

CHAPTER 12.

A REVIEW ON SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING RESEARCH IN CHINA

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Second language or SL/L2, is the language that people learn in addition to their native tongue(s) or any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood, including what is chronologically the third or subsequent language. The language to be learned is often referred to as the “target language” or “L2.” From the broad sense, second language in the West includes foreign language (Ellis, 2008). From the narrow sense, second language refers to the language which is acquired in a natural condition after first language has been acquired. In China, English has been a required foreign language to be started from Grade 3 in primary schools, and when we refer to L2 in China, it means English.

Second language writing research can be dated back to the 1960s, which refers to the writer's use of their non-native language, their second language, or a foreign language to write. International second language writing research has matured in the late 20th century and has formed its own theoretical systems such as contrastive rhetoric, research objects such as writers and learners of second language, research methods such as content analysis and research teams such as second language writing teachers and writing research specialists. The study of second language writing was promoted in the US due to the rise of writing studies. And it has gradually developed into a well-defined independent discipline (Kroll, 2003; Silva & Matsuda, 2001) with its feeder disciplines, composition studies and applied linguistics (Silva & Leki, 2004).

However, in China, most L2 writing research and teaching was done by researchers and teachers trained in applied linguistics (Zou, 2016), as the major disciplines associated with L2 writing have been this due to the fact that there is not such a discipline named composition studies in foreign language studies, and the L1 writing studies in Chinese studies mainly refers to Chinese creative writing with a very small section intertwined with journalism in mass media studies. L1 writing studies have also experienced a tremendous development during the past 40 years, and researchers have had some communication and interactions with writing researchers in other countries (Yu, 2021), L1 writing researchers focus mainly on creative writing in Chinese with recent emerging

areas and topics such as sci-fi, non-fiction writing, and multimedia writing (Fang, 2021). Charles Bazerman was the first international writing researcher to be invited to lecture in College of Chinese Language and Literature in Wuhan University from April 2 to 4 in 2010 and was invited to become an honorary member of The Writing Academy of China, a national Level-1 academic organization (the highest level possible in China). And the next year, 2011, Kexun Yu, the chairman of The Writing Academy of China, and some of his colleagues were invited to the fourth Writing Research Across Borders (WRAB) conference in Washington D.C. and delivered a panel on Chinese writing studies. However, L1 and L2 researchers in China have different focus interests in writing studies, while L1 researchers focus more on creative writing and L2 researchers more on English acquisition issues. The interactions between the two research areas have rarely been found in existing research and literature.

Therefore, L2 writing in China does not have the two parents (composition studies and applied linguistics) as it does in the US (Silva & Leki, 2004). From this perspective, L2 writing in China is actually single parented, which is also closely related to its research characteristics.

Second language writing is a very complicated process, as well as a major difficulty in second language learning. Therefore, it attracts attention from English researchers and teachers. Empirical research on second language writing has been carried out for early half a century, but domestic research in China in this area was started much later. After a steady development of the 1980s, second language writing experienced a period of rapid growth in the 1990s. Since stepping into the new century, the development of second language writing has been flourishing, and both the quantity and the quality of research have increased significantly (Shao, 2013). In particular, some scholars have summarized the research on second language writing of different stages from different angles, such as Yan and Cui (2011), Qin (2009), Huang and Yu (2009), Wang and Sun (2005), Yao and Cheng (2005), Wang and Wang (2004), Li and Li (2003). All these reviews have broadened the research space of the domestic writing field and promoted the further development of writing research to a certain extent.

Previous reviews on second language writing in China mainly dealt with research methods and focus entities (i.e., objects of study). These studies can be divided into four review stages. The first stage of L2 writing reviews were on studies published before 2004 (Yao & Cheng, 2005; Wang & Wang, 2004; Li & Li, 2003), and these reviews all pointed out that L2 writing research in this stage was mainly non-empirical research. The second stage reviews (Zhao et al., 2010; Qin, 2009; Huang & Yu, 2009; Guo, 2009) feature research between 2004 to 2007. Their work showed that the number of empirical studies increased significantly during that period. The third stage was from 2007 to 2010 and

involved efforts of He (2013), Liu and Ling (2012), Yan and Cui (2011), Zhu (2011), and Meng (2011), in which the research subjects ended in 2010. The fourth showed achievements made by Zhan and Ai (2015), Tan (2014), Zheng et al. (2014), and Luan (2012), in which the papers chosen as reviewed ones were published before 2013.

