Walking Through the Darkness of Unknown:

Delving into the Common Problems that Chinese ESL Students Encounter in

Post-secondary Academic Writing

With the continuous expansion of globalization, the number of Chinese students who pursue post-secondary education in North American universities keeps growing rapidly. However, most of the students will experience an unexpected mood fluctuation from the initial delight of dreams come true to the current frustration grown out of academic pressures after moving to the unfamiliar learning environment. In addition to many other challenges, the students’ poor academic writing skills are regarded by many as one major barrier that precludes them from achieving academic success (Xu, 2012).

To help understand what exactly makes English academic writing problematic for Chinese students, Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) approach of narrative inquiry is employed in this paper. Through writing, and then inquiring into the author’s own stories on learning to write academically in English, three major questions have emerged: 1) why does my English academic writing sound so Chinese, 2) why don’t I have a voice in English academic writing, and 3) why am I charged as a plagiarizer.

After reading relevant literature on L2 academic writing, the author has moved beyond the belief that Chinese students’ inadequate acquisition of English language, such as poor grammar foundation or limited vocabularies, is the main reason for their academic writing problems. Rather, the author comes to realize that the divergent
educational and cultural backgrounds as well as writing norms play a much more essential role. In other words, it is the disparate thought patterns and rhetoric conventions between Chinese and Western cultures that make Chinese students’ academic writing seem illogical, ambiguous and confusing in North American universities. In addition, Chinese students are believed to be lacking the ability of critical thinking, one indispensable requirement for high-quality English writing; thus, they frequently fail to reach the expectations of their professors.

In the same token, Chinese ESL students’ voice in academic writing is often silenced. Owing to the dominance of North American writing conventions, with which the students have to negotiate, they struggle to establish a new and appropriate identity in their academic writing. Those who are unable to find an authentic voice in L2 writing initially will sometimes commit academic plagiarism due to relying heavily on textual borrowing or patchwriting. They will face severe academic penalties if caught.

Through inquiring into my own lived experiences and reading the relevant literature, this paper aims to raise cultural awareness amongst Chinese ESL students as well as their writing tutors or teachers at North American institutions, helping both parties realize what the students’ problems may truly be in the process of developing academic writing skills. By doing so, hopefully, Chinese students can achieve academic attainments with less pain and frustration in their post-secondary studies in North America.
References:
