

Topic familiarity, syntactic maturity, and lexical competence of Chinese college non-English majors in EFL writing

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Abstract

Effective writing is a crucial skill for college students, vital for personal growth, academic research, and career success. Study evaluated the writing proficiency of non-English majors in Chinese universities, specifically focusing on topic familiarity, syntactic maturity, and lexical competence. The research utilized a descriptive methodology with questionnaires, surveying 392 participants from five universities in China. All data analyses were conducted using SPSS 26.0. The study results indicate that all participants acknowledged the importance of topic familiarity in both receptive and productive writing tasks. This confirms that topic familiarity plays a significant role in the writing abilities of Chinese EFL learners. Additionally, enhancing students' syntactic maturity can effectively improve their writing quality. While the respondents demonstrated a strong depth of lexical knowledge, the breadth of lexical knowledge and overall vocabulary use were not as strong. There was a highly significant correlation between these three variables, indicating that better performance in topic familiarity leads to more proficiency in syntactic maturity, leading to greater competence in lexical aspects. Based on these findings, an enhancement program has been proposed to improve the EFL writing proficiency of Chinese college students. By implementing this program, students can intentionally increase their topic knowledge, improve the syntactic maturity of English, and successfully reinforce their lexical competence, all of which will improve their writing abilities.

Keywords: topic familiarity, syntactic maturity, lexical competence

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1. Introduction

English writing ability is a crucial skill emphasized in foreign language teaching and learning and writing, which has received extensive attention from numerous scholars. The published *English Teaching Syllabus for Non-English Majors in Colleges and Universities* (from now on referred to as *the Syllabus*) by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2021 requires students to be able to write in all kinds of styles with substantial content, smooth language, appropriate words, and expression. The new *Syllabus* places great emphasis on various genre contexts and specific content of writing, that is, students are required to have a proficient competence to write on different topics, establish genre awareness, and enhance written expression ability. This is not only the need for college students in times of internalization and globalization, but also a new task of English writing teaching for English teachers in Chinese colleges. However, for the average scores of CET-4 (College English Test Band-4) and CET-6 (College English Test Band-6) writing scores in 2021 and 2022, a large-scale standardized test sponsored by the Ministry of Education and administered by the Educational Examination Institute of the Ministry of Education, are unsatisfactory and falls far short of the requirements of the new *Syllabus*. Nationally, based on the total score of 100, the average score of the CET-4 writing test in 2021 was 65.4 points but dropped to 61.88 points in 2022. The average writing score of the national CET-6 test in 2021 was 60.05 points but dropped to 58.05 points in 2022. It is urgent to address the problems in English writing for non-English majors in Chinese colleges and universities, meanwhile, the writing teaching needs further exploration and research.

Many foreign language writing researchers conducted empirical studies on the factors affecting Chinese students' English writing from different perspectives, and their findings showed that foreign language level, native language writing ability, writing tasks and conditions, writing practice frequency, metacognitive ability, and other factors had varying degrees of influence on the quality and quantity of foreign language writing. Based on the current background, the research attempts to further probe into the factors affecting students' English writing from the perspective of topic familiarity, syntactic maturity, and lexical competence, and to test the significant relationships among these three variables in English as a foreign language writing (hereinafter referred to as the EFL writing) and to propose a writing program to help learners improve their writing ability. In this way, students' English writing level can gradually meet the requirements of the new *Syllabus* with substantial content, appropriate words, and pertinent expression.

Scholars have elaborated the meaning of topic familiarity from different angles in their research. Cognitive linguistics argues that assimilation and adaptation are conducive to learning new knowledge. If learners are familiar with the materials provided, they may immediately search the existing information in their brain according to the material information, connect the old and new knowledge, and quickly absorb and understand the new knowledge. Andrade et al. (2022) believe that background knowledge in mind is very important for successful writing. Indah (2017) pointed out that topic familiarity, similar to the content schema, is the degree of familiarity with the writing topic. To sum up, topic familiarity can be understood as students' familiarity with the writing topic, that is, the mind stores the background knowledge related to the writing topic. This study intends to investigate how topic familiarity influences EFL learners' written performance by using measures in terms of reception and production. It is hoped that the investigation of topic familiarity in writing can shed some light on both theoretical significance as well as on practical values. Specifically, on one hand, the findings in this study might provide support for the research on topic familiarity in EFL writing; on the other hand, findings might provide insights for EFL writing teaching.

