

Variations in the Teaching of Writing in the United States and China

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on English writing courses in three distinct contexts, universities in China, Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in the United States, and English writing courses for undergraduate students in the United States (U.S.), aiming to foster transparency and collaboration within the English language writing teaching community. While writing courses at universities in China and IEPs initially focus on foundational writing skills before transitioning to more advanced tasks such as research papers, U.S. writing courses emphasize sophisticated writing abilities and critical thinking from the outset. Assessment criteria varied, with courses at the universities in China prioritizing language accuracy, IEPs focusing on lower-order writing concerns, and U.S. writing courses emphasizing higher-order skills. Despite these differences, a developmental approach to assessment, emphasizing student growth and improvement over time, emerged as a common thread. Writing instructors across all contexts valued multiple drafts, revisions, and holistic grading in fostering student development. Additionally, this study highlights the importance of clear communication, organization, and critical thinking in student writing, irrespective of context.

Keywords: L2 writing, composition, writing curriculum, writing syllabus, EFL, intersectionality, writing assessment

Introduction

As instructors of English writing courses in the United States, our student body consists of a myriad of students with varying backgrounds. As we engage with the English linguistic abilities of our multilingual students, we are interested in the students' linguistic background, the previous learning circumstances that preceded the students' experiences in our courses, and we value what we can gain from that knowledge. Additionally, we value a spirit of collaboration knowing that as English language writing instructors globally, we are a community with a shared practice and desire for greater transparency and collaboration between our varied teaching contexts.

In that spirit, this study investigates the curricular practices of English language instructors in three mediums: English writing courses in China, English writing courses in Intensive English Programs (IEP) in the United States, and English writing courses for undergraduate students at universities in the United States. Recognizing that writing instructors in these contexts have valuable experiences and knowledge of the curricula of the courses, we sought out instructors in these contexts for their insight. Though we came to the task with our individual experiences teaching in one or more of these contexts, we hoped that this study could be a conduit for further conversations between these contexts and promote the benefits of a shared community of practice.

Before we began our research, we acknowledged that each of the contexts has an established though evolving practice based on different though interrelated theories: composition theory, language acquisition theory, and sociocultural theory. We also acknowledged that our own experiences teaching in these contexts influenced our perception of how writing is taught

while also recognizing that the writing students in each of our contexts are diverse with diverse backgrounds, expectations, and goals.

Literature Review

Composition Theory

Composition theory, developed in the academic field of composition studies, focuses on the study and teaching of writing, rhetoric, and the processes involved in composing texts.

Drawing from linguistics, psychology, education, communication, and other related disciplines to understand how writing is learned, practiced, and taught, composition theorists study a wide range of topics, including writing processes, rhetorical theory, literacy studies, and the use of technology in writing instruction. Some key concepts include process writing, rhetoric, genre theory, critical pedagogy, and multimodal composition. Process writing emphasizes the importance of multiple drafts, revision, and recursive writing processes in the development of proficient writing. Rhetoric looks at the principles of persuasive communication and how they apply to discourse. Genre theory investigates how diverse types of genres of writing function within specific contexts and communities. Critical pedagogy explores the social and political dimensions of writing instruction and is concerned with issues of literacy education, power, access, and identity. Finally, multimodal composition looks at the integration of various modes of communication, such as images, sound, and digital media, into the writing process.

Some influential scholars in composition theory include Bitzer, Elbow, and Burke. Bitzer (1968) is known particularly for his essay “The Rhetorical Situation,” which studies the dynamic between audience, purpose, and context within rhetorical acts. Elbow (1998) is well-known for his contributions to process-oriented writing pedagogy and emphasizes the importance of freewriting, feedback, and the development of a writer’s individual voice. Burke is known for his

book *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969), which is a rich text that investigates the intricacies of language, motives, and human communication. This work encourages readers to consider the underlying motives behind discourse and the symbolic nature of language in shaping human interaction.

Second Language Acquisition Theory

Second language acquisition (SLA) theory draws on linguistics, education, psychology, and sociocultural studies to understand how people learn to write in an additional language and how teaching practices can best support that process. Some key concepts in second language writing include language transfer, cultural rhetoric, multimodal writing, feedback practices, translanguaging, and critical language awareness. Language transfer refers to how learners' first-language structures influence their writing in a second language. Cultural rhetoric considers how cultural norms and values shape the ways writers organize, express, and support ideas. Multimodal writing involves composing texts that blend written language with images, audio, or other media. Feedback practices focus on the different ways teachers and peers respond to writing to promote rhetorical and linguistic development. Translanguaging highlights how multilingual writers draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning, while critical language awareness examines how language use reflects broader issues of power and identity.

Some influential scholars in the field of SLA theory include Canagarajah, Hyland, Ortega, Manchón, and Matsuda and Silva. Canagarajah (2011) focuses on the translanguaging practices of L2 writers and the sociopolitical dimensions of language learning. Hyland (2013, 2021) examines academic discourse and writer identity, emphasizing stance and engagement. Ortega (2018) highlights the global, longitudinal, and ecological nature of second language development, and Manchón (2017) illustrates how L2 writing develops across tasks, contexts,

and time. Complementing these perspectives, Matsuda and Silva (2005) provide foundational research insights for classroom instruction, shaping understandings of L2 writers' needs, process-oriented pedagogies, and the distinct disciplinary identity of second language writing. Additionally, Lightbown and Spada (2020) synthesize decades of research on cognitive, social, and instructional factors that influence additional language learning. Scholars have examined differences in rhetorical traditions, exam-driven writing cultures, process pedagogy adoption, and the shifting expectations of multilingual students (Li & Casanave, 2012; Zhang, 2016).

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory, rooted in the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), is a framework that emphasizes the role of social and cultural factors in the process of learning and cognitive development. Sociocultural perspectives draw on insights from psychology, linguistics, and education to understand how writers use literacy within specific communities. Some key concepts include the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), mediated action, collaborative learning, language as a cultural tool, and the role of social context in shaping writing development. The ZPD refers to the distance between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. Mediation describes the process through which human thinking and learning are shaped by cultural tools that structure how individuals interact with the world. Collaborative learning emphasizes how knowledge is constructed through social interaction, highlighting the role of dialogue, shared problem-solving, and joint engagement in developing understanding.

Some influential scholars in sociocultural theory include Lantolf and Thorne, Daniels, and Shooshtari and Mir. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) extend sociocultural theory to second language development, illustrating how multilingual writers grow through scaffolded interaction,

collaborative dialogue, and participation in authentic literacy practices. Daniels (2001) applies Vygotskian principles to pedagogy, demonstrating how guided participation and culturally responsive instruction support learners' access to valued literacy practices. Shooshtari and Mir (2014) further discuss sociocultural theory in L2 writing contexts by showing how peer and instructor scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development supports writing strategy use and writing quality development. These scholars deepen our understanding of writing as a socially situated, culturally mediated, and interaction-driven process.

Research Questions

As we thought about the curricular and cultural aspects of each context, we desired to learn more about assignments, course objectives, and assessment practices in each context. We also wanted to understand similarities and differences in teaching writing in these contexts as well as note themes and any pertinent variances between contexts. With that in mind, we had two overarching research questions.

1. What are the similarities and differences in curricular design specifically related to course objectives and assignments in the three contexts?
2. What qualities of writing do the instructors consider when evaluating writing?

Methods

Research Context

This research focused on three contexts for teaching writing: English writing courses taught at universities in China (context 1), advanced English writing courses taught in Intensive English Programs in the United States (context 2), and Rhetoric and Writing courses for undergraduate students in the United States (context 3).

Context 1

College students are from science-focused universities in China. Most students have learned English as a second language for 6 years before being admitted to the college, however, the English language learning is focused on reading comprehension and syntax. At the college level, English writing is a core course for college students. Normally, the instructors will teach a class of 40-50 students.

Context 2

IEP writing courses are provided to help international students meet the language requirements set by the university in the United States. The learning environment was in an English-speaking context. Most students have 3-6 years of English learning experience in their home countries, but writing for academic purposes was not a focus or was not introduced to them in their home countries. IEPs want to prepare students for academic courses; thus, basic writing requirements are a crucial objective in the IEP writing course. The IEP instructors usually teach a class of 10-15 students.

Context 3

Rhetorical and writing is a University Core Curriculum (UCC) course in an American university. Most of the students will be English-speaking students, with a few international students. The UCC course has a comprehensive set of objectives for the instructors to follow. Normally, the instructors teach a class of 25-35 students.

Participants

A total of nine English writing instructors participated in the study, with three instructors representing each of the above-mentioned contexts. The instructors from the Chinese universities all identified as bilingual speakers of Chinese and English. Their teaching of English writing

experience ranged from four to sixteen years, and all three had taught required writing courses at the university. The IEP instructors reported varied educational and linguistic backgrounds. Their teaching of English writing experience ranged from ten to thirty years in a variety of contexts in the United States. The rhetoric