



# Processes Involved in Chinese and English Writing: A Study of Chinese University Students

Meihua Liu

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

E-mail: ellenlmh@yahoo.com

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## Abstract

The present study examined the writing processes of 20 L1 writers and 20 L2 writers on a course task of writing a narrative in a Chinese university naturalistic setting, as well as the challenges they encountered and their coping strategies during the processes. Analyses of the data collected via questionnaire, journal and semi-structured interviews revealed that (1) both L1 and L2 writing processes were nonlinear and cyclical, involving a constant interplay of thinking, writing, and revising throughout the process, (2) though having a lot in common, the two groups differed in many aspects regarding the foci of concern during the process of writing the narrative, (3) both groups encountered common challenges as well as those peculiar of their own writing during the composing process, and (4) both groups were resourceful learners. Based on these findings, some suggestions are discussed.

**Keywords:** writing process; narrative; L1; L2; challenge; strategy

## 1. Introduction

Based on L1 (native language) writing models, researchers have investigated different aspects of L2 (second/foreign language) composing process with different groups of participants since the early 1980s, such as the transfer of writing abilities across languages and the relationship between writing ability and L2 proficiency (Roca de Larios, Murphy & Marín, 2002; Wang & Wen, 2002; Zhu, 2001). The focus of attention has been, however, mainly on the similarities between L1 and L2 writing processes despite the “salient and important differences” between them (Silva, 1993; Wang & Wen, 2002). And most of the studies asked participants to compose on an artificial topic in controlled conditions, different from the writing most university students do (Trang & Hoa, 2008).

Situated in a naturalistic setting, the present study adopted a mixed methods approach to examine Chinese university EFL learners’ writing processes in both L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) and identify the challenges they encountered and their coping strategies during the processes.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Writing process

Process studies conducted on L1 writers have discovered that the writing process is recursive and that writers at different proficiency levels demonstrate different patterns of the writing process (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Perl, 1979; Pianko, 1979). Skilled writers seem to understand the cyclical nature of the writing process and are able to consciously control and direct the entire writing process (Perl, 1980). They often instruct themselves on what to do next (Flower & Hayes, 1981), plan more and at higher levels (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), and review for global aspects of the text (Flower & Hayes, 1981). When drafting and revising, they concern themselves more with content, organization and audience, and less with minor issues such as grammatical rules and spelling (Stallard, 1974). Unskilled writers, in contrast, usually do the opposite (Perl, 1979).

Based on the research findings, various models of L1 writing processes have been advanced (De Beaugrande, 1980; Flower & Hayes, 1981). For example, Flower and Hayes (1981) proposed that the composing behavior is basically cognitive and requires many sub-processes within three main phases—planning, translating and reviewing. Planning includes the generation of ideas, organizing information and setting goals; translating requires writers to put their ideas into words and sentences; and reviewing covers the evaluation of the text and the subsequent reorganizing, deleting and adding (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Led by studies on L1 composing processes, research on L2 composing processes has been flourishing as well (Arslan & Şahin-Kizil, 2010; Boshier, 1998; Li, 2008; Parks & Raymond, 2004; Raymond & Parks, 2002; Spack, 2004; Wang, 2010; Zamel & Spack, 2004). The researchers have commonly found that L2 writers are similar to their L1 counterparts (Cumming, 1989; Parks, Huot, Hamers & Lemonnier, 2005). For example, skilled L2 writers tend to plan more and revise more at the discourse level while unskilled L2 writers tend to plan less and revise more at the word and phrase level (Parks et al., 2005; Raimis, 1987; Sasaki, 2000; Zamel, 1982, 1983). They have also discovered that the use of L1 while writing in L2 proves to improve the quality of L2 writing (Wang & Wen, 2002).

Zhu (2001) found that L2 writing processes covered topic selection, planning and revising. Most participants selected topics specifically related to their jobs, brainstormed before writing and revised several times after having finished the product (Zhu, 2001). Roca de Larios, Manchón, Murphy and Marín (2008) categorized the L2 writing processes into seven types: (1) reading the prompt, (2) task conceptualization, (3) planning, (4) formulation, (5) evaluation, (6) revision, and (7) metacomments. They identified three main practices that their L2 writers typically performed when completing a writing task—planning, formulation, and revision, and found that formulation was the dominant process across writers and proficiency levels. Having compared the L1 and L2 writing processes of 16 Chinese university English learners, Zhang (1995) concluded that the two processes were similar and that the students adopted avoidance strategy or turned to their mother tongue to handle difficulties during the process of writing in English.