All the above scholars described the proportion changing of empirical and non-empirical studies in different journals over years. In reviews before 2003, non-empirical studies took an absolute advantage with the proportion of 72.73% (Yao & Cheng, 2005) and 66.9% (Li & Li, 2003) in different databases. Then empirical studies made a forerun with the proportion of 53.71% from 2003 to 2007 (Huang & Yu, 2009). After that, in a review on a database before 2010, empirical research took an absolute advantage with the proportion of 73.2%, and non-empirical research fell to 26.8% (Yan & Cui, 2011). Based on a longer period of reviewed publications, Zhu (2011) got a result that empirical studies (56.81%) were still leading over non-empirical studies (43.19%). Although with differences, it is still obvious that the empirical studies were started later, with a lag from the international trend, but persisted to grow with stronger development until recently.

In China, many experts and scholars have set out to define research methodology (Wang, 2000; Gao, 1999). Gao et al. (1999) classified the research methods of applied linguistics in China into three categories: quantitative studies, qualitative research, and non-empirical research. The first two, which are characterized by systematic, planned collection, and analysis of materials, are collectively referred to as empirical research. The third category, non-empirical research, is not based on the systematic collection of materials, and consists of pure theoretical discussion, including descriptions of teaching and personal experience.

After more than half a century's development, the study of second language writing began to change from non-empirical research to empirically-based research. Of course, in empirical studies qualitative and quantitative have their own characteristics. Therefore, in this study we set out to understand precisely the distribution of qualitative research and quantitative research to add clarity and detail to earlier descriptions of Chinese writing research.

However, it is notable that there are some problems with the retrospective work that is available. Firstly, in terms of research methods, only the changes of numbers of empirical and non-empirical research were counted, and nothing about the quantitative, qualitative, or the mixed methods was analyzed. Secondly, theories adopted by the researchers were not reviewed. Thirdly, as for the focus entities, the ways of the focus entities classification are various and ranges from four kinds to eight kinds. As pointed out by Wang (2013), the study of L2 writing in China is still relatively young. Its theoretical system has not yet been formed, its research methods are still immature, and the focus entities are still

unbalanced. Therefore, it is necessary to further improve the quality of research, to expand the scope of research, and to optimize the methods of research.

The present study, based on international research perspectives, reviews articles on English writing published in 11 Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) foreign language studies journals during 2001-2020. The present study has been conducted to explore the situation of English writing research in China in terms of research methods, research theories, and focus entities by answering the following research questions: (1) Among all of the empirical research published in the 11 surveyed foreign language studies journals during 2001-2020, how do the methods of qualitative, quantitative and mixed distribute and change over years? (2) Among all of the empirical studies, what are the content theories the authors adopted? (3) Among all of the empirical studies, what is the distribution of objects of study in terms of writers, readers, writing, and multiple entities?

METHOD

SELECTION OF PUBLICATIONS TO BE INCLUDED IN THIS STUDY

When selecting journals for reviewing, this study follows the criteria set by Nwogu (1997): representation (a representative readership holds for a particular publication), reputation (the esteem which members of an assumed readership hold for a particular publication) and accessibility (the ease with which texts that constitute the corpus can be obtained). Considering these three significant factors, the journals are chosen from the citation database: Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI), Chinese:中文社会科学引文索引). CSSCI is an interdisciplinary citation index program in China, which is used to search the papers that were embodied and the literature was cited in the Chinese social science field. It was developed by Nanjing University in 1997 and was established in 2000. CSSCI follows the method of bibliometrics, and it takes the method of quantitative and qualitative evaluation to select journals with precise academic and editorial characteristics from more than 2700 journals in humanities and social sciences fields in China. The selected journals can reflect the latest research results in various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences in China, which are the academic journals with the highest quality, the greatest influence, and the most standardized editing and publishing processes. Now many leading Chinese universities and institutes use CSSCI as a one of the standards for evaluating published academic achievements and faculty promotion.

Based on the previous reviews of L2 writing research, this review lays its focus on the progress in numbers of research on L2 writing, the development trends of empirical and non-empirical research, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, the employment of theories adopted and the distribution of focus entities in research articles published in 11 CSSCI foreign language journals: *Foreign Language World* (《外语界》), *Computer-assisted Foreign Language Education* (《外语电化教学》), *Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice* (《外语教学理论与实践》), *Foreign Languages in China* (《中国外语》), *Modern Foreign Languages* (《现代外语》), *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching* (《外语与外语教学》), *Foreign Language Education* (《外语教学》), *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (《外语教学与研究》), *Foreign Languages Research* (《外语研究》), *Journal of Foreign Languages* (《外国语》) and *Chinese Translators Journal* (《中国翻译》) from 2007 to 2020.

These 11 journals are all leading journals in foreign language research in China and are considered to have high prestige in the academic community, meeting the requirements of representation and reputation. And speaking of accessibility, these 11 journals are all accessible in CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). It's necessary to point out that there are other journals that also publish articles on second language writing. The reason for selecting these 11 CSSCI journals was to obtain the results from the most representative journals in foreign language research field in China. The authors collected a total number of 30,810 articles published in these 11 CSSCI foreign language journals from 2001 to 2020. And out of these 30,810 articles, 1,012 are on or about second language writing.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

These 1,012 articles on second language writing were reviewed by the authors. 601 were identified as empirical studies and 411 were categorized as non-empirical studies. The authors reviewed each of the 601 empirical research by title, abstract, and methodology (and if necessary, the article in complete) to identify what method was used, what theory or theories were adopted, and what was the object of study. Out of these 601 articles, 203 were coded as “qualitative,” 194 as “quantitative,” and 204 as “mixed methods.” All of the 601 empirical research articles were also coded by their different objects of study into 4 categories: writing (N=369), writers (N=31), readers (N=60), and multiple entities (N=141).

It can be observed from Figure 12.1 that the development of second language writing research keeps a steady range with a sudden drop in 2019. Specifically, second language writing research has experienced several significant rises during the last 20 years and has demonstrated an ascendant trend.

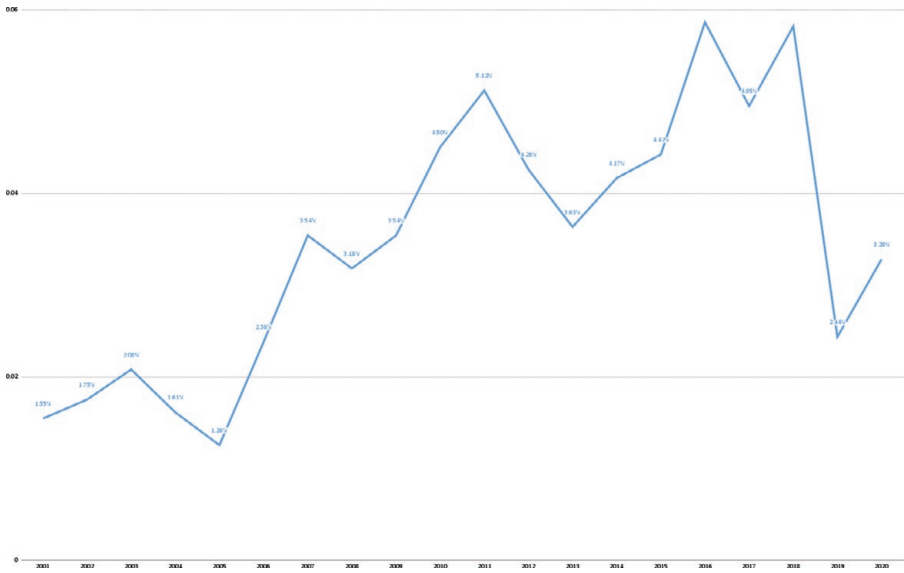


Figure 12.1. Trendline of L2 writing research articles among all published CSSCI journal articles during 2001-2020

As shown in Table 12.1 and complied with previous researchers’ descriptions of the proportion changes of empirical and non-empirical research published in different journals within different periods, the development of empirical research has been quite dramatic during these 20 years. And it can be drawn from the content of the articles that, the non-empirical studies experienced some rise since 2015 with more and more studies focused on questioning the status quo of the empirical trend in the field and concerns for future theoretical and methodological developments in the field (Zhan & Ai, 2015; Xu, 2021; Ye & Duan, 2021) and also the rapid development of research overseas (Qin, 2017; Wang & Xiao, 2021). Figure 12.2 also shows the changes of empirical research and non-empirical research during these 20 years. It can be observed that the rise of empirical studies was steady before 2015, and then non-empirical studies started to come back with more theoretical evaluations and updates on international writing studies with expectations for future research in China (Qin, 2017; Wang & Xiao, 2021; Xu, 2021).

Through the analysis of the current situation of English writing research in China, it can be seen that English writing research is receiving more and more attention. Most of the research methods used in the empirical studies being reviewed are quantitative and mixed methods. Qualitative method was significantly lower than quantitative method, which shows that the qualitative method might be more challenging to researchers in the aspect

of previous training and also access to publication. It is also very obvious that many researchers did not explicitly state which methodology was used in the study. Secondly, research theories often adopted by Chinese scholars are activity theory, genres, meta-cognition, and functional theory, which are very obvious influences from the North American genre theory (Hyon, 1996) and an activity theory approach to genre (Russell, 1997a). It also needs to be mentioned that over 30% of empirical research did not provide any explanation of theory which guides the research. Thirdly, the objects of study in English writing cover four aspects: writing, writers, readers, and multiple objects of study.

Table 12.1. Numbers of Empirical Research and Non-empirical Research in Surveyed Journals During 2001-2020

Year	Non-empirical Research	Empirical Research	Total
2001	11	4	15
2002	11	10	21
2003	12	11	23
2004	12	8	20
2005	11	7	18
2006	35	16	51
2007	8	18	26
2008	9	27	36
2009	10	27	37
2010	5	38	43
2011	9	30	39
2012	7	35	42
2013	4	34	38
2014	3	24	27
2015	1	39	40
2016	5	27	32
2017	60	101	161
2018	37	33	70
2019	35	36	71
2020	126	76	202
	411	601	1012

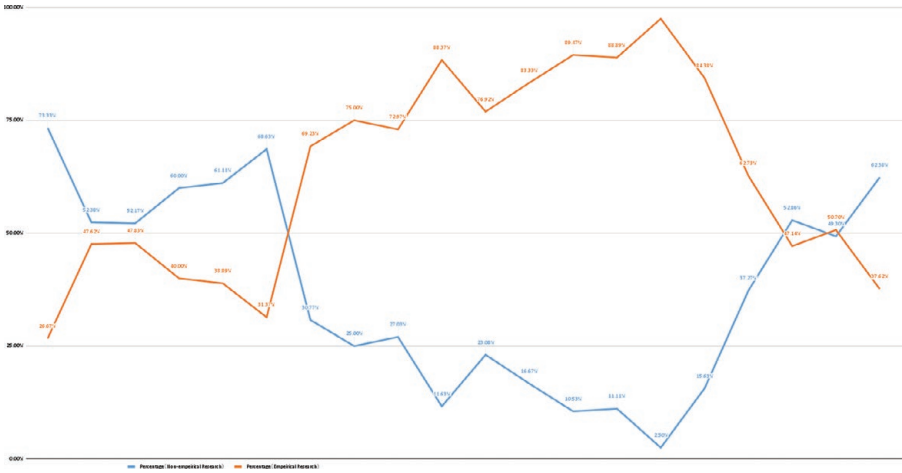


Figure 12.2. Trend of empirical research and non-empirical research

Chinese researchers are more likely to conduct research based on writing texts, which include three types of research: measures of textual characteristics, including fluency, accuracy and development, discourse features, and linguistic features; ratings of writing quality; and feedback research. Then the researchers favor multiple entities-oriented research, such as research on writer and writing, reader and writing, and teachers and textbooks, and this type of research will gain more attention in future. A small fraction of research focuses on writers as the object of study, or on writers’ psychology and cognition. Attention to writers has been less common than a focus on readers, with even less research investigating the relationships between the writer and the reader (Bazerman, 2001), all of which definitely deserve more attention.

IMPLICATIONS

The present study provides a better understanding towards research methods, theories, and focus entities of English writing research in China and unveils that analyzing research methods, theories, and focus entities is a complex process. By reviewing existing research on English research articles published in 11 CSSCI foreign language journals (2001–2020) from the aspects of methods, theories, and focus entities, it can be concluded that English researchers in China in the aspect of writing research should maintain the “method” consciousness, continuing to try new writing instruction methods in practice. In addition, Chinese scholars should communicate more with international colleagues so that real dialogues are conducted concerning the research methods and focus entities of English writing research in order to promote the development of English writing.

In terms of research methods, empirical research methods continue to be used increasingly. English writing is a complex process of interaction of various variables. In order to deeply analyze the characteristics of the variables and their relationships, it needs to be noted that the mixed use of quantitative and qualitative methods is necessary. Therefore, mixed methods will become a more popular research method in the English writing research field in the future. Theories adopted in English writing will be more and more cross-disciplinary, with continuing influences from the US (Qin, 2017) and other English writing research communities. Although L2 writing studies in China has been single-parented, the influences from Rhetoric and Composition have been brought to China from the US through introductions of writing theories and research methods by various channels like journal articles (Li, 2014), books (Wu, 2013), and translated works (Bazerman, 2020). Thirdly, the research results will be more and more multi-modal. The results of writing research are emerging various forms, not only including research papers, but also a lot of new achievements, such as English writing software, English writing instruction websites, and English writing assessment platforms. It can be predicted that English writing research in the future is bound to develop in a comprehensive, scientific, and diversified way with the theorizing and standardization of English writing research methods and diversified focus entities.

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