Syntactic maturity is a term used to describe the degree of development and complexity of a language's grammatical structure. It refers to the ability of a language to express complex ideas and relationships through the

use of different grammatical forms and structures. According to Kameen (2014), syntactic maturity can vary greatly between different languages. English has a relatively high degree of syntactic maturity, with a wide range of verb tenses, noun plurals, adjective degrees, and other grammatical forms that allow for precise and nuanced expressions. The level of syntactic maturity in a language can also change over time as the language evolves and develops. For instance, older versions of a language may have had simpler grammatical structures, while modern versions may have become more complex and diverse.

On the whole, syntactic maturity is an important aspect of language development and can influence how effectively a language can communicate complex ideas and relationships. Zhi (2004) argued that sentences are considered the key unit of syntactic complexity, together with accuracy and fluency, which is an important feature of sentence maturity. Many researchers committing themselves to EFL writing proficiency and development have focused their attention on research of syntactic complexity, hoping to provide a convincing gauge of syntactic maturity. Meanwhile, researchers tested and developed a variety of syntactic maturity measures, referred to as indexes of learners' writing proficiency, both in China and abroad to relatively objectively present a convincing standard of the assessment of writing proficiency.

However, there is limited understanding of how non-native speakers of English develop and achieve syntactic maturity in their writing, and relatively little attention has been paid to the unique challenges and processes involved in syntactic maturity in EFL writing. There is a need for more research exploring the mechanisms of language transfer and its impact on syntactic maturity in EFL writing. The role of instruction in promoting syntactic maturity in EFL writing is another area that requires further investigation. While some studies have examined the effectiveness of different teaching methods in improving syntactic complexity and accuracy, there is still a lack of consensus on the best practices for instructing syntactic maturity in EFL writing. Jiang (2000) argued contextual factors, such as the genre of writing, the purpose of the text, and the target reader, can also affect the syntactic choices made by EFL writers. There is a need for more research exploring how these contextual factors shape syntactic maturity in EFL writing. By addressing these research gaps, the study intends to identify syntactic maturity as to syntactic monitoring skill, syntactic manipulating skill, and syntactic producing skill and the development of the writing proficiency of the non-English majors.

Lexical competence is a person's ability to understand and use vocabulary effectively in a given language. It involves both receptive vocabulary knowledge and productive vocabulary knowledge. Yan (2010) held the idea that lexical competence encompasses a range of skills and abilities, including vocabulary size, word knowledge, word relationships, word recognition, and word production. One of the outstanding problems existing in college students' English writing is that words are not expressive and do not conform to English expression habits. The width of vocabulary knowledge, the depth of vocabulary knowledge, and the use of vocabulary are three important dimensions of vocabulary competence, which reflect the development of vocabulary knowledge as well as the development of the ability to use vocabulary.

Yet there is limited research on the specific challenges of vocabulary acquisition and use in EFL writing and an insufficient understanding of the impact of teaching methods on vocabulary acquisition and use. There is a need to compare and contrast different teaching methods to identify the most effective strategies for improving lexical competence in EFL writing. Addressing these research gaps can help researchers better understand the challenges and strategies employed by non-native speakers in EFL writing, and identify effective teaching methods and resources to improve their lexical competence. It is crucial to explore one's lexical competence in writing from the perspective of lexical quality and quantity, that is, the depth and breadth of lexical knowledge.