As such, composing in L2 is also a recursive process requiring planning, formulating and revising, and L2 writers may use similar strategies in their writing as do L1 writers (Pennington & So, 1993; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Stapleton, 2010). For this reason, many studies from the late 1980s on have compared the same participants' L1 and L2 writing processes (Arndt, 1987; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Uzawa, 1996; Whalen & MeÂnard, 1995). For example, Pennington and So (1993) examined the writing processes of six Singaporean university students as they produced written texts in both L2 (Japanese) and L1 (English or Chinese). The researchers found a similarity in writing process for individual subjects across the two languages and a relationship between proficiency in Japanese and the quality of the participants' written products in the language. The writing process of the six participants proved to be nonlinear, involving a constant interplay of thinking, writing, and revising throughout the process.

### *2.2 Challenges and coping strategies during writing*

While writing academic assignments in English at university, learners often meet such difficulties as being unable to find the sources of information, being late for borrowing books from the library, reading too much and forgetting what is read, and not remembering where the ideas come from (Trang & Hoa, 2008). During the process, learners might not know what to include in the introduction, not have the direction to follow when writing the body of the paper, lack ideas and lack words to express their ideas, and have difficulty in translating from L1 to L2 (Trang & Hoa, 2008). In Zhu's (2001) study, most participants perceived the argumentative assignment to be challenging and even stressful. Several indicated that they were (highly) anxious when working on the assignment; more than half reported having difficulty with the form and the structure/organization of argumentative writing; and half confided that page limit was a challenge because they had more to say than what was required. Generally, they perceived the following to be difficult: structure/organization, page limit, punctuation, conclusion/closure, vocabulary, topic selection, and grammar. Organization and developing arguments were among the most challenging areas identified in Al-Abed-AI-Haq and Ahmed's (1994) study on Arabic ESL writers' argumentative writing.

Dalsky and Tajino (2007) examined the difficulties encountered by 65 1<sup>st</sup>-year and 17 2<sup>nd</sup>-year students. The 1<sup>st</sup>-year students reported greatest difficulty with adapting to the transition from high school practical English to university academic English, especially with writing in a formal style and thinking about the rules of academic writing. They also reported having difficulty in structuring paragraphs and writing with the responsibility for successful communication. The 2<sup>nd</sup>-year students reported greatest difficulty with producing a coherent academic paragraph with no redundant sentences, followed by writer-responsible communication, and linking ideas. Difficulties with structuring paragraphs included developing main ideas and focusing on main ideas, and avoiding redundancy.

To overcome these difficulties, the learners might spend a lot of time reading the books repeatedly and use search routine and the dictionary as a source text to deal with the problems (Trang & Hoa, 2008). The participants also resorted to such strategies as asking for feedback, looking for models, and using past ESL writing training (Leki, 1995; Zhu, 2001).

### **3. Rationale for the present study**

Although the above studies have provided useful insights into the writing processes of L2 writers, they have some limitations. Firstly, most of the reviewed studies depended on controlled conditions, requiring the participants to compose on an artificial topic for a predetermined amount of time. This might result in writing that is not truly representative of the writing most students, especially university students, do most often (Trang & Hoa, 2008). Secondly, as reviewed, the studies on L2 composing processes largely used think-aloud protocols as the main data source (Raimes, 1985; Roca de Larios, Manchón & Murphy, 2006; Roca de Larios et al., 2008). Although think-aloud protocols can provide real-time data on the writing processes, it is very difficult for some participants to produce think-aloud data while writing in L2, especially when they are asked to speak in L2 (Trang & Hoa, 2008). Also, there is some doubt about the extent to which verbalizing aloud one's thoughts while writing simulates the real composing situation (Trang & Hoa, 2008; Zamel, 1984).

For these reasons, the present study, as done in Trang and Hoa (2008), adopted a mixed methods approach to examine and compare Chinese university EFL learners' writing processes in both L1 and L2 and identify the challenges they encountered and their coping strategies during the processes in a naturalistic setting. The particular research questions were:

- (1) What is the writing process in the students' L1 and L2 like respectively?
- (2) What are the problems the students encounter and strategies they use to solve the problems during the process of writing the essay in their L1 and L2 respectively?

#### 4. Research design

Since the writing task for the present study was course work and supposed to be submitted in a month, it was impossible to employ think-aloud protocols. Hence, the present study used in-depth interviews, reflective journals and a questionnaire to examine the participants' composing processes in both L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) on a real task in the naturalistic setting. As described below, all the participants in the present study were trained writers in the L1 or the L2 and were representative of the two populations and the writing processes respectively. Hence, the processes they demonstrated when writing in their L1 and L2 respectively could be studied and compared.

