Unlocking the code: An analysis of Chinese non-English majors' cultural decoding ability in English writing

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Abstract

Many Chinese college students struggle with writing in English due to a lack of cultural understanding, which affects their writing ability. This study aimed to investigate the cultural decoding ability of Chinese non-English major students in their English writing. The research used a survey questionnaire and a descriptive research method to gather quantitative data from first and second-year students majoring in science and liberal arts. The results showed that the respondents identified cultural background as the most significant obstacle in their English writing. Mode of expression and cross-cultural Rhetoric Awareness followed closely, with scores of 2.76 and 2.73, respectively. Furthermore, the study analyzed the differences in responses between male and female students and found that females generally had a better understanding of cultural background and mode of expression. Based on these findings, an enhanced English writing program was formulated to enhance English teaching and writing, focusing on improving cultural decoding ability.

Keywords: English writing, cultural decoding ability, cultural background, mode of expression, cross-cultural rhetoric awareness

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1. Introduction

Cultural decoding ability is a crucial aspect of English writing as it involves the interpretation and adaptation of values, social customs, and language usage in diverse cultural contexts. Writing is not a universal skill but rather a set of practices that interacts with different knowledge fields and learning environments. The complexity of writing stems from the heterogeneity, fluidity, and diversity of culture, and the cultural reflection and accumulation inherent in each language. All aspects of writing, including its orientation, purpose, structural arrangement, and techniques, convey profound cultural connotations and are deeply influenced by the cultural context (Hyland, 2015). However, in China, despite significant investments in foreign language instruction, students face several challenges hindering effective English writing instruction. The primary focus of English language teaching in China is foreign language instruction, which does not adequately address the nuances of cross-cultural writing ability (Ju, 2016).

To transmit messages effectively across diverse audiences, cultural decoding ability requires an understanding of cultural codes. This proficiency involves interpreting and adapting values, social customs, and language usage in diverse cultural contexts, while also being mindful of cultural backgrounds, modes of expression, and cross-cultural rhetorical awareness. Activating pre-existing knowledge and linking it with new information can facilitate better comprehension, as studies have shown that without relevant knowledge about the subject matter, students may have difficulty grasping the new content effectively (Bilokcuoglu, 2014). Therefore, increasing exposure to diverse cultural materials and issues can enhance English language proficiency for learners. Moreover, being exposed to different cultures can foster acceptance and appreciation of individuals who are different from them. In addition to a firm grasp of background knowledge, proficiency in the mode of expression should also be accorded equal importance in English writing. The ability to decode language is incomplete without the ability to effectively and accurately express ideas in writing. Cross-cultural rhetorical awareness plays a vital role in the cross-cultural decoding ability of individuals. Its origins can be traced back to contrastive rhetoric, which emerged in the 1960s. Initially, the primary focus of cross-cultural rhetoric was to investigate how students' writing in a second language could be influenced by the rhetorical techniques of their native language. This was achieved through comparative analysis of various linguistic and cultural models (Hyland, 2015).

In conclusion, the success of a text depends on the writer's ability to satisfy the rhetorical demands of readers, which involves embedding the writing in a non-local discourse world. Therefore, improving cultural decoding ability is essential for English writing, as it helps them to effectively communicate their ideas to diverse audiences (Soodmand & Moradifar, 2021).

2. Methods

Research Design - The study mainly focused on the cultural decoding ability of Chinese non-English major students in a public university in China. It employed a descriptive method to investigate the cultural decoding ability in English writing.

Participants - The participants in this study were college non-English major undergraduates from Henan University of Engineering who studied English as a foreign language. These included liberal arts and science majors. At the university where the researcher conducted the study, 8,000 students were non-English majors. Of these, 4100 were first-year students, 1900 in liberal arts and 2200 in science. The remaining 3900 were second-year students, 1850 in liberal arts and 2050 in science.

