

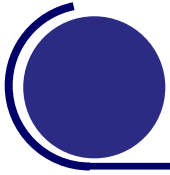
*What does writing in English look like in
another part of the world?*

Li Gao

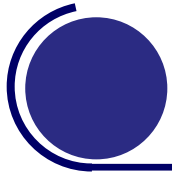
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Northwest A&F University

IWAC 2016

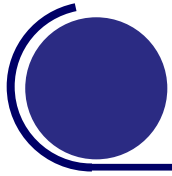


- Why conducting the research?
- What is it about?
- What did I get?
- Challenges



Location of my university



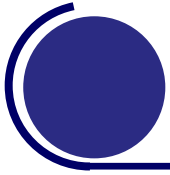


Northwest A&F University



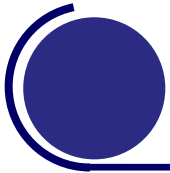
- a key national **comprehensive university** directly under the administration of the Ministry of Education
- **29,294 students** (21,827 undergrad + 7467 grad)
- **24 colleges (departments, institutes)** and Graduate School, covering disciplines of **agriculture, science, engineering, economics, business, liberal arts, law, philosophy, history, medicine, education, arts, etc..**





Why conducting the research?

Something I notice from my own teaching



Department of Foreign Languages
at Northwest A&F University

three
teaching
& research
sections

T&R Section for English Majors

Responsible for teaching courses mainly about English literature, linguistics, translation, and education

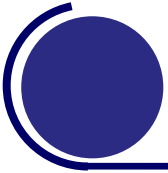
T&R Section for non-English Major Undergraduates

Teaching non-English major undergraduates English integrating listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating skills

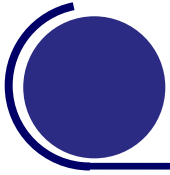
T&R Section for Graduates of non-English Major

Teaching English to non-English major graduates, mainly focusing on scientific paper writing in English

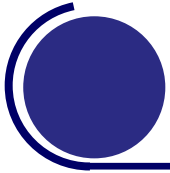
This is
where I
am!



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- Many students feel frustrated when it comes to writing a scientific paper in English: *expressing themselves in English* and *the writing conventions* seem to be main difficulties
 - It seems what they have through many years of English learning is just some fragmentary things (words+expressions+some grammar), not any coherent picture about writing



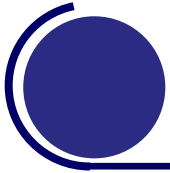
Something I learn from Marty (some WAC ideas) and John Bean's book



What is WAC?

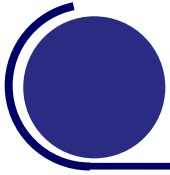
- Not grammar across the curriculum
- Not a correctness movement
- Not English-language specific
- Not teaching English as a foreign language (TOEFL)
- An educational reform movement born in the U.S. and U.K. in the 1970's
- that encourages faculty in all disciplines to use writing in whatever discipline they work in
- FIRST as a way for students to understand the concepts of that discipline, and
- SECOND as a way to have more writing experience

From *Marty's presentation at Northwest A&F University in 2013*



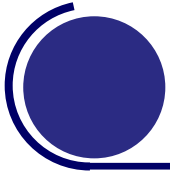
Bean's book

- Good writing assignments (as well as other active learning tasks) **evoke a high level of critical thinking**, help students wrestle productively with a course's big questions, and **teach disciplinary ways of seeing, knowing and doing** (P. 2-3).
- Writing is both a process of **doing critical thinking** and a product that **communicates the results of critical thinking** (P. 4).



Isn't this just what we want?

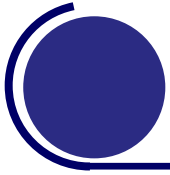
But before applying some of the WAC ideas to our teaching, it is quite necessary to know in great detail the current situation of writing in English of our students, that's what motivates the present study.



What is it about?