Therefore, it is of great importance and significance to explore EFL writing teaching and learning in China. Based on pertinent literature, the research status, research gaps, and the researcher's fifteen years of frontline teaching experience and perception in EFL non-English major writing, the study aims to assess topic familiarity, syntactic maturity, and lexical competence in EFL writing with the research method of questionnaires, and to propose a writing program to help learners improve their writing proficiency and inspire teachers in writing

teaching.

Objectives - This study aimed to assess topic familiarity, syntactic maturity, and lexical competence of non-English majors from five Chinese universities and to propose an EFL writing enhancement program to improve students' writing proficiency. Specifically, it described the profile of the respondents in terms of sex, academic year, school type, and major; determined topic familiarity of respondents in terms of writing task reception and writing task production; identified syntactic maturity as to syntactic monitoring skill, syntactic manipulating skill and syntactic producing skill; assessed lexical competence of respondents in terms of breadth of vocabulary knowledge, depth of vocabulary knowledge and overall use of vocabulary; tested significant differences of responses in topic familiarity, syntactic maturity, and lexical competence when grouped according to profile; tested significant relationships among topic familiarity, syntactic maturity and lexical competence in EFL writing and proposed a writing program for Chinese non-majors to enhance their writing proficiency based on the results of the study.

2. Methods

Research Design - This study used a descriptive research design that includes the interpretation of findings. It was used to the topic familiarity, syntactic maturity, and lexical competency of non-majors in English from five Chinese institutions. The researcher collected data by giving survey questionnaires to the respondents.

Participants -The participants of the study were 392 non-English majors from 5 universities in China. A sample size of 392 was calculated using Raosoft with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, based on the total population of 31450 of the 5 universities. They were selected due to their capacity to evaluate their topic familiarity, syntactic maturity, and lexical competence. 392 participants were either freshmen or sophomores, with majors in either science or liberal arts, and the 5 universities comprised both public and private ones.

Instrument - Information gathering instruments in this study were adopted and modified questionnaires. The respondents' profile, which included details about their sex, academic year, school type, and major, was covered in the first part. The second part is about the questionnaire for topic familiarity. The third part explores the respondents' syntactic maturity, and the last part contains the lexical competence questions. Survey items were assessed by the respondents using the Likert Scale of 4 - Strongly Agree; 3 - Agree; 2 -Disagree; and 1- Strongly Disagree.

Data Analysis - Descriptive statistics were used to tally, encode, and interpret all of the collected data. Weighted mean and rank were used to assess topic familiarity for EFL writing in terms of receptive writing tasks and productive writing tasks; to assess syntactic maturity in terms of syntactic monitoring skills, syntactic manipulating skills, and syntactic producing skills; to assess lexical competence in terms of depth of lexical knowledge, breadth of lexical knowledge and overall use of lexical knowledge. Pearson r was used to determine a significant relationship. All analyses were processed using SPSS 26.0.

Ethical Considerations - As each participant reads and understands the consent form and accepts the study's rules before participation, ethics are an essential component of all research studies. The participants' responses and personal information were taken very seriously and kept private. The LPU-B Research Ethics Review Committee would scrutinize all elements of the study from an ethical standpoint and give their ethical approval for the study. Additionally, it protected the respondents' privacy and anonymity by not requesting their identities while they completed the questionnaires. The investigator made certain that the participants willingly responded to the surveys according to their wishes. Lastly, none of the subjects were coerced by the researcher.

3. Results and Discussion

The respondents' profiles in terms of sex, year level, school type, and major. The 392 respondents who participated in the survey came from five different universities in China, which ensured the respondents were

representative of the target subjects and the research findings were scientific. Among 392 respondents, 161 were male students, which is equivalent to 41.1%, comprising less than half of the respondents, compared with 231 female students, which is equivalent to 58.9%. From the data, it can be seen that the number of female students is slightly higher than the number of male students.