The present study's sample size was ascertained using a statistical formula from Raosoft. The formula determined the required sample size based on the total number of students involved in the research, with a 5% margin of error. The researcher employed a simple random sampling method to conduct the study. According to the calculations derived from the formula, 421 students were randomly selected to participate in the questionnaire study. The 421 undergraduates were first- and second-year students from various colleges and majors, including but not limited to literature, history, sociology, psychology, physics, biology, and engineering. Such samples represented various subject areas and knowledge backgrounds to provide diverse data and observations. By covering students from different majors, the research provided a more comprehensive understanding of common issues and specific challenges that non-English majors faced in English writing.

This study focused on the English writing abilities of college undergraduates receiving systematic English education to build their foundation for academic writing. Researchers analyzed 421 undergraduates to gain insights into their cultural decoding ability in English writing. The sample size was representative and scalable and could be used as a reference for similar groups in other universities. The results could help schools create appropriate teaching plans and support for these students.

Instruments - A survey was conducted to investigate students' English writing learning process. The survey covered the cultural decoding ability in English writing. Demographic information such as sex, academic level, and major was also collected. To overcome language barriers, the survey was presented in Chinese and English languages. The questions were designed in a multiple-choice format for ease of comprehension and response.

The **Cultural Decoding Ability Questionnaire** was designed based on China's Standards of English Language Ability. It had 23 items administered to undergraduate students to measure three dimensions: cultural background knowledge, expression style, and cross-cultural rhetorical awareness. The questionnaire aimed to evaluate students' comprehension of shared cultural background knowledge between China and the UK, explore differences in their thinking styles in English writing, and assess their understanding and application of rhetorical techniques in different languages and cultural backgrounds. Each item in the questionnaire had a 4-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 to 4, with options including Strongly Disagreed, Disagreed, Agreed, and Strongly Agreed. It is worth noting that all items in the questionnaire contained positive statements, indicating that the highest numerical value on the response scale signified positive evaluations of the cultural decoding ability. The questionnaire aimed to provide insights into students' cultural decoding abilities and identify areas where improvements were needed.

A pilot study was conducted to evaluate the reliability of questionnaires among 30 non-English speaking participants with prior college-level experience in learning English. The data was collected using "Questionnaire Star" and analyzed using SPSS 27.0. Cronbach Alpha coefficients were calculated to ensure the questionnaire's reliability. The reliability findings for the three examined variables showed that the Cronbach Alpha coefficients for all subscales ranged from 0.814 to 0.903, while the Cronbach Alpha for the entire questionnaire was 0.923. The subscales and questionnaire demonstrated adequate internal consistency reliability, surpassing the 0.70 threshold.

Procedure - As for the data gathering, questionnaires were distributed through an online survey – "Questionnaire Star," to participants of non-English majors who were from the Liberal Arts and the Science of a university in China. The researcher contacted six English teachers from various majors to begin the study. The study included participants from liberal arts and sciences, spanning seven distinct disciplines: engineering, science, economics, management, literature, art, and law. The questionnaire was distributed to them as a QR code, and they were provided with a detailed explanation of its purpose. In this study, faculty members distributed the questionnaire to suitable students across the university. They were explicitly instructed to clarify the purpose and content of the questionnaire, ensuring precise responses. Given the numerous queries, perseverance and earnest participation from participants were necessitated. Those interested scanned a QR code on their mobile devices to answer the questions. Upon submission, respondents received a token as an incentive for quality and quantity of

feedback. The questionnaire had a maximum limit of 450; data collection ceased when this threshold was met. Statistical analyses, including frequency counts, percentages, rankings, and weighted means, were conducted using SPSS 27.0.