##### 4.1 Participants

20 second-year Chinese majors and 20 second-year English majors from a very prestigious university in Beijing participated in the present study. With an average age of 19.2 and an age range of 18 to 20, they were all trained almost in the same way to write Chinese either in their primary school (31/77.5%) or in middle school (9/22.5%), moving from the short to long essays. With the majority (35/87.5%) starting to learn English at the age of 9 and 11, the participants were trained to write, mainly for exams on given prompts in their middle school. The longest text they could produce was about 100 to 200 words long. The exception was Peng (a Chinese major) who had studied in America for one year and thus wrote English essays of around 300 words long.

When in university, only the Chinese majors registered for a Chinese writing course each term, in which they met their teachers once a week, lasting 90 minutes each time. They were often required to write on a specified genre by the course teacher, and then involved in free writing on their own in their free time. At the same time, they took Academic English for one term and wrote 3 to 4 essays of 3000 words for the course. Apart from that, they did not write in English except emails occasionally to English-speaking people. On the other hand, none of the English majors registered for any Chinese writing course and thus simply stopped writing in Chinese except when writing Chinese essays occasionally on blogs. The English majors had a compulsory English writing course each term, starting with an introduction to and practice with different genres of English writing (first term) and moving on to specific foci on argumentative (second term) and creative writing (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> terms). They had to write for the course once every other week and the essay was 1000 to 1500 words long. In addition, they wrote emails, the frequency of which varied from person to person per week, and sometimes an academic paper in English for other courses they took during the term.

When the present study was conducted, all the participants took a writing course offered by the Department of Chinese and the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures respectively. During the semester, the Chinese majors were required to write two narratives of 8000 words per se for the course, while the English majors were asked to write three full essays (one narrative, one play and one review) of 2000-3000 words per se in addition to a few poems for the course.

##### 4.2 Instrument

Data for the present study derived from a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a reflective journal, as detailed below.

###### 4.2.1 Questionnaire

To investigate the processes involved in the writing of Chinese (L1) and English (L2) and compare the differences and similarities of the two, a 24-item Writing Process Questionnaire (WPQ) on both L1 and L2 writing processes were self-developed, aiming to explore the processes involved at three stages of writing: pre-writing (e.g., topic, purpose, and audience of writing and planning), writing (e.g., topic sentence, word choice, sentence structure, punctuation, adequacy of argument, logic, coherence, organization of ideas, discourse structure, and format), and post-writing (i.e., proofreading and revision). All the survey items were placed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Never or almost never true of me" to "Always so", with values 1 to 5 assigned to each of the descriptors respectively.

###### 4.2.2 Semi-structured interview

To gain a more insider's perspective of the processes involved in Chinese or English writing, all the participants were interviewed. Though the focus was on Chinese writing for Chinese majors and on English writing for English majors, the questions for both groups were similar, covering such aspects as training on Chinese or English writing, writing frequency, genre of writing, concerns before, during and after actual writing, features of good writing, factors affecting writing, difficulties met during writing, differences between English and Chinese writing, and so on.

##### 4.3 Reflective journal

All the participants were required to write a reflective journal on the writing task they had just completed for the course. The focused topics were provided to them beforehand, such as topic selection, planning, and idea generation during actual writing, difficulties and coping strategies, factors affecting their writing, proofreading, and revision. In addition to these topics, the participants could freely express their ideas related to their writing, either in Chinese or English, or both.

##### 4.4 Procedure

The present study was carried out during the second term of an academic year. During the term, each Chinese major wrote two narratives of 8000-10000 words per se for the course; and each English major completed three main writing tasks—a narrative, a play and a review of 2000-3000 words per se for their writing course. Both groups were required to produce essays on a topic of their own according to some given prompts. For the sake of balance and comparability,

only their first task of the same genre (narrative) was selected as the focus of the present study. As soon as they finished their products, they wrote the reflective journal. After that, they answered the WPQ and were interviewed in depth about the processes of their essay writing. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese, with some mixture of English. Each approximated 40 minutes and was tape-recorded.