Universities in China usually provide systemic teaching of College English writing for freshmen and sophomores. The number of students from the first year and the second year is 212 (54.1%) and 180 (45.9) respectively. From the results, the grade distribution of the respondents is relatively average for the school types of the respondents, which include public schools and private schools. As shown, 232 (59.2%) are from public schools and 160 (40.8%) are from private schools. There are slightly more students from public schools than those from private schools. The number of students from liberal arts and sciences is 210 (53.6%) and 182 (46.4%) respectively. From the data, the major distribution of the respondents is relatively even.

Table 1

Summary Table on Topic Familiarity

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Writing Task Reception	2.72	Agree	2
Writing Task Production	2.79	Agree	1
Composite Mean	2.76	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 1 presents the summary of topic familiarity for EFL writing in terms of writing task reception and writing task production. The composite means of 2.76 suggests the respondents' agreement with all the indicators. From the data shown, writing task production ranked first with the highest weighted mean of 2.79, compared to writing task reception with a weighted mean of 2.72. Based on the above data analysis, it can be concluded that EFL writing output is much impacted by topic familiarity. Teachers can assess the language level and progress of students through their writing output, and give more targeted feedback and suggestions based on the familiarity of the topic (Song, & Reynolds 2022). This helps to enrich the content of the article and make it livelier and more interesting. Students are often able to conceive and write articles more quickly on familiar topics. This helps improve writing efficiency and gives students more time to review and revise the essay. Students are more confident about familiar topics, which helps reduce anxiety in the writing process. A relaxed mind is more conducive to students' creation.

Table 2

Summary Table on Syntactic Maturity

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Syntactic Monitoring Skill	2.89	Agree	3
Syntactic Manipulating Skill	3.04	Agree	2
Syntactic Producing Skill	3.95	Agree	1
Composite Mean	3.29	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 2 presents the summary of syntactic maturity for EFL writing in terms of syntactic monitoring skill, syntactic manipulating skill, and syntactic producing skill. The composite means of 3.29 suggests the respondents' agreement with all the indicators. From the data shown, syntactic producing skill ranked first with the highest weighted mean of 3.95, compared to syntactic manipulating skill with a weighted mean of 3.04 and syntactic monitoring skill with a weighted mean of 2.72, ranked 2 and 3 respectively, and both with which the respondents agree. Syntactic-producing skill is the key to improving language accuracy. Mastering correct grammar structure and vocabulary use is the basis of expressing ideas. By practicing syntactic producing skills, learners can construct sentences more accurately and avoid common grammatical errors and problems with poor expression. Proficiency in the use of multiple grammatical structures can make the language more flexible and diversified, and make the expression smoother and more natural. Syntactic monitoring skills, syntactic manipulating skills, and syntactic producing skills are interrelated and influence each other in EFL writing. Together, they determine the author's writing ability and the quality of the text. Therefore, in English learning, cultivating and improving these syntactic

skills is very important to improve the level of writing.

Table 3

Summary Table on Lexical Competence

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Breadth of lexical knowledge	3.03	Agree	2.5
Depth of lexical knowledge	3.11	Agree	1
Overall use of vocabulary	3.03	Agree	2.5
Composite Mean	3.06	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 3 presents the summary of lexical competence for EFL writing in terms of breadth of lexical knowledge, depth of lexical knowledge, and overall use of vocabulary. The composite means of 3.06 suggests the respondents' agreement with all the above indicators. From the data shown, depth of lexical knowledge ranked first with the highest weighted mean of 3.11, compared to breadth of lexical knowledge with a weighted mean of 3.03 and overall use of vocabulary with a weighted mean of 3.03 as well, which tied for second place, that is, the respondents agree with them all. The breadth of vocabulary knowledge determines the richness of vocabulary use. The greater the vocabulary a person has, the greater the choice of words he or she has, and thus the greater flexibility and variety in expressing his or her ideas. The depth of vocabulary knowledge affects the accuracy of vocabulary use. A deep understanding of the meaning, usage, and collocations of words will help learners choose the most appropriate words and make their expressions more accurate. To sum up, the width and depth of vocabulary knowledge are important factors that affect the overall use of vocabulary. In language learning, learners should pay attention to expanding the vocabulary, deepening the understanding and mastery of vocabulary, to improving the ability of language use.