Data Analysis - Quantitative data analysis was used in this study to interpret the data. This approach employs numerical data, making it applicable to other domains through analysis methods like regression models or probability distributions. The study did not rely on descriptive statistical analysis or qualitative research. The respondent's sex, major, and grade were interpreted based on frequency and distribution. The weighted mean and rank were used to determine the status of the cultural decoding ability among Chinese university students. The Shapiro-Wilk Test results signified that the p-values of all variables fell below 0.05, suggesting that the dataset was not distributed normally. Consequently, non-parametric tests such as the Mann-Whitney U Test for two groups and the Kruskal-Wallis Test for more than two groups were employed to identify significant differences. Additionally, spearman's rho was used to assess significant correlations.

Ethical Considerations - The researcher took ethical considerations to protect the respondents' privacy and confidentiality. To obtain permission to conduct the study, an individual letter was addressed to the dean of the college in a university. The research maintained the confidentiality of the survey participants by not providing any specific names. The only information given was that they were college students. The identities of the respondents were kept anonymous. Informed consent was obtained from the student's teachers, who were required to read and understand all instructions and procedures before the study began. Once they had fully comprehended the instructions, the survey instrument was handed to the students. The collection of data and the confidentiality of the information obtained were handled with the utmost care.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1

Percentage Distribution of the Respondents' Profile

Sex	Frequency	Percentage %
Male	215	51.1
Female	206	48.9
Major		
Liberal Arts	192	45.6
Science	229	54.4
Grade Level		
Freshman	200	47.5
Sophomore	221	52.5

Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the respondents' profiles, including their sex, major, and grade level. The respondents were all from Henan University of Engineering. The data revealed that 215 male students, comprising 51.1 percent of the total respondents, participated in the study, while the number of female students was slightly lower. Since the study was conducted at an engineering university, the proportion of science majors offered by Henan University of Engineering was higher than that of liberal arts majors, which accounted for the higher ratio of male students.

Table 1 reveals that out of the total respondents, 192 students, accounting for 45.6 percent, studied liberal arts, while 229 students studied science. This suggested that there were more experimental science subjects than liberal arts. As the Henan University of Engineering prioritized engineering, with a focus on majors such as materials and chemical engineering, resources and environment, civil surveying and mapping, and intelligent manufacturing, it was expected that the number of science majors would exceed that of liberal arts majors, considering the professional orientation of the institution. Additionally, the study considered the respondents' grade level, and it

was noticed that sophomores recorded a higher percentage (52.5 percent) than first-year students (47.5 percent) in this study.

The researcher selected first- and second-year students as participants for two key reasons. First, Henan University of Engineering's college English teaching syllabus mandated English as a compulsory course only in the first and second years of college. Second, first- and second-year students were in the early stages of English learning, with relatively high enthusiasm but poor proficiency. Collecting feedback from this group of students helped to understand the effectiveness of English teaching and the needs and confusion of students at this stage.

Furthermore, the ratio of sophomores among the survey respondents was higher than that of first-year students. This could be attributed to four factors. Firstly, as students progressed in their studies, their demand and interest in English gradually increased, making sophomores more likely to participate in the questionnaire than first-year students. Secondly, sophomore students had adapted to university life, had less academic pressure, and had more time and energy to focus on English learning, making them more willing to participate in the questionnaire. Thirdly, after experiencing the first-year English course, sophomores had a clearer understanding of their English level and could provide more accurate feedback on problems in English teaching. Finally, some first-year students may not have had a transparent understanding of the process and goals of English learning, making it difficult for them to provide targeted feedback in the questionnaire.

Table 2
Summary Table on Cultural Decoding Ability

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. Cultural Background	2.82	Agree	1
2. Mode of Expression	2.76	Agree	2
3. Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Awareness	2.73	Agree	3
Composite Mean	**2.77**	**Agree**	

Table 2 displays the cultural decoding abilities of respondents in three primary dimensions: Cultural Background, Mode of Expression, and Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Awareness. The composite mean of 2.77 signifies that those respondents adhered to all indices of cultural decoding proficiency. Notably, cultural background garnered the highest weighted mean of 3.04. The preeminence of cultural background in the summary table of cultural decoding ability for Chinese students learning English writing can likely be attributed to two primary factors.

