showed that the group had improved significantly in the density of moves (DoM). This measure also correlated highly with the holistic CAFIC scores. All in all, the last two group studies had shown that CET-6 group had made some progress in some subtle areas of English language proficiency.

The first group study had shown that overall the CET-6 group had not made any progress, but some students actually had improved and others had not. To explore possible differences in developmental patterns, two individuals were selected: one to represent a strong learner and one a weak learner. This study (Chapter 6) traces several variables in the 12 texts written over the course of 18 months by our writers from a Complex Dynamic Systems Perspective. The results show that the strong learner was more advanced to begin with and over time the subsystems in her linguistic system were more strongly coordinated. The weaker learner showed more variability in some measures and few meaningful relations among the measures.

In addition to the present chapter, the thesis contains five chapters discussing the respective studies mentioned above and a conclusion in which especially the implications for both the Chinese students and research findings are elaborated.