#### 4.5 Data analyses

The present study adapted the schemes developed by Roca de Larios et al. (2008) and Wang and Wen (2002) to analyze the qualitative data. Alternatively, the writing processes in both L1 and L2 were categorized into four types: (1) task-examining, which means reading and analyzing the writing prompt(s) to understand the task demands; (2) planning, which refers to the episodes related to the retrieval and generation of ideas, the establishment of connections between them, and the setting of goals; (3) formulation, which involves the episodes indicating that the writer is trying to convert thoughts and ideas into language, with or without having to engage in problem solving, (4) evaluation and revision, which is concerned with the process by which the writer assesses the efficacy of his/her pragmatic, textual, and linguistic decisions, and makes changes accordingly. The data collected were also analyzed and interpreted under another major heading: the problems arising during the process of writing the essay and strategies to deal with them. The survey data were analyzed in terms of mean and standard deviation. To protect the participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used by the researcher when analyzing the data and presenting the results.

### 5. Results and Findings

#### 5.1 The writing processes in the students' L1 and L2

As previously described, the writing processes in the students' L1 and L2 in the present study were categorized into four main activities: task-examining, planning, formulation, and evaluation and revision.

##### 5.1.1 Task-examining

When required to write a narrative on a topic of their own choice, all the participants studied the prompts first: read the prompts several times, identified the key words, and guessed why the examiner/teacher gave such prompts and what s/he expected (interview & journal), as happened in Zhu (2001) and Roca de Larios et al. (2008). This is consistent with their self-reports on the survey: the L1 and L2 groups scored 4 and 4.60, 4 and 4.40, and 4 and 4.40 on items concerned with topic selection, reading the prompts and deciding on the theme respectively, well above the item midpoint of 3.

After that, as reported in the interviews and journals, all the participants worked hard for a topic, which could be what impressed or inspired them or what they were interested in or familiar with, as some correspondents did in Zhu (2001). For example, Hu concentrated on the topics she was interested in and had many ideas on. She also took into account the difficulty of the topic, such as the amount of materials she had to search and the demand of logic (interview). In addition, 3 (15%) L1 and 4 (20%) L2 writers wrote a title for their essays though it might be changed later (journal). In this way, the correspondents decided on the theme of their writing, in order to make sure how to illustrate the main idea (36/90%) and make the writing easier (23/57.5%), avoid working on too many ideas (17/42.5%) and deviating from the main idea (17/42.5%) (interview).

##### 5.1.2 Planning

After having chosen a topic to write on and decided the themes of their writing, 17 (85%) of the 20 L1 writers considered the purpose and audience of their writing in order to get a good score, to make the reader comfortable when reading the essay and/or "to be responsible for myself and the reader as well" (Peng) (interview & journal). They all thought about the readers of their essays in that people from different places might have different interpretations of and reactions to the same thing and thus might have difficulty communicating with one another (Hua) (interview). To Lu, a strong relationship existed between the reader and the writer: the reader reads a writer's writing in order to be empathetic with him/her. If the reader failed to understand the writer or saw through the writer easily, the writing was a failure.

Based on the theme, purpose and audience, the L1 writers started to plan the whole essay in regard to what to write, how to write and how to organize the ideas either on paper or in mind (interview & journal). For example, Shen listed an outline, briefly indicating what was to be expounded in a paragraph, including some specific and good ideas in mind (interview & journal). Lu made a brief list of how many paragraphs to have, what to write in each paragraph, and how to conclude, etc. (interview & journal). She also planned the clues of her essays, especially those running through the essay from the beginning to the end (interview).

At this stage, they also thought about how to organize the ideas via various means such as adopting a natural order (Ying) and contrasts (Long) to illustrate the thesis.

After determining the thesis of their writing, the English writers also took into account the purpose of their writing because "writing is to express an idea" (Min & Yong, interview). Meanwhile, 15 (75%) of them decided on the audience of their writing so that they could concentrate on certain aspects of the topic (Gao), be sure what to be more or less illustrated (Gong), and avoid any bad consequence (Yong) (interview). The others (25%) did not think about their audience either because their audience, namely the course teacher and their classmates, was small and fixed or because they did not "have the habit of writing for an audience" (interview).

After that, these English writers, like their L1 peers, started to plan their essays. They all wrote an outline on paper, listing the ideas they would develop to support the main idea (interview & journal). For example, Chun made a list of

the following in her outline: what to illustrate on, from what aspects to illustrate the idea(s), the relations between paragraphs, and how to conclude (interview & journal). When planning for their essays, they also considered how to organize the ideas in their writing, which was usually achieved by a logical order (e.g., from a small point to a big one or from the positive points to the negative ones) or time order (interview & journal).