Cultural knowledge is the primary thing to consider in English writing. Writing instruction should be imparted within a relatable, culturally-infused context. Cultural knowledge can generally be categorized into two types: Big 'C' cultures and small 'c' cultures (Lee, 2009; Peterson, 2004; as cited in Soodmand & Moradifar, 2021). Big 'C' cultures encompass comprehensive information and statistics concerning a target language country's arts, history, geography, cuisine, education, cinema, and traditional practices. These encompass geographical locations, architectural elements, musical considerations, literary works, political circumstances, societal norms, legal frameworks, core values, historical events, and cognitive aspects. In contrast, small "c" cultures encompass the mundane aspects of our daily lives, including attitudes, emotions, and beliefs. Understanding cultural backgrounds significantly enhances the respondents' ability to decode and comprehend the cultural nuances embedded within the English writing context, thereby fostering a more proficient and nuanced approach to language learning.

Advocates of the concept of background knowledge contend that activating the pre-existing knowledge and linking it with the new information can facilitate better comprehension. Studies showed that without relevant knowledge about the subject matter, students may have difficulty grasping the new content effectively. For English language learners, increased exposure to diverse cultural materials and issues can enhance their English language proficiency. Moreover, being exposed to different cultures can foster acceptance and appreciation of individuals

who are different from them. Furthermore, the more we engage with people from diverse cultures, the greater the mutual respect and value we develop for each other (Yang et al., 2015).

When learning a foreign language, it is essential to understand the cultural context of the language being learned. This is crucial as it helps students appreciate nuances and idiomatic expressions that may not be immediately apparent through studying grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, it allows students to avoid misunderstandings due to cultural differences. Familiarizing oneself with the cultural background of the target language can help minimize such occurrences and facilitate more accurate and meaningful interactions. Additionally, cultural sensitivity is crucial in promoting mutual respect and understanding between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. These claims align with Dar and Khan's (2015) perspective, emphasizing the challenges of acquiring writing skills in a second language. Writing mastery necessitates a profound understanding of language structure and the ability to use it effectively and accurately to articulate thoughts and ideas. Furthermore, familiarity with the topic and cultural appropriateness are crucial in preventing negative transfer from one's first language to the second language's writing. However, despite this argument, when students wrote on familiar and culturally appropriate topics, negative transfer from their first language to their second language writing was not entirely prevented (Shukri, 2014).

Mode of expression ranks second with a weighted mean of 2.76, and the participants seem to agree with the importance of expression in English writing. A solid understanding of the content is not enough for writing in English. It is crucial to express ideas effectively and accurately in written form, as language comprehension is incomplete without this skill. Therefore, giving equal importance to both aspects of language proficiency while writing in English is essential. While there has been a growing similarity between Chinese and Western cultures' thought processes, some traditional Chinese thinking patterns remain deeply ingrained in Chinese students' minds, making writing in English challenging. English's sentence structure and syntax can highlight significant differences between the two languages, with Chinese using hypotaxis and English relying more on parataxis. This difference in thinking models can negatively impact Chinese students' writing abilities. Moreover, Chinese speakers construct sentences with themselves as the subject, while Westerners are more objective and critical in their expression. Another significant difference is expression habits, which can differ significantly due to cultural disparities. While Western culture values self-expression, creativity, and flexibility, Chinese culture emphasizes conformity, unity, and a more general-to-specific approach to communication. These differences can pose communication obstacles for individuals from both cultures.

Much research has highlighted the importance of the mode of expression in English writing. As per Song's (2020) research findings, Chinese students' English learning is often hindered by differences in thinking models and negative transfer, leading to the common issue of Chinglish in their writing. The Conceptual Fluency Theory can be applied in English classes to address this problem and enhance students' writing abilities, enabling them to produce authentic English compositions. Previous studies (Wang, 2015; Teng, 2016; Fareed et al., 2016) have delved into the impact of thinking differences on English writing, which is closely intertwined with culture and thinking patterns reflected in discourse. Hence, students must recognize negative transfer from their mother tongue to improve writing skills and use discourse analysis to analyze and comprehend it.

Cross-cultural rhetoric awareness ranks last with a weighted mean of 2.73. The results demonstrated that compared with the above two factors, it is difficult for Chinese students to use cross-cultural rhetorical awareness appropriately in English writing because of the lack of awareness of Western rhetorical conventions. Chinese students may be unaware of the conventions and expectations of English writing, such as formal language, tone, and structure. Acquiring a foreign language is a complex process involving learning the language and the culture of the community that speaks it. For instance, Chinese learners of English face a considerable challenge due to the vast cultural differences between the two languages. Each culture has its communication style, including specific rhetorical patterns in written language. Non-native speakers of English tend to rely on the communication style of their native language, resulting in a linguistic transfer that may hinder their language proficiency (Zhu, 2022).

The cultural variances in communication styles are particularly pronounced between low-context cultures, such as the United States, UK, and Germany, and high-context cultures, including China and many other Asian nations. Therefore, it is essential to understand and account for these cultural differences when learning a foreign language to achieve effective communication and language proficiency. Regarding communication methods, Chinese people generally prefer subtlety and avoid directness, liking to quote from classic texts. Regarding expression style, Chinese emphasizes regularity, parallelism, tone rhyming, and ornate vocabulary. In contrast, Western culture belongs to a low context and exhibits the habit of directness. That is to say, it must provide the necessary background information to complete the process of mutual understanding. Regarding expression style, English usually values simplicity, clarity, and a direct presentation of facts.

As previously discussed, English as a Second Language (ESL) students encounter more than just language barriers in their quest to learn English. Cultural differences significantly affect language acquisition, from word choice and sentence structure to organization and idiomatic expressions. In addition, our communication style and the messages we convey are shaped by our cultural values, beliefs, conventions, and perceptions. However, difficulties may arise when communicating with individuals from different cultural backgrounds who possess their unique code systems. This is because every culture has its method of encoding and decoding messages, making it challenging to bridge the gap in understanding.

Table 3

Difference in Responses on Cultural Decoding Ability When Grouped according to Profile

Sex	F-value	p-value	Interpretation
Cultural Background	12.640	0.000	Significant
Mode of Expression	4.750	0.030	Significant
Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Awareness	2.130	0.145	Not Significant
Major			
Cultural Background	0.543	0.461	Not Significant
Mode of Expression	0.095	0.758	Not Significant
Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Awareness	0.766	0.382	Not Significant
Grade Level			
Cultural Background	1.091	0.297	Not Significant
Mode of Expression	0.001	0.981	Not Significant
Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Awareness	0.672	0.413	Not Significant

Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.01

Table 3 compares responses on cultural decoding ability when grouped according to profile. It was observed that there was a significant difference in cultural background (p = 0.000) and mode of expression (p = 0.030) when grouped according to sex since the obtained p-values were less than the alpha level. This means that the responses vary statistically, and based on the test conducted, it was found that females have better assessment than males. Gender differences in language use are intricately connected to socialization and culture. Cultural values and social norms affect gender differences in language use, with male students sometimes outperforming female students in certain language aspects while females outperform males in other aspects. The most significant factors affecting these differences are the students' psychological conditions, cultural and social backgrounds, and connection to native speakers.

According to previous research, evidence suggests that females exhibit superior performance to males in various writing domains, particularly in the UK and America. This can be attributed to the differences in physiological and psychological characteristics between the two sexes. Women demonstrate greater sensitivity and awareness towards cultural nuances in their writing, displaying a more refined prowess in written expression. Female students exhibit better writing skills than their male counterparts in terms of writing fundamentals, including smoother text entry and greater emphasis on editing, according to a study conducted by Zhang et al.

