# REVIEWS

### Leedham, M. (2015) *Chinese Students' Writing in English: Implications from a Corpus-Driven Study*. Abington: Routledge. 184 pp.

Chinese students make up the biggest group of international students at universities in the United Kingdom (UK). While they have to compete with native speaker students, Chinese students face various challenges and difficulties in writing, one of which is learning how to write "within the accepted style of their discipline […] and [an] unfamiliar range of text types and genres" (p. 1). As relatively few studies have been conducted on assessed undergraduate student writings and since the number of Chinese students in the UK is increasing, Maria Leedham's aim was to investigate typical features of the L1 Chinese students' writing style in English.

Leedham focused on three research questions in her study: (1) What are the distinguishing characteristics of writing in English in a corpus of Chinese undergraduates' assignments in the UK?; (2) Are there any variations in these characteristics identified in this study between years 1-2 and year 3?; and (3) In what ways do disciplines affect the identified characteristics of Chinese undergraduate writing in English? To answer these questions, she extracted papers from the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus and created a set of undergraduate writings. She first analyzed a corpus of assessed academic writings by Chinese students (146 assignments) and compared her findings with her reference corpus consisting of papers written by native speaker (NS) students (611 assignments). Those assignments cover the years 1-3 of Economics, Biology and Engineering studies. Leedham furthermore designed a questionnaire for both undergraduate students, writing tutors and lecturers, interviewed students and observed English/foreign language lessons at schools in China and the UK.

The book consists of seven chapters. Chapter One outlines the focus and the approach of the study as well as the description of the dataset, disciplines and genres. Before she describes the BAWE corpus, the primary source of her dataset in more detail, Leedham compares it with the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE). Through this comparison of data sets of assessed undergraduate assignments (BAWE corpus) and unassessed learner texts (ICLE), it was illustrated that learner corpora feature several limitations: one important factor is that they consist of extremely short argumentative essays that do not require any background reading or research and therefore do not include any secondary sources. Hence, these texts cannot compete with academic writings

at university. In order to investigate features and reveal unexpected patterns of both Chinese and English students, this study employs a corpus-driven approach, that is, keywords were analyzed without having any pre-established patterns or categories.

The homogeneity of L1 Chinese students, their educational background and challenges faced by all undergraduate students in the UK are discussed next, in Chapter Two. The main focus here is on the English Language Teaching (ELT) education of students from the largest national group, namely China. Leedham addresses commonalities of Chinese students such as literacy, language learning and Confucianism. She offers an insight into their learning of English, starting at primary level and points out that there is a common tendency in the West to generically label all students that speak a dialect of Chinese, no matter if they are from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan or Malaysia, as 'Chinese students'. It has been critiqued that no national, regional, cultural or economic differences are considered when describing this group of students, but that they are treated as an entirely homogenous group. What is shared among this group of students, however, is their writing system that is based on ideographic characters, their similar language learning methodology that rests on the Grammar Translation method, and a heritage founded in Confucianism. To better understand the choices that Chinese students make in their writings, it is important to consider the factors that influence them. Hence, dedicating one subchapter to background information on Chinese students' literacy and language learning is essential. However, the excessive description of Chinese characters and their reading competency is irrelevant here.

Chapter Three presents the findings of the features of Chinese student writings found in Leedham's dataset and the distinguishing features of Chinese student writings. Firstly, both corpora are described and compared. Secondly, the keyword analysis with WordSmith is explained in more detail. Such an analysis discloses which words and n-grams merit further investigation. Most of the keywords were taken from semantically coherent areas and grouped into 'key categories' (p. 43) (connectors, informal items, first person plural, and references to data or visuals within the text). The categorization of informal and formal words is based on Biber et al.'s (1999) description in the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Leedham's investigation and several previous research studies explored in Chapter Two show that overall, Chinese students tend to use more informal words (e.g. *really*, *I think*, *what's more*, *of course*) than NS students and generally use a smaller range of lexical items. They furthermore repeatedly use the first person pronoun *we* and informal connectors such as *by the way* and *besides*, which is in line with the literature on non-native speaker (NNS) writings. Formal expressions preferred by NS students are underrepresented in the Chinese

corpus and contracted verb forms are significantly more frequently employed by L1 English students. Another main finding was that Chinese students tend to use more visuals and lists in their texts and hence write significantly shorter sentences, but use longer words. This finding about the mean sentence and word lengths and the greater use of visuals by Chinese students is important since it has not yet been mentioned in other literature. Whether this can be interpreted as an avoidance strategy or a strategy to present their information concisely, is unclear.