The survey data showed that the L1 and L2 writers scored 3.40 and 3.60, 3.60 and 4.20, and 4.60 and 4.20 on items indicative of purpose, audience and planning respectively, all exceeding the item midpoint 3. This result further supports that of the qualitative data and attests to the fact the L2 writers spent more time and/or efforts on the purpose, audience, and planning of their essays, which might be because they were writing in a foreign language.

### 5.1.3 Formulation

Based on the outlines either in pen and paper or in mind, all the participants moved to convert their thoughts and ideas into language.

At this stage, all the twenty L1 writers tried their best to write out the first paragraph(s) which stated the theme of their writing, because “it was more important than other things of an essay” (Long, interview), though it might be revised later (Hua, interview & journal). Then they moved on to work on other parts of their essays.

During this process of translating ideas into language, they all paid much attention to coherence, punctuation, appropriateness of wording, and clear expression of ideas (interview).

They were concerned with coherence both within and between paragraphs because “the reader may not understand the essay if it is not coherent” (Peng, journal). To achieve coherence, they resorted to such means as repeated use of key word(s) and/or sentence(s) throughout the essay, logical order, highlights such as spacing, rhetorical devices such as antithesis, and transitional markers such as ‘because’ and ‘so’ (interview & journal).

These L1 writers also claimed that punctuation was important in that “improper use of a punctuation mark can result in a serious problem” (Feng, interview). To them, different punctuations denoted different meanings, which could affect the meaning of a whole sentence, and proper use of punctuation could make the ideas flow smoothly and the essay more readable (interview & journal). Likewise, they considered appropriate use of words and expressions crucial because different words or phrases denoted different feelings, though probably meaning the same and it could make an essay more exquisite (interview & journal). Meanwhile, they all paid special attention to the clear expression of ideas so that they could be (fully) understood by the reader, which they claimed was quite difficult (interview & journal).

Meanwhile, 4 of the 20 L1 writers tried to vary the sentence structures in their writing in order to avoid being dull and appear attractive to the reader (interview & journal). The others did not do so either because of having no such habit or the fear of negatively affecting the expression of ideas (interview & journal). Concurrently, none of the L1 writers was concerned with word limit or spelling (interview). Though paragraphing could help clearly express ideas and appeared attractive, the L1 writers generally did not care much about paragraphing in that “it can easily disrupt the flow of thinking” (Hu, interview) or how to develop a paragraph (interview). Therefore, an important sentence could be an independent paragraph, and the sentences in a paragraph were just naturally grouped together instead of evolving around a topic sentence (interview & journal). Understandably, they except Peng did not have a topic sentence for the paragraphs in their writing. Peng wrote a topic sentence for one or more paragraphs in his writing, which he attributed to his study in America (interview).

During this process of actual writing, only when feeling tired, all the L1 writers kept on writing till the end. Nevertheless, they all stopped to look back after finishing a paragraph to see whether it was coherent (17/85%), whether a word was properly used (10/50%), to make some changes (8/40%), and to remind themselves what should come next (8/40%), as stated in their reflective journals and interviews. And since writing required concentration and efforts (18/90%), they did not think of anything irrelevant to their writing during this process (interview). After having finished their products, they all chose a title for their essays except Hu who did it before she started to write (interview).

During this stage of formulating ideas and thoughts into language, all the L2 writers paid much attention to paragraphing, paragraph development, coherence, punctuation, spelling, appropriateness of wording, variety of sentence structures, clear expression of ideas, and word limit (interview & journal).

All the English writers paragraphed their essays according to ideas, with one leading idea in a paragraph (interview & journal). For each leading supporting paragraph in their writing, they all had a topic sentence so that the reader would easily understand what was on (interview & journal). The following is a typical view, “A topic sentence helps me and the reader understand what I am writing about. ...” (Yong, interview). Meanwhile, they all concerned themselves with how to develop the paragraphs in their writing to make the analyses more logical and reliable and the paragraphs more interesting (interview & journal). For example, Gu developed his paragraphs “from the surface to the deep or from the simplest to the most difficult” (interview); Min tried “to use statistics or examples to support the main idea, depending on the collected materials” (interview & journal).

They, like the Chinese writers, were also concerned with coherence both within and between paragraphs to make the ideas clearer and the writing smoother, and help readers better understand the essay (interview & journal), just as Gu said, “... Without coherence, the sentences would be disconnected, which was hard to understand” (journal). To achieve coherence, they employed various means such as transitional markers, a logical order and a time order to chain the ideas (interview & journal). Similarly, they all commented in interviews that punctuation was very important in English writing, because “punctuation helps make the flow of ideas clearer and more logical” (Nie).

