

# **An Investigation of Chinese University EFL Learners' Knowledge about Writing**

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With detailed interview data, this study investigated 25 Chinese university EFL student writers' knowledge about writing, namely knowledge of audience, knowledge of discourse conventions and knowledge of writing plans which have been proved to play an important role in writing success (Flower and Hayes, 1980a; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). The study found that these student writers showed awareness of their readers, valued the quality of content in argumentative writing and made plans before writing. Genre-approach writing instruction and metacognition training are advocated for an efficient L2 writing pedagogy. More studies are suggested to investigate the knowledge about writing of writers with varied language abilities from different educational backgrounds.

## **1. Introduction**

Greatly influenced by L1 writing process research, increasing numbers of studies have been done to investigate ESL/EFL learners' composing processes from a cognitive perspective. Some are devoted to the holistic description of ESL/EFL composing processes (Zamel 1983; Raimes 1985; Arndt 1987; Wang 2004; Roca de Larios et al. 2008), some to the cognitive components during composing such as planning (Jones & Tetroe 1987) and L1 use in L2 composing (Woodall 2002; Wang 2003), and some others to comparing similarities and differences between L1 and L2 composing (Arndt 1987; Cumming 1989) and examining composing behaviours of skilled and unskilled L2 writers (Victori 1999).

However, these examples of writing process research in both L1 and ESL/EFL context are mainly concerned with writers' procedural knowledge (how) while overlooking the role of writers' declarative knowledge (what) during the writing process. Alexander et al. (1991) pointed out that in the literature on cognition and learning, interactions between various types of knowledge have sometimes been ignored and "strategy research often fails to consider the influence of subjects' domain knowledge on strategy use" (Alexander et al. 1991: 321).

### **1.1. Knowledge about writing**

Writers' diverse sources of knowledge about writing have been described to occupy an important position in various writing process models. As one of the most referred writing process models, Hayes and Flower's cognitive writing process model (1980) identified three major groups of constraints on composing: the demand for integrated knowledge, written text and rhetorical problem. They claim that though knowledge is generally the resource writers draw on in the long-term memory for composition, knowledge itself could become a constraint on the process when it is not in an acceptable form. "When confronting a new or a complex issue, writers must often move from a rich array of unorganized, perhaps even contradictory perceptions, memories, and propositions to an integrated notion of just what it is they think about the topic" (Flower & Hayes 1980a: 34). In this process model, writers' knowledge stored in the long-term memory includes those of topic, audience and writing plans.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) formulated two types of composing process models, one the knowledge-telling model for young and immature writers and the other the knowledge-transforming model for expert writers. Both models recognize content knowledge and discourse knowledge as the two important sources of knowledge writers draw on to generate ideas and attend to discourse requirements.

In writing process research, the interactions among online cognitive strategies and writers' knowledge as topic and genre knowledge have received researchers' attention and some studies (Kellogg 1987; Olive & Kellogg 2002; Olive 2004) have found that the writer's extensive topic knowledge gives rise to lower cognitive effort and affects the writing process.

In a review article, McCutchen (2000) explained how multiple sources of knowledge are coordinated during writing processes under working memory constraints and she presented a developmental account of writing expertise. Writers' genre knowledge and topic knowledge are reported to be important sources of knowledge to distinguish novice and expert writers.

ESL/EFL writing research indicates various results about composing processes and cognitive strategies underlying diverse task types or tasks with different topics: different amount of L1 use in narration and argumentation (Wang & Wen 2002; Woodall 2002); various strategy uses with culture topics (Zamel 1982; Manchon et al. 2000); more rescanning of already produced text (Raimes 1985) and more high-level problem solving episodes (Cumming 1989) in the completion of argumentation over narrative; no pausal differences (Miller 2000) and qualitatively similar restructuring strategy (Roca De Larios et al. 1999) in argumentation and narration tasks; students wrote more and with greater fluency and satisfaction when their writing involved them personally, while they wrote with less facility when the writing was more objectified.