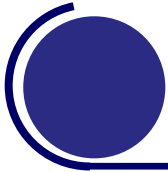
Research context

- claims the **largest number of learners**
- kids **start learning it from kindergarten**
- **a compulsory course** at primary school, middle schools, and universities
- English instruction commonly **focuses on vocabulary and grammar which finds their carriers in dialogues and passages** with the length and difficulty of these dialogues and passages increasing step by step
- students **start to learn to write from middle school** because there is a writing component in the national college entrance examination, which **usually** asks students to write **a 100-word composition based on a given writing prompt**
- **at college levels**, except English majors, **students do not have a separate writing course** and **writing is usually taught together with the other four skills** of the language---listening, speaking, reading and translating



Participants

- 179 students of randomly selected majors from Northwest A&F University (100 freshmen, 37 sophomores and 42 graduates)
- landscape architecture, economy, forestry, animal biotechnology, clinical veterinary, neurobiology and physiology
- conducted at different times with the 100 freshmen and 37 sophomores at the beginning of their academic year and the 42 graduates at the end of their academic year



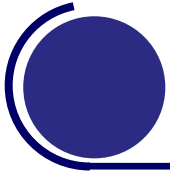
Data collection and analysis

- **Questionnaire** (for freshmen and sophomores)
- **Semi-structured small group interviews** (for graduates)
- The questionnaire and the interviewing questions are mostly inspired by and **adapted from Zhoulin Ruan (2014)** and try to elicit answers concerning students' writing study
- The questionnaire and the interviewing questions **revolve around two broad categories:**

the English education students receive in general

students' experiences of and views on writing-related stuff

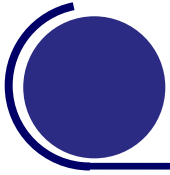
“Metacognitive awareness of EFL student writers in a Chinese ELT context” in ***Language Awareness***



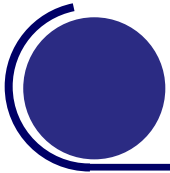
What did I get?

- English instruction is largely driven by tests and examinations.

In English classes, teaching is mainly based on the textbook (which consists of a certain number of units, usually 8 or 10 and each unit focuses on a certain topic, like campus life, internet, friendship and so on). Teachers usually start from vocabulary section, then grammar, followed by text explanation and finally exercises. Sometimes vocabulary and grammar are not taught separately but done in the course of text explanation.

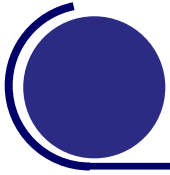


At middle schools, teachers usually teach vocabulary and grammar and write on the blackboard important language points for us to note down. And then we are asked to memorize them. Because scoring high in exams is greatly valued, we seldom open our mouth to speak English in class.

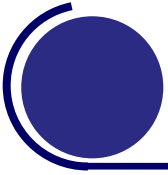


- Writing is regarded as one language skill parallel to the other four---listening, speaking, reading and translating. Because it is test-oriented, the focus is put heavily on reciting well-written model essays as templates.

When at middle school, I memorized some templates. And I just added some contents to the template in exams, sometimes I even wrote down one or two paragraphs which directly came from templates.

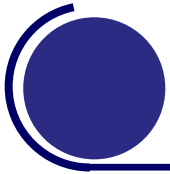


I went to a training school for graduate entrance examination. English instruction is based on different sections like listening, speaking, reading and writing. Teachers usually have different divisions of labor for these sections. What we learn in writing classes includes model essays and well-written sentences.



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- Writing is not seen as a learning tool for knowledge but an evaluative tool to assess students' grasp of the language.

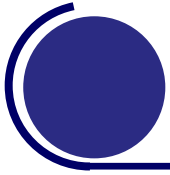
A good piece of writing should have “advanced” vocabulary, smooth sentences, no grammatical mistake and good sentence patterns and properly cite some popular expressions, proverbs or sayings.



So, it seems that we can conclude:

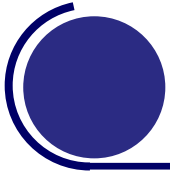
Rote memorizing and applying formulaic templates are typical characteristics of students' way of writing, which have easily seen consequences:

not helpful for developing students' critical thinking ability
distorts students' understanding of the nature of writing
does not help students transfer knowledge from one writing situation to another



Challenges

- change from early on, probably middle school, which is a tough project, especially in an exam-oriented situation
- large class (usually around 60 at middle school, 50 at college level)
- faculty interest given their heavy work load
- high-level administrative support



Main references

- Bean, John C. 2011. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (Second Edition) [M]. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ruan, Zhoulin. 2014. Metacognitive awareness of EFL student writers in a Chinese ELT context [J]. *Language Awareness*, 23: 1-2, 76-91.
- Wu, Dan. 2010. *Introducing Writing Across the Curriculum into China: Feasibility and Adaptation* [D].Clemson University.

Thank you