They perceived the appropriateness of wording in their writing to be important as well, because “every word denotes a special meaning, even if it might mean the same when translated into Chinese” (Yong, interview). Consequently, they spent considerable time choosing the right expressions by checking dictionaries and studying samples (interview & journal), as happened in Leki (1995) and Trang and Hoa (2008). To make their writing more interesting and less dull, they all tried to vary sentence structures in their writing (interview & journal).

At the same time, as reported in the journals and interviews, the L2 group was very careful about whether their ideas were clearly expressed in that “the essay would be a failure if the ideas were not clearly expressed” (Man). Likewise, they were careful to meet the word limit as required and made their essays just slightly longer than what was required (interview). In addition, they generally considered spelling to be important, because spelling was “a fundamental quality in English writing” (Gong) and “spelling mistakes are so foolish that the writer will be laughed at” (Gu) (interview).

Because writing required “strong concentration” and “great effort” (interview), all the English writers, like their L1 peers, did not think of anything irrelevant to their writing during the process of actual writing (journal & interview). Except when feeling tired or getting stuck, they did not stop easily either. Nevertheless, they all stopped during the process to look back at what had been written down sometimes, to (1) change the theme to better reflect the content (11/55%), (2) make sure of what came next (10/50%), (3) check what was written down was what the writer meant (10/50%); (4) make the preceding paragraph and the following one (more) coherent (10/50%), (5) check whether there were any mistakes or missing ideas (9/45%), and (6) see whether the writing could go on (6/30%) (interview & journal). After the product was finished, all the English writers wrote a title for their essays, which was built on the theme of the essay (interview & journal).

Finally, both L1 and L2 writers carefully formatted their essays as required, because good formatting helped make the essay tidier and easier to read and revise (interview & journal).

All these results were in accordance with the survey results. For example, the L1 group scored only 2.20 while the L2 group scored 3.80 on the item reflective of topic sentence, lending further support to the finding that the Chinese writers did not concern themselves much with topic sentence while the English writers did.

#### 5.1.4 Evaluation and revision

After the first draft was finished, both L1 and L2 writers carefully proofread and revised their products (interview & journal), which is also evidenced by their responses to survey items expressing proofreading ( $m = 4.40$  and  $4.40$  respectively) and revision ( $m = 3.80$  and  $4.00$  respectively). The L1 writers mainly focused on the following: (1) punctuation, (2) coherence, (3) content, and (4) wording (interview & journal). They all added, reorganized and/or deleted certain sentences or ideas that were irrelevant to the thesis to make the essay more coherent and the flow of ideas smooth(er) (interview & journal). They all revised the products as many times as possible so that the essays had few wrong punctuation mistakes and were coherent and well organized (interview & journal). For example, Hu read her essay from the very beginning and made revisions accordingly each time she resumed working on it (interview). As a result, 15 (75%) of them generally spent 1.5 to 2 times more time revising their products than writing them up; and the time spent on revision was almost the same as that on writing to the other 5 (25%) (interview).

Likewise, the L2 writers also repeatedly proofread their essays to identify grammatical mistakes and inappropriate use of words and phrases, and check whether the ideas were coherently connected (interview & journal). Meanwhile, to make their essays more coherent and powerful, they all revised their essays two to three times at intervals of hours or days before the final submission either by themselves or according to peer responses (interview & journal). When doing so, they mainly focused on (1) grammatical mistakes, inappropriate use of words and phrases, (3) unnecessary sentences or even paragraphs, (4) adequacy of evidence, (5) consistency between the content and the topic sentence, (6) variety of sentence structures, (7) use of new words, (8) the introduction and conclusion, and (9) organization of the ideas (interview & journal). Consequently, they changed some words and phrases, deleted, added, and/or reorganized certain sentences or even paragraphs in their essays (interview). Yong also proofread and revised her essay while writing it up (interview), as one participant did in Victori (1999).

#### 5.2 Challenges and coping strategies

During the process of writing up their essays, both the L1 and L2 writers reported having difficulties of various kinds. The Chinese writers reported having encountered the following challenges: (1) expression, (2) coherence, (3) worry about having too many paragraphs, (4) being hard to choose one from two phrases or characters, (5) being hard to chain so many segments together, (6) varying sentence structures, and (7) lack of materials (interview & journal). For example, Ying commented, “I worry much about the expression of my ideas, such as whether the thesis and the ideas are clearly stated, whether a character is properly used, and whether the use of a character would hurt anybody, etc.” (journal).