In sum, though the importance of various sources of writers' knowledge in composition has long been recognized (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987; Flower & Hayes 1980a), writing research "has only touched upon" the knowledge about writing (Schoonen & Glopper 1996: 88) and this line of study is greatly limited in its scope of subjects and knowledge categories. First, compared with the attention given to the influence of topic/content knowledge and genre knowledge upon composition, little attention is paid to writers' knowledge about writing such as knowledge of discourse conventions, knowledge of audience and knowledge of writing plans which are stored in writers' long-term memory in Hayes and Flower's cognitive writing process model (1980). Second, there have been few studies of Chinese EFL learners' knowledge of English writing. Therefore, a descriptive examination of Chinese university EFL students' knowledge about writing process and product is warranted.

## 1.2. Studies on writers' knowledge of writing

In this section, a few relevant studies will be introduced in greater detail. In the case study of a longitudinal documentation of one undergraduate's writing development in historical writing, Beaufort (2004) established a conceptual model which contains five key areas of domain-specific knowledge that expertise writers must draw on in developing disciplinary writing.

	<i>DEFINING FEATURES</i>
Discourse-community knowledge	Knowledge of overarching goals for communication; underlying values; and meta-discourses of the discipline.
Subject-matter knowledge	Knowledge of specific topics, central concepts, and appropriate frames of analysis for documents. Also, critical-thinking skills to apply, manipulate, & draw from subject-matter knowledge for rhetorical purposes.
Genre knowledge	Knowledge of standard genres used in the discipline and features of those genres: rhetorical aims, appropriate content; structure & linguistic features
Rhetorical knowledge	Knowledge of the immediate rhetorical situation: needs of a specific audience and specific purpose(s) for a single text.
Writing-process knowledge	Knowledge of how to get discipline-specific writing tasks accomplished (metaknowledge of cognitive processes in composing and phases of writing projects).

Table 1. Five knowledge domains in disciplinary writing expertise (Beaufort 2004: 148).

During the course of four observations, a distinguishable gain in students' subject and discourse knowledge was detected while other types of knowledge were seen the least development. This study shed light on the developmental trend of students' domain knowledge in writing in a natural context.

Schoonen and Gloper (1996) made an attempt to probe the relation between student writers' knowledge about writing process and product and their writing performance. In their study, 9<sup>th</sup> grade student writers were instructed to write an essay to provide advice on what constitutes a good composition. Students' compositions were coded according to a preset scheme and accordingly their knowledge about what constitutes a good composition and how to write it was revealed. Findings show that overall these students have relatively more declarative knowledge (knowing what amounts to a good composition) than procedural knowledge (knowing how to proceed to write). The study also indicates a link between certain aspects of writers' declarative knowledge and writing proficiency.

Victori (1999) conducted a qualitative evaluation about to what extent metacognitive knowledge may influence student writers' writing approach, namely the writing processes and strategies they employ during writing. Two effective and two less effective student writers were chosen to verbalize the writing process while writing an argumentative essay. These students also attended an interview about their knowledge of writing. The comparison between the think-aloud protocols and interview data suggests that there is a difference between effective student writers' employment of metacognitive knowledge and strategies when composing and indicates that less effective students' poor writing performance is attributable to the differences already mentioned between metacognitive knowledge and cognitive strategy uses.

In short, the extant literature shows a positive link between writers' knowledge of writing and their writing performance and development. Building upon these studies, the current investigation takes Chinese university EFL students as subjects and attempts to probe their knowledge of English writing.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Subjects

This study is part of a larger project which aims to examine the linguistic features in English writing by Chinese university English majors. 25 students in the project were randomly chosen from a larger cohort of 90 participants to take a discourse-based interview. These 25 interviewees were taken as subjects for the current investigation. They are junior students

majoring in Business English in a Chinese university. Most of the students age between 20 and 21 and the average age is 20.4. They have been studying English for 9 to 13 years.

## 2.2. Writing performance

Students were asked to write a timed essay in the classroom. The instruction for the writing goes as follows:

*Some people say that the Internet provides people with a lot of information and much convenience. Others think access to so much information creates problems and brings potential troubles. What is your opinion? You are given 40 minutes to write a 250-word argumentative essay with specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.*

Their writing was scored first independently according to the official TEM (Test for English Majors, a nation-wide test for university English majors in China) writing rating rubric by two EFL professionals in the university who are experienced English writing raters. Then they met to fix the final score for each piece of writing. The score distribution of these writings is illustrated in the following table.

<i>SCORE</i>	<i>FREQUENCY</i>	<i>%</i>
7	2	8.0
8	5	20.0
9	3	12.0
10	3	12.0
11	3	12.0
12	2	8.0
13	4	16.0
14	3	12.0
Total	25	100.0

Table 2. Distribution of students' written performance.

## 2.3. Discourse-based interview data

Writers' knowledge about writing in their long-term memory is diverse and the most frequently discussed knowledge includes knowledge of audience, knowledge of discourse conventions and knowledge of writing plans which have been proved to be essential to the success of writing performance (Flower & Hayes 1980a; Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987). The current study focuses on these three types of knowledge.

To elicit data about students' knowledge about writing, every student was invited to participate in a discourse-based interview which took place within 48 hours of writing. It is reported that a 95% accuracy in recall could be achieved if a discourse-based interview takes place within two days of the event (Uysal 2008). For the sake of ease and clarity, both the interviewer and interviewees spoke Chinese during the interview process.

The following questions were developed to probe students' knowledge in above-mentioned areas:

1. Did you plan or outline before you started to write? How? Please describe in detail.
2. While you were writing, did you imagine an audience for your writing (or who did you think you were writing to)?  
If yes, who was it? How did this audience impact your writing?  
If no, why you were not imagining an audience for your writing?
3. What do you think makes good argumentative writing in English? Please explain.

I conducted the interview and recorded all interview sessions. Each session lasted about 15-20 minutes. Finally, I obtained a total of 8-hour recording and transcribed it verbatim.

### 3. Results

I studied the transcriptions carefully and identified various themes according to three knowledge categories, namely the knowledge of audience, knowledge of discourse conventions and knowledge of writing plans. The transcriptions were coded under each knowledge category and counted their occurrences.

#### 3.1. Knowledge of audience

Students' responses to the question 'Who did you think you were writing to?' varied a lot and a careful examination of the transcriptions helps identify four categories of audience: *explicit readers as teachers or raters*, *implicit readers as teachers or raters*, *readers as others* and *no readers at all*. The four categories will be elaborated in detail with examples from student writers' responses.

The first category, *explicit readers as teachers or raters*, means that students are explicitly aware that the readers are raters or course teachers and bear this reader in mind during the process of writing. Altogether 5 students fall into this category.

- (1) It is you [the teacher who is the reader of this article]. Before writing, you should think who will be your readers. If writing a professional article, you might use many professional terms while for scientific publicity, of course you shouldn't use these professional terms. It is of utmost importance to think about audience. (EW113789)
- (2) To you, the teacher; [...] you should be aware of your position whatever you are doing, including your viewpoints. Different positioning will influence your perspective and depth. (EW113796)

A total of 15 students belong to the second category, *implicit readers as teachers or raters*, which accounts for the greatest proportion of participants (60%). These students did not keep the reader in mind consciously during the process of writing, but subconsciously they wrote for the raters or course teachers. They normally didn't keep "teacher-as-reader" at the surface level to produce their writing every time, but the default "teacher-as-reader" has shaped or impeded their way of thinking and writing.

- (3) [I write] normally for teachers; certainly there are [influences upon our writing by thinking of audience]: we must abide by formal requirements, [it is] not possible [to write] according to your own wishes. (EW113795)
- (4) Subconsciously it is for teachers [...] normally it is for teachers.[...] Once I learn writing in the school, the reader is the teacher. I will be restrained from explaining much for some viewpoints if I know I am writing for teachers. (EW113804)

Students reported that as they had teachers or raters as readers, they could write simply by just following teachers' advice on how to write, including the structure, diction and tone; this would often secure them a good mark. However, students also expressed their dissatisfaction for this practice. They complained that they didn't reveal their true feelings in their writing and they wrote like the "Ba Gu Wen" (eight-legged essay: a form of essay writing in the imperial examination to select civil servants in ancient China. It is known for its rigid requirement for the structure). Sometimes, even worse, "teacher-as-reader" caused considerable stress.