Chapter Four presents the variation across year groups (year 1-3) "to explore whether the identified features in L1 Chinese and L1 English student writing converge over time" (p. 62). Again, the focus is on the three 'key categories'. One interesting finding is that the features identified as typical of L1 Chinese students in year 1 did not occur as frequently in year 3. Hence, Chinese students have reduced the use of most of the distinguishing features. That is why Leedham also took various textbooks and model texts that Chinese students use to prepare for the Chinese university entrance exam (*Gaokao*) into consideration. Her qualitative analysis of these texts and books shows that the connectors and informal words mentioned above were frequently used in the material that students use prior to university entry. Hence, it can be inferred that Chinese students use the language they have been most exposed to, in this case before starting their undergraduate careers.

Chapter Five explains how the different disciplines Biology, Economics and Engineering can influence the writing style of students. To support her corpus data, Leedham conducted 21 interviews with lecturers who were asked to comment on different textual features by disciplines. It was found that the use of first person pronouns, lists and visuals differ across disciplines and L1 groups. The main findings are that first person pronouns are mostly used in Economics texts by both student groups and that Chinese students employ more formulae (in Engineering), lists (in Economics) and figures (in Biology) than British students. There are diverging views on this phenomenon. While some lecturers generally appreciate the high use of visuals and lists by Chinese students and regard it as being concise and brief, others see it as disjointed writing.

Chapter Six presents the pedagogical implications of these disciplinary differences, based on the finding from the interviews and questionnaire data. New insights are offered in this chapter. One finding is that lecturers are open to variation in how assignments are written and presented (p.113). Instead of describing the views of the lecturers she interviewed in more detail and placing them in the broader academic discourse in this field, Leedham focused too much on the lecturer's views already discussed in the literature. The subchapter, entitled 'Students' views: attitudes towards writing', explicates how students

learned to write and what their attitudes towards writing are. For this purpose, 202 Chinese and British students completed a questionnaire with open-ended questions. Many students described the teaching of academic writing, if they had received any at all, as minimal and vague (p. 122). Even though most students enjoyed writing, they still described it as 'tiring', 'challenging' and 'hard'. Reasons for disliking writing included the stress of deadlines and the struggles with language (p. 124). A clear trend could not be identified. The chapter ends with some recommendations (in the title referred to as 'pedagogical implications') for teachers to help all undergraduate students to understand and fulfill the writing requirements in their fields. Helpful new knowledge that cannot be found in previous studies has not been presented at this point. Even though the implications are declared as the main aim of this study, the recommendations seem more like an afterthought that is neither directly linked to the research questions nor to the literature review.

All findings based on the research questions are summarized and concluding remarks about her study are made in Chapter Seven. The following findings were highlighted: differences between Chinese and British students' writings decreased as they learned more about adapting to the given norms; the use of informal words differs between both groups, but not as extremely as previous studies claim; and Chinese students use visuals significantly more often than British students. Some limitations of corpus linguistics are discussed as well. One point that Leedham discusses is that tables, lists and other visuals are often removed from the texts before the actual analysis.

On the whole, important and valuable insights into the writing ability of NNS students are gained from Leedham's book. It offers background knowledge on the teaching of English in China and provides an extensive picture of Chinese student writing today, discusses the findings of a corpus analysis and draws our attention to multimodality. In the last years, students have been more and more required to use visuals in their assignments. As Chinese students seem to be leaders in using visuals, Leedham suggests that lecturers help students more in the production of multimodal texts. The representativeness of her findings can be questioned since Leedham does not provide information on the different genres found in her two corpora. It seems that the aspect of genre has not been sufficiently taken into consideration in her analysis. However, the choices of words can differ enormously between different genres. The book can be recommended as a reference for researchers analyzing Chinese English in the field of academic writing, researchers interested in corpus linguistics and lecturers who teach Chinese students and are interested in better understanding the challenges they face in writing.

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