Table 4

Relationship Between Topic Familiarity and Syntactic Maturity

Writing Task Reception	r value	p-value	Interpretation
Syntactic Monitoring Skill	.338**	0.000	Highly Significant
Syntactic Manipulating Skill	.344**	0.000	Highly Significant
Syntactic Producing Skill	.320**	0.000	Highly Significant
Writing Tasks Production			
Syntactic Monitoring Skill	.288**	0.000	Highly Significant
Syntactic Manipulating Skill	.246**	0.000	Highly Significant
Syntactic Producing Skill	.144**	0.001	Highly Significant

Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.01

Table 4 displays the association between topic familiarity and syntactic maturity. The obtained r values indicate a moderate direct correlation and the resulting p-values were less than the alpha level. This means that was significant relationship exists and implies that the better the assessment of topic familiarity, the better the syntactic maturity. Topic familiarity and syntactic maturity promote each other in writing. In the process of increasing topic familiarity, a writer will also improve syntactic maturity; in turn, by improving syntactic maturity, he or she is also able to better grasp and express opinions and emotions on a topic. Therefore, in writing, the author should pay attention to the common development of topic familiarity and syntactic maturity to write a higher-quality article. All in all, the better the assessment of topic familiarity, the greater the syntactic maturity, as learners can focus more on their language use and expression when they have a solid understanding of the topic at hand.

Table 5 shows the association between topic familiarity and lexical competence. The obtained R values indicate a strong direct correlation and the resulting p-values were less than the alpha level except on writing task production vs. breadth and depth of lexical knowledge. This means that was significant relationship exists and implies that the better the assessment of familiarity, the more competent in lexical aspects. Topic familiarity and lexical competence are interrelated and mutually promoting in writing. If a writer wants to write high-quality articles, he needs to pay attention to the common development of topic familiarity and lexical competence, and constantly improve his language ability and expression ability. The better the assessment on topic familiarity, the

more lexical competence in EFL writing because a deep understanding of the topic allows the writer to effectively use appropriate and varied vocabulary related to that subject. Ifantidou and Tzanne (2012) conducted a related study and confirmed that when a writer is familiar with a specific topic, they are more likely to have encountered and absorbed the relevant vocabulary and terminology associated with it. As a result, their writing demonstrates greater lexical competence, as they can choose the most suitable words and phrases to effectively communicate their ideas on the topic.

Table 5

Relationship Between Topic Familiarity and Lexical Competence

Writing Task Reception	r value	p-value	Interpretation
Breadth of lexical knowledge	.113*	0.011	Significant
Depth of lexical knowledge	.233**	0.000	Highly Significant
The overall use of vocabulary	.282**	0.000	Highly Significant
Writing Tasks Production			
Breadth of lexical knowledge	0.029	0.516	Not Significant
Depth of lexical knowledge	0.079	0.079	Not Significant
The overall use of vocabulary	.204**	0.000	Highly Significant

Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.05

Table 6

Relationship Between Syntactic Maturity and Lexical Competence

Syntactic Monitoring Skill	r value	p-value	Interpretation
Breadth of lexical knowledge	.392**	0.000	Highly Significant
Depth of lexical knowledge	.408**	0.000	Highly Significant
The overall use of vocabulary	.458**	0.000	Highly Significant
Syntactic Manipulating Skill			
Breadth of lexical knowledge	.830**	0.000	Highly Significant
Depth of lexical knowledge	.662**	0.000	Highly Significant
The overall use of vocabulary	.703**	0.000	Highly Significant
Syntactic Producing Skill			
Breadth of lexical knowledge	.711**	0.000	Highly Significant
Depth of lexical knowledge	.636**	0.000	Highly Significant
The overall use of vocabulary	.627**	0.000	Highly Significant

Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.01

Table 6 presents the association between syntactic maturity and lexical competence. The obtained r values indicate a strong direct correlation and the resulting p-values were less than the alpha level. This means that a significant relationship exists and implies that the better the assessment of syntactic maturity, the more competent on lexical aspects. In writing, syntactic maturity and vocabulary ability are two key factors, which influence each other and jointly determine the quality of the article and the reader's reading experience. If a writer wants to write high-quality articles, he needs to pay attention to the development of both syntactic maturity and vocabulary ability. Through continuous practice and accumulation, learners can improve their syntactic maturity and vocabulary ability, so that the learners can better express their thoughts and opinions and write more rich and in-depth articles. The better the assessment of syntactic maturity, the more advanced the writer's grasp of sentence structure and grammar. This indicates that the writer has a strong understanding and command of the language, and can use complex sentence structures and varied sentence types effectively. This level of syntactic maturity often goes hand in hand with a deep understanding of vocabulary and word choice, as writers with strong syntactic maturity can effectively manipulate language to convey their ideas. Therefore, the more advanced a writer's syntactic skills, the more likely they are to have a higher level of lexical competence in their writing.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Female students outnumbered the male students. The number of freshmen was slightly larger than that of sophomores. Respondents from public schools were more than those from private schools. Respondents were evenly distributed in majors of liberal arts and sciences. The respondents agreed with all indicators of topic

familiarity for EFL writing in terms of writing task reception and writing task production, which indicated that topic familiarity has a considerable impact on the writing performance of Chinese EFL learners. The respondents scored higher on assessments of syntactic-producing skills than syntactic monitoring skills and syntactic-producing skills in syntactic maturity. Enhancing learners' syntactic maturity can effectively support their language learning and writing quality. The respondents performed best on the depth of lexical knowledge, with the breadth of lexical knowledge and overall vocabulary use at a relatively low level when it came to lexical competence. When grouped according to profile, female learners had a better assessment than male learners in syntactic monitoring skills; freshmen had assessment in writing task reception and production, syntactic monitoring and producing skills, depth of lexical knowledge, and overall use of vocabulary; learners from public schools had better assessment than those from private schools in all indicators except syntactic producing skill, depth of lexical knowledge and overall use of vocabulary; learners majoring in sciences had better assessment than those majoring in liberal arts in all indicators except syntactic producing skill. Highly significant relationships existed among the three variables, indicating that the better the assessment of topic familiarity, the more proficient in syntactic maturity; the better the assessment of syntactic maturity, the more competent in lexical aspects; the better the assessment of topic familiarity, the more capable on lexical aspects.

By putting the proposed programs into practice, students may intentionally increase their topic knowledge, improve the syntactic maturity of English, and successfully reinforce their vocabulary competence, all of which will improve their writing abilities. Teachers may encourage students to read more authentic language materials with a wide range of genres and topics; guide students to learn various syntactic structures to help them enhance their syntactic maturity; organize vocabulary expansion activities to help learners accumulate and use rich vocabulary flexibly, to improve their writing level. University administrators may provide students with specialized writing courses, writing workshops, interdisciplinary integration, assessment and feedback mechanisms, creating writing environments, and other ways to help students improve their writing ability. Project coordinators may cooperate with teachers to provide writing guidance and support for students in terms of writing topics, syntactic, and vocabulary, provide feedback and suggestions, urge students to reflect and summarize, and establish good cooperation and communication with students to help students achieve better writing performance. Future researchers may carry out pertinent scientific studies with a larger sample size and other variables. They could also include more profile dimensions in the analysis of differences and use the questionnaire in conjunction with classroom observations and interviews. The proposed EFL writing enhancement program may be tabled for discussion, implementation, and evaluation. Overall, practicing the enhancement program with a systematic and collaborative approach can help ensure its successful implementation and effectiveness in improving writing quality and efficiency.

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