- (5) I thought the reader must be teachers and I should write in a formal way, more like Ba Gu Wen (eight-legged essay) [...] (EW113786)
- (6) I would imagine how teachers read this article [...] particularly for CET4/6 writing, I would put the most advanced vocabulary at the first and last paragraph [...] [I would] think about the choice of words and phrases and how teachers read these. .. for this article, it is horrible [when I] think how teachers

[will read my writing]; I try to write a better article to get a high score [...] because I know the only reader is the teacher. (EW113794)

Then comes the third category, *readers as others*, which means that students treated others as readers instead of raters or course teachers. 2 students fall into this category. In example (7), the student explicitly stated that he wrote for himself and according to his own standards while in example (8), the student preferred to write like a journalist.

- (7) [I wrote] for myself. While writing, I normally require it to be clear in line of thinking, correct in organization. It would be better if the writing could be complex. I prefer long sentences. It is Ok since I am satisfied. [...] [My writing is] clear in idea development and logical in paragraphing. It is Ok if I think it is Ok. ... (EW113803)
- (8) While I am writing, I normally imagine a reader who is quite formal. I hope my writing would look like news report, even for my diary writing. So, I don't care about who is the reader. I don't write like a fairy story writer for children or a scholar for academic purpose. (EW113785)

The remaining three students fall into the fourth category, *no readers at all*. These students claimed that they seldom thought about the issue of audience in the process of writing. It seems that they don't have this awareness at all but were just writing for writing's sake.

- (9) No, [I] seldom think about audience while writing; [...] [There is] not much influence upon my writing as far as audience is concerned. If [there is] nothing special to say about a topic, no matter who the reader is, I will not write much. (EW113802)

In short, 25 students in the study possessed different level of audience awareness in writing process. However, they unanimously agreed on the extensive impact of readers upon the written product. First, the style or tone of their writing would be different for different readers. It could be formal and less emotional if written for raters or teachers and different if written for friends.

- (10) Yes, this imagined reader would influence our writing. [...] Linguistic style would be quite monotonous [if written for teachers or raters] [...] [If written] for friends, language would be more fashionable and colloquial. (EW113788)
- (11) If written for teachers, the tone and emotion would be common, not personal, because if you write in a way different from the norm [which teachers or raters would expect you to write], it will be risky. (EW113799)

Second, the image of “teacher-as-reader” could exert a great influence upon student writers’ choices of diction.

- (12) While writing diary, I can use whatever vocabulary I like; while writing for teachers, I just dare not use many words though I am sure these words are correct, I am just afraid of using words in a wrong way. [...] then I just use those words teachers have recommended as correct. (EW113797)

Third, student writers employed very limited approaches to textual structures if written for “teacher-as-reader”. They tended to write in a fixed way for raters’ sake of easy scoring. However, student writers expressed their dislike of this structuring.

- (13) With teachers as readers [I just] follow teachers’ advice to use the tripartition structure in a traditional way. (EW113787)
- (14) I think my writing will look like Ba Gu Wen (eight-legged essay). It is teachers who show us exemplar argumentative essays. They told us that in the first paragraph we need to pick up one viewpoint from some controversial ones. In the following paragraphs, then they would require us to elaborate the chosen viewpoint with examples. Particularly, teachers would normally instruct us to begin each paragraph with a topic sentence before expanding it with specific examples. Finally, teachers would say

that the last paragraph is to summarize your viewpoint. That's it. We have fixed procedures to follow. The main work is to find examples and organize your language. (EW113783)

(15) Second, [ I employed] this structure because I thought my writing would be scored, and for your ease of scoring [I wrote in this way] [...] If not for your scoring, I would not use clear structures because I think it is quite rigid [...] I normally don't write in this way when I write on the internet freely [because] it is mainly for expressing ideas. (EW113789)

In sum, the majority of students reported that they considered teachers/raters as the default readers and this reader influenced their writing, including linguistic, structural and stylistic aspects. Still, few students thought that they nurtured this kind of audience awareness and few regarded others instead of teachers/raters as their readers. The following figure shows the distribution of these categories.