(2019). Even after adjusting for essay scores, these variances persisted, indicating that female students possess a more remarkable ability to construct knowledge associated with the text during the writing process. Babayiğit's (2015) research revealed that in native English-speaking and foreign-language children's writing, girls surpass boys in text length, spelling, written vocabulary, and text quality. The study further suggested that self-efficacy significantly predicts writing performance and text quality. Additionally, women exhibit a more favorable learning attitude than men, which may be linked to their enthusiasm and perseverance in the educational process.

Women's advantage in cultural decoding abilities can be attributed to their stronger cultural sensitivity and awareness ability and more positive learning attitude and strategies. Women usually pay more attention to details, which makes them more likely to notice subtle differences in grammar and wording during language learning. At the same time, they tend to use various learning strategies, such as self-reflection and cooperative learning, which help improve learning outcomes. Therefore, women often perform better than men in language learning. To improve men's cultural decoding abilities, attempts can be made to guide them to pay more attention to cultural details, cultivate learning interest and perseverance, and employ diverse learning strategies. It is also essential to focus on and explore men's strengths and characteristics in the learning process to teach accordingly and improve the overall language learning effectiveness.

Table 4

An Enhanced English Writing Program for Chinese Non-English Majors

Key Result Areas	cultural decoding ability
Objectives	To enhance the cross-cultural rhetoric awareness in English writing
Strategies/ Activities	**Introduce students to different cultural backgrounds and their impact on rhetoric** ➤ Provide students with readings that highlight the differences in cultural perspectives and their impact on writing. ➤ Encourage students to research and analyze different cultures and their rhetorical traditions. ➤ Facilitate class discussions on the topic of cross-cultural rhetoric and its importance. **Use authentic materials to expose students to diverse rhetorical styles** ➤ Organize students to visit places with strong cross-cultural characteristics, such as international companies, multinational schools, etc., so that students can understand communication methods and rhetorical skills in different cultural backgrounds. Provide students with authentic materials, such as speeches, advertisements, and news articles, from different cultural backgrounds.
Success Indicators	90% of students will demonstrate an improved ability to recognize and analyze cross-cultural rhetoric in their writing. Students will be able to use cross-cultural rhetorical strategies effectively in their writing. Students will be able to recognize and appreciate the impact of cultural backgrounds on writing and communication.
Persons Involved	Teachers Students Volunteers (such as international students whose native language is English or English professionals)

4. Conclusion

Writing well in English is an important skill for non-native English speakers to achieve academic and professional success. However, limited cultural understanding can affect their writing abilities, leading to the need for assistance. To address this issue, researchers conducted a study to investigate the cultural decoding ability of Chinese non-English major students in their English writing. The researchers utilized a survey questionnaire and descriptive research method to gather quantitative data from college students majoring in science and liberal arts at Henan University of Engineering. The study included non-English majors, with a higher proportion of science majors than arts majors, and more male participants than female. The students had studied English for over six years, and the research aimed to improve English teaching and writing by enhancing the cultural decoding ability of the students.

The research found that cultural background had the highest mean value, while cross-cultural rhetoric awareness had the lowest mean value. Based on these findings, an enhanced English writing program was developed to introduce students to different cultural backgrounds and their impact on rhetoric. The program aims to improve cultural decoding ability by using authentic materials to expose students to diverse rhetorical styles, helping them overcome their challenges while writing in English.

To improve college English writing courses, Chinese universities may tailor the course content to the needs of the students, improve the allocation of English teaching resources, and encourage teacher participation in training activities. College students may be encouraged to actively participate in class discussions, develop personalized English learning plans, and experiment with different types of English writing to improve their writing skills. Future researchers may conduct empirical research to analyze and propose solutions to English writing teaching problems while fostering exchange and cooperation of best practices and resources. They may also explore other variables influencing or impacting the present study, such as age, region, and English proficiency.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of cultural understanding in English writing and provides a framework for improving English writing programs for non-native English-speaking students.

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