To confront the challenges, the Chinese writers adopted such strategies as follows: (1) avoiding what could not be well handled, (2) simply writing out the idea, however awkward it might be, (3) doing research to see how a difficult issue was handled, (4) discussing with classmates, (5) trying best to write better by questioning themselves all the time, (6) replacing the character with a synonym or a sentence, (7) putting both characters there which were hard to choose with the help of punctuation such as comma, and (8) taking a walk outside to find a clue to chain the segments (interview & journal).

To the English writers, their reported challenges in writing the narrative included: (1) a limited vocabulary, (2) being not

skilled at using the words and phrases, (3) having difficulty finding relevant evidence, (4) being hard to relate evidence to the thesis to make it more convincing, (5) lacking materials, (6) being difficult to select a topic due to a limited knowledge pool or other reasons, (7) being difficult to select appropriate words and phrases, and (8) being hard to make a sentence clearer, more concise, and more native-like (interview & journal), as reported in the few studies examining the difficulties in writing in L2 (Al-Abed-AI-Haq & Ahmed, 1994; Dalsky & Tajino, 2007; Trang & Hoa, 2008). A typical comment was given by Gao: "... My vocabulary is limited, and I am not skilled at using the words and phrases. Consequently, I had to spend lots of time collecting materials to be used in the essay and thinking about how to vary sentence structures in my writing" (interview).

To cope with these challenges, the English writers employed the following strategies: (1) trying to find as much evidence as possible and then choosing the best, (2) checking an English-English dictionary, (3) asking the teacher for advice, (4) discussing with classmates, (5) changing the topic, (6) turning to Internet and library for more related information, (7) drawing an outline on paper, and (8) writing a Chinese alternative (interview & journal), similar to their counterparts in Trang and Hoa (2008) and Zhu (2001).

As described, both the L1 and L2 groups in the present study, similar to those in other studies (Crosby, 2009; Trang & Hoa, 2008-), were resourceful learners.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 *The writing processes in the students' L1 and L2*

As analyzed above, the L1 and L2 writers shared a lot when composing the narrative in Chinese and English respectively, as found by Sasaki and Hirose (1996). They all studied the prompts, and then selected a topic and determined a theme accordingly, as done in Roca de Larios et al. (2008) and Wang and Wen (2002). Before they planned for the whole essay, the majority clarified to themselves for what purpose and for whom they were to write the narrative. Then they brainstormed and drew an outline, indicating/listing what to write, how to write, how to organize the ideas, and so on, similar to their counterparts in Arslan and Şahin-Kizil (2010). Based on the outline, they started the process of translating ideas and thoughts into language. During this process, they tried their best to achieve coherence both within and between paragraphs, make good use of punctuation, use words and phrases appropriately, and express their ideas clearly and well. Because of the demanding and challenging nature of the task, they remained highly attentive and did not stop easily during the process. After the essay was finished, they wrote a title for it, formatted the whole essay as required, and carefully proofread it to reduce/avoid any spelling and grammatical mistakes. Then they repeatedly revised their essays during the process of actual writing and/or after they had finished the writing. But main and text-level revisions generally occurred after the product was finished, as happened in Porte's (1996, 1997) studies. The focus of revision, to both L1 and L2 writers, lay at both sentence and discourse levels, which involved wording, coherence, and content.

Further comparison of the students' L1 and L2 composing processes revealed that some differences existed between the two. For example, the L2 writers listed more details at the planning stage, indicating that they spent more time planning for their essays, which might be related to their proficiency in the L2 (Arslan & Şahin-Kizil, 2010; Cumming, 1989; Trang & Hoa, 2008). At the formulation stage, all the Chinese writers paid much attention to coherence, punctuation, appropriateness of wording, and clear expression of ideas, but cared little about word limit, spelling, paragraphing and paragraph development, similar to the participants in Stallard (1974). By contrast, all these were foci of concern to the L2 writers, characteristic of writing in a L2. At the evaluation and revision stage, grammatical mistakes, consistency between the content and the topic sentence, the variety of sentence structures, the use of new words and the organization of ideas were rarely reported to be concerns to the L1 writers, but foci of attention to the L2 composers, as happened in Stallard (1974).

Furthermore, the survey data clearly demonstrate that the L2 group generally considered the activities involved in the writing process to be equally or more important than their L1 counterparts. They consequently spent more time and/or efforts on the activities, which might be closely related to their mastery of the language they were writing in.

### 6.2 *Challenges and coping strategies during L1 and L2 writing processes*

When it comes to the challenges and coping strategies during the process of writing the narrative, both L1 and L2 participants reported having difficulty choosing appropriate words and phrases and finding adequate materials. Meanwhile, some L1 writers found achieving coherence and having too many paragraphs to be great challenges, which might be related to the fact that they did not care much about topic sentence and paragraph development. The L2 writers, on the other hand, reported having such difficulties while composing the narrative as a limited vocabulary and a limited knowledge pool, which have been commonly identified as obstacles to the learning of a foreign language (Crosby, 2009; Sun & Wang, 2003). Intermediate English learners and writers though they were, the L2 participants still lacked writing experience in English, or at least not so adroit as the L1 writers composing in their mother tongue. Probably because of this, some L2 writers reflected that it was hard to locate relevant evidence and/or relate evidence to the main idea to make it more convincing and powerful, which was hardly reported by the L1 writers.

To overcome these difficulties, both groups resorted to such common strategies as avoidance, discussing with peers, turning to the teacher for help, and doing library research. When they found they could not handle something well, they simply avoided it by turning to something easier, as found in Zhang (1995). As native speakers of Chinese, the L1 writers found a synonym for the word they were not satisfied with, or simply put both words there when not sure which one was better. By contrast, the L2 writers employed strategies peculiar to the learning of a foreign language. They

checked an English-English dictionary to locate the best word and drew an outline in pen and paper to clarify their ideas, or provided a Chinese alternative first.

As such, the L2 writing processes were largely similar to L1 writing processes: both were recursive and non-linear, involving prewriting, writing and post writing, as found in numerous existing studies (Arslan & Şahin-Kizil, 2010; Parks & Raymond, 2004; Raymond & Parks, 2002; Spack, 2004; Sternglass, 1997; Zamel & Spack, 2004; Zhang, 1995); both L1 and L2 writers planned a lot at both micro- and macro-levels of the narrative, as happened in Trang and Hoa (2008); both groups engaged themselves with both surface- and text-level revisions, unlike their L2 counterparts in other studies (Raimes, 1985; Sasaki, 2002; Strang & Hoa, 2008). Meanwhile, the two writing processes differed in that each group tended to different foci, encountered specific challenges, and had their own peculiar resources at disposal during the process of composing the narrative, as found in existing studies (Li, 2008; Sun & Zhao, 2008; Wang, 2010). And the L2 groups, as foreign language learners, had both L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) at disposal, as found in other studies (Kibler, 2010; Manchón, Roca de Larois & Murphy, 2000; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Woodall, 2002; Zhang, 1995).

## 7. Conclusions and implications

The present study examined the writing processes of 20 L1 writers and 20 L2 writers on a course task of writing a narrative in a university naturalistic setting, as well as the challenges they encountered and their coping strategies during the processes. And the following conclusions are guaranteed from this study.

First, both L1 and L2 writing processes proved to be nonlinear and cyclical, involving a constant interplay of thinking, writing, and revising throughout the process. The two groups underwent major activities of the process in a similar way: examining the task, planning for the whole essay, formulating the ideas into language, and proofreading and revising the essay carefully after it was finished. During this process, both groups believed the theme of the essay to be important, decided on the purpose and audience before planning for the essay, and paid much attention to wording, expression of ideas, coherence and punctuation. The L2 group also concerned themselves with paragraphing, paragraph development, spelling, variety of sentence structures, and word limit. Similarly, though the foci of revision were largely similar, the L2 group spent much time checking grammar mistakes, which was hardly reported to be a concern by the L1 group. Secondly, the two groups encountered common challenges such as lack of materials and expression of ideas. They also had their own specific difficulties when composing the narrative. To deal with these challenges, the two groups utilized such common strategies as avoidance, discussing with peers, and doing research. Meanwhile, each group employed their own specific strategies.

As such, it might be advisable to identify the similarities and differences between the L1 and L2 writing processes, so that students can make better use of the bilingual resources they have. In addition, as found in the present study and Zhu's (2001), L2 learners reported to encounter difficulties of various kinds during the process of composing in the foreign language. These difficulties might not always match the weaknesses observed in students' final products, as found in Zhu (2001). However, this does not mean that the writers did not experience major difficulties with these aspects in the writing process. Also, because the difficulties encountered by L2 writers relate not only to textual features of writing, but to the writing process, it may not be advisable to rely on text analysis alone when we try to understand learners' difficulties. Combining text analysis with learners' self-reports seems to be optimal if we wish to understand the full range of learners' difficulties and needs (Zhu, 2001).

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