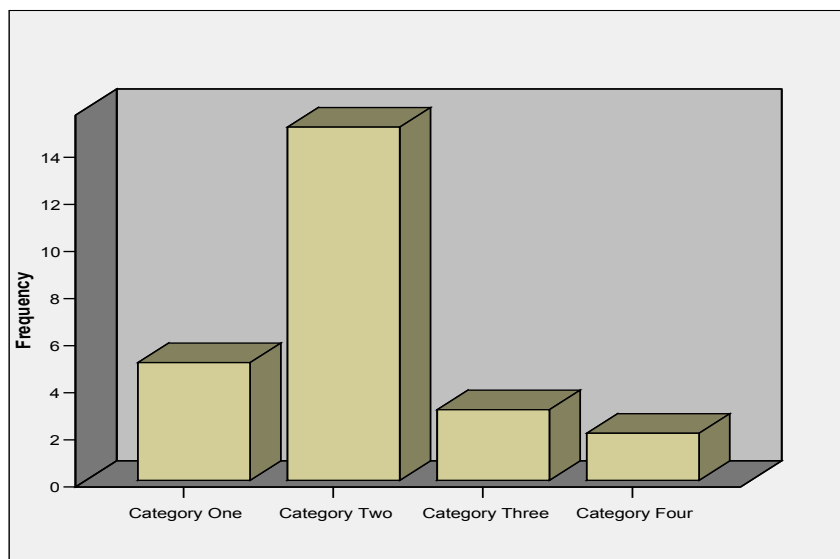


Figure 1. Reader category reported by student writers. (Category one: explicit readers as teachers or raters. Category two: implicit readers as teachers or raters. Category three: readers as others. Category four: no readers at all)

### 3.2. Knowledge of discourse conventions

Based on Schoonen and Gloppe's (1996) coding scheme addressing students' knowledge of writing conventions and process, I coded students' responses to the second question 'What do you think is good argumentative writing in English?' and the third question 'Did you plan or outline before you started to write? How?' respectively.

Overall, five categories were identified from students' responses to what constitutes good English argumentative writing. These categories deal with the Content, Organization, Expression and Rhetoric of English argumentative writing and few other aspects which altogether amount to 103 occurrences. The percentage of their occurrences is illustrated below.

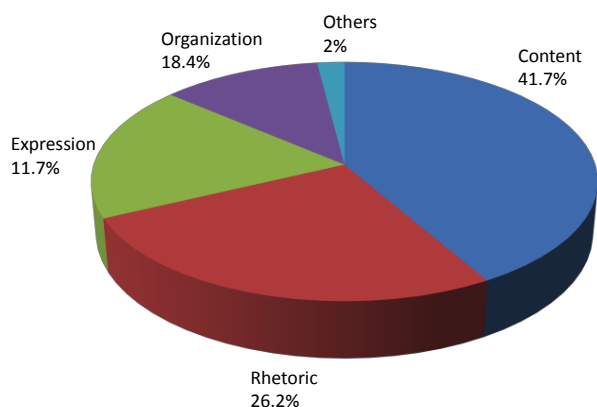


Figure 2. Five categories of students' knowledge of English argumentative writing.

### 3.2.1. Content

A total of 43 occurrences (41.7%) was devoted to the discussion of content in argumentative writing. These occurrences are mainly concerned with viewpoints in the writing (26 occurrences or 25.2%) and subsequent supporting materials (16 occurrences or 15.5%). These students said that for good English argumentative writing, a clear statement of the writer's stance on the issue under discussion is of the utmost importance and ample relevant supporting materials are needed for a successful elaboration of the writer's stance.

### 3.2.2. Rhetoric

Rhetoric in writing attracts the second greatest proportion of occurrences (total of 27 occurrences or 26.2%). Students believed that good English argumentative writing should be strong in logic (11 occurrences or 10.7%), clear in reasoning (8 occurrences or 7.8%) and sometimes both sides of the issue need to be touched (3 occurrences or 2.9%). Overall, the purpose is to enhance the persuasion of the argumentation (5 occurrences or 4.9%).

### 3.2.3. Organization and expression

Compared with attention paid to the content and rhetoric, less is given to its *organization* (total of 19 occurrences or 18.4%) and *expression* (total of 12 occurrences or 11.7%). Students thought that a good piece of English argumentative writing should have a clear and balanced structure with introduction, body and conclusion (8 occurrences or 7.8%). It is also wise to have the writer's stance presented at the beginning of the text (6 occurrences or 5.8%) and a topic sentence for each paragraph (4 occurrences or 3.9%).

### 3.2.4. Other categories

In contrast to the attention students paid to the major categories, there are few comments on language use in English argumentative writing. According to the interview data, students believed that the use of language itself couldn't make English argumentative writing distinguishable from other types of writing. No grammatical mistakes (3 occurrences or 2.9%), correct diction (2 occurrences or 1.9%), the use of simple words (2 occurrences or 1.9%), idioms (1 occurrence or 1%), conjunctions (1 occurrence or 1%) and beautiful language (1 occurrence or 1%) are some of the ways to produce good argumentative writing. In addition, critical thinking (1 occurrence or 1%) and independent thinking (1 occurrence or 1%) are also mentioned as important for good English argumentative writing.

## 3.3. Knowledge of writing plans

Planning occupies an important position in writing process (Flower & Hayes 1980a) and involves various sub-processes (Sasaki 1996, 2002, 2004). According to the interview data,



24 out of the 25 students reported that they would normally plan before starting to write. Careful examination of the transcriptions shows that there are three outstanding features in their reported planning behaviors, namely global planning to settle their stances, drafting to help fix the structure, and brainstorming to search for ideas.

### *3.3.1. Global planning (46 occurrences, i.e. 58%)*

24 out of the 25 students described that they would normally plan before starting to write. The planning stage ranged from 1 minute to 15 minutes within a time limitation of 40 minutes. Global planning here refers to planning activities which are not concerned with specific expression and rhetoric issues but thematic ones.

The 24 students who did planning chose to adopt a clear stance on controversial issues before any substantial writing. This finding echoes with the result in the previous section about students' knowledge of discourse conventions, for these students believed that the most important element in good argumentative writing was the clear presentation of the writer's stance on the issue being discussed.

Apart from determining the main idea in their writing, most students still went further to search for supporting viewpoints to the main idea (17 occurrences or 21%). Some students reported to plan the structure (5 occurrences or 6.3%) of their writing.

### *3.3.2. Drafting*

Drafting here means scratching or outlining on the paper what comes to the writer's mind before writing the whole essay. In the current study, students were given an extra blank sheet for drafting besides the writing sheet. 12 out of the 25 students have reported to have the habit of drafting before writing. The examination of the 12 drafts showed that these students paid particular attention to the structure of their writing and sketched structural arrangement for each paragraph. Also, these students outlined the main supporting ideas for each paragraph.

### *3.3.3. Brainstorming (12 occurrences, i.e. 15%)*

The final notable category of planning identified from students' interview data is brainstorming which means planning for specific expressions. Some students recalled that they had brainstormed to get specific examples to support their viewpoints (10 occurrences or 12.5%). However, due to the time pressure, most students chose to write the text immediately after determining the main point during the global planning stage.

## **4. Discussion**

This study identified four categories of audience in the process of writing and on most of the occasions, the majority of student writers (80%), category one and two in this study, regarded their teachers as readers, which is widely accepted by previous research (Victori 1999; Casanave 2004; Wang 2004) and proves the uniqueness of school-sponsored writing, namely the shared knowledge between the student-writers, their target audience and the teacher-evaluator (Sengupta 1999). Wang (2004) suggests that within an exam-oriented environment, Chinese EFL students write mainly for the sake of completion of course requirements and examinations, and the target readers are exclusively either their teachers or external examiners. Students "do not write for real communication, and accordingly, it is hard for them to imagine and keep in mind a potential audience throughout the writing process" (Wang 2004: 243).

Consequently, educators and researchers expressed a pessimistic view of audience awareness raising or education in writing classroom. Berkenkotter (1981) indicated long ago that school writing "demands that the student write for a single authority, the teacher. To this

authority, the student must demonstrate *her* authority on a given subject. Small wonder that researchers have found students to be topic bound. School writing stifles the development of audience representation because it precludes its necessity” (Berkenkotter 1981: 396). Casanave (2004) also echoed in a similar way that in school settings, particularly in Far Eastern EFL writing classroom, efforts to advocate students to write for ‘real audience’ other than teachers might not be appropriate because the “writing teacher is ordinarily the bottom-line reader and evaluator” and “students are not easily deceived into dismissing the all-powerful teacher as their main reader” (Casanave 2004: 159).

However, students in this study seem to have a different understanding of potential audience awareness raising activities. The majority of interviewees agreed on the importance of audience upon writing process and indicated that they would certainly change their writing for different audiences. Also different from Victori’s (1999) finding, which showed that the protocols from the four student subjects in her study “provided little evidence of concern for audience” (Victori 1999: 544), the current investigation revealed that altogether 7 students from category one and category four reported that they were either consciously aware of the presence of teacher-as-reader during the writing process or consciously saw themselves or journalist professionals as their readers. I therefore believe that student writers will benefit from audience awareness raising in writing classes if a systematic and explicit teaching programme is carried out. Ruan’s (2005) study provided a tentative and partial testimony to this belief. He conducted a longitudinal study about Chinese university EFL students’ metacognitive growth in composition. His study indicated that after metacognitive instruction in writing classroom for about 4 months, students were found to have a changed concept of audience for their writing, that is, their writing was no longer teacher-oriented but imbued with a sense of peer readership (Ruan 2005: 190). More studies are therefore needed to develop a plausible audience awareness raising programme and to document its effect.

For good English argumentative writing, advice on the content attracted the most attention (43 occurrences, 41.7%). 22 students out of 25 (88%) reported one or more pieces of advice on valuing content, such as the clear statement of stance and suitable supporting examples. Victori (1999) reported a similar finding from the two successful student writers’ metacognitive knowledge about a good text. In her study, “good and interesting content, clarity of ideas” were listed as some of the characteristics of a good text by two successful student writers (Victori 1999: 541). On the other hand, the two poor writers in her study seemed to have very restricted knowledge about what was a good text. Schoonen and Gloppe’s (1996) study reported a different picture. In their investigation about students’ view about how a good text should look, a large proportion of advice was given to the organization (20%), mechanics and grammar (27%) instead of the content (9%). This discrepancy might be associated with the different genre and subjects discussed in both the current and Victori’s (1999) study and Schoonen and Gloppe’s (1996), with argumentative writing by university students in the former and the letter writing by high-school students in the latter which makes comparison difficult.

This study showed that only one student out of 25 reported that they wrote without planning while the other 24 students claimed that they would certainly spend some time ranging from one minute to more than 10 minutes on planning before writing. Half of those planners drafted on the page and made a rough outline about the main structure and main ideas. The rest 12 students preferred mental planning without a written plan. All these planners demonstrated a sense of what Ruan calls “self-regulatory” writing: “formulating a goal, narrowing down a subject, and evaluating the appropriateness of content against purpose” (2005: 195).

Victori’s (1999) findings about student writers’ knowledge of writing strategies made the discussion more controversial. The two good writers made an outline or mental plan before writing and linked their writing process to the context and purpose. The two poor writers in her study did not make an initial plan at all and preferred to “improvise and write as if I were

speaking” (Victori, 1999: 546), which was labeled as a ‘writing-as-telling’ strategy by Ruan (2005: 195).

Differences in the findings regarding student writers’ knowledge about discourse conventions and writing plans might have something to do with the student subjects themselves and the educational context they are in. Firstly, different from Victori’s (1999) study with a good-poor difference in students’ writing ability, the subjects’ writing ability in the current study would be regarded as medium-high level as indicated by the average of 10.48 out of a total of 15. There seems to be a link between students’ good writing capacity and their understanding of the characteristics of good argumentative text and the writing process as well. In the current study, these student writers have a good idea of what constitutes good argumentative writing and how to plan in a timed condition. In the end, their writing seems to receive favorable scoring as indicated by the relatively high average score.

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. D
SCORE	25	7	14	10.48	2.330

Table 3. Descriptive results of students’ writing performance.

Secondly, students’ educational background and current writing instruction may be responsible for differences in the findings regarding students’ knowledge about discourse conventions and writing plans. This investigation took place in a top university in China and these students had been admitted into the university due to their outstanding performance in the College Entrance Exam. The English Writing Experience Questionnaire indicated that they practised argumentative writing extensively because this is the normal genre in the College Entrance Exam. They also reported that they practised this type of writing the most and have a habit of writing argumentative essays by simply following teachers’ advice. The Questionnaire showed that a clear presentation of the main idea and provision of powerful supporting material are among the most valued elements in writing classes.

#### 4.1. Implications for EFL writing pedagogy

In view of the findings in the study, I propose two approaches to improve L2 writing instruction. Firstly, a genre approach to L2 writing instruction. A genre is defined as a “staged goal-oriented social process” (Martin 2009: 13). In L2 writing instruction context, teachers pay excessive attention to correct grammar and expression while ignoring the social aspect of writing, such as purpose and audience (Mohan & Lo 1985; You 2004). For the genre of argumentative writing, the writer is expected to take a position on the issue debated. Cooper opposed ‘all-purpose’ approaches to teaching writing and advocated the following genre-specific approach to argumentative writing instruction (Cooper, 1999: 31):

- Genre-specific criteria: Taking a Position on an Issue
- Asserts a clear position on the issue*
- Gives specific reasons for holding the position*
- Supports each reason with personal experience, examples, statistics, or by quoting authorities*
- Provides readers with new, surprising ways to think about the issue*
- Shows an understanding of opposing views*
- Anticipates readers’ objections and questions*
- Sequences the argument in a logical step-by-step way*

Of course, this guidance on argumentative writing is definitely not fixed, on the contrary, it demonstrates how genre-specific approach to teach writing works. As Kay and Dudley-Evans summarized, “it is communicative purpose which brings any genre into being, shaping the ‘schematic’, or ‘beginning-middle-end’ structure of the discourse, and influencing choices of content and style” (1998: 309).

Second, metacognition instruction is needed to enhance student writers' awareness of the specific knowledge in writing, such as knowledge of the writer himself, task and strategy which have been classified by many scholars (Flavell 1979; Wenden 1998). Empirical studies (Ruan 2005; Wu 2008) have also produced positive results of metacognitive knowledge training in the improvement of student writers' writing performance.

In fact, the genre-approach in teaching writing can be combined together with the process approach enabling students to "combine knowledge about the genre product with the opportunity to plan, draft, revise, and edit work, as well as provide the opportunity for greater interaction" (Kay & Dudley-Evans 1998: 312 ).

## 5. Conclusion

Drawing on writing process theories, this study investigated 25 Chinese university EFL student writers' knowledge about writing, specifically their knowledge about audience, discourse conventions and writing plans based on interview data. The study found that though these student writers held various level of audience awareness, they predominantly saw teachers or external examiners as default readers; they understood what constitutes good argumentative writing and how to plan as well, and by doing so, their writings generally received favorable scoring (indicated by the relatively high average score).

Though the study revealed a partial picture of Chinese university EFL students' awareness of audience, discourse conventions and metacognitive strategies about writing, due to the small number of subjects and the particular educational background, it is not possible to generalize from these findings, and so they need to be interpreted critically. More studies are therefore needed to examine writers at different level of language proficiency and from different educational background.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors, two anonymous reviewers, and Dr. Liu Li and Angela Evans for their insightful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article. Of course, all errors remain my own.

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