How do Chinese master’s students of different writing proficiency levels construct opposition relations in their writing

What this research was about and why it is important

Chinese students make up the single largest group of overseas students in UK universities. A major challenge faced by non-native students is learning not only to write clearly in a foreign language, but also learning to write in line with the expectations of the target academic discourse. At a higher university level, students are often expected to present their arguments clearly, to state their counterarguments and to refute those counterarguments. One of the linguistic means to meet these expectations is through the construction of opposition relations, such as contrast, concessive, and corrective, using appropriate discourse markers (e.g. however, although, but). Concerns exist, however, that for Chinese students this may be especially challenging, because of the differences between the English and Chinese writing styles. In addition, there are blurred conceptualizations of opposition relations in the linguistics and teaching literature, which could also cause learning problems. With this in mind, this study analysed a corpus of essays written by Chinese students doing a master’s degree in the UK to see if their ability to make use of certain discourse markers had any impact on the grades they received. The research suggests that there was no clear relationship between the frequency of use of such words and the students’ grades. However, their grades did seem to be affected by the degree of variety and appropriacy with which they used these types of words.

What the researchers did

- Assignments in the form of documented essays by forty-four Chinese students written as part of their master’s degree were compiled in a corpus and analysed to count the number of uses of discourse markers.
- The essays from twenty-four of those students were further analysed qualitatively in order to investigate how these types of words had been used. For example, the word however can be used to show a contrast between two ideas, or to show some concession to the validity of an argument, despite taking an opposing position [e.g. there is some evidence to show that homework can benefit learning; however, this does not mean it should be used on a regular basis]. In addition, this qualitative analysis was used to investigate whether the words or phrases had been used correctly or incorrectly.
- The grades for the essays were then compared with the findings of these two analyses to see if relationships existed.

What the researchers found

- No direct relationship was found between the frequency of words used to show opposition and students’ grades.
- However, when the essays were analysed qualitatively, two important findings appeared. Firstly, the students who had received higher grades generally used a larger variety of the words to show opposition than those who received lower grades. They also used the words for a wider variety of purposes (e.g. using the word ‘however’ to show both contrast and concession). Finally, writers who received higher grades typically also made use of less common words to show opposition (e.g. nevertheless, nonetheless) than writers who received lower grades.
- In addition, the writers who received the lower grades also used these types of words incorrectly, often putting them into a sentence were there was in fact no opposition to be found between the ideas. This suggests that those writers either did not fully understand the meaning of these words or did not know how they ought to be used.
- In general, all of the students overused the word however, thus, failing to make full use of the other linguistic resources available to them.

Things to consider

- Overall, for students who received medium or low grades, there seemed to be a gap between their knowledge about the words available to show opposition between ideas and their ability to use those words in academic writing.
- With this in mind, the authors suggest that different types of instruction be provided for higher and lower scoring writers. Specifically, higher scoring writers could be given plentiful practice exercises with feedback from a teacher. Lower scoring writers, in addition to these exercises, could also be given more direct lessons on when and how to use these words and phrases, as well as exercises in which they analysed model exercises to see how expert writers use them to discuss opposing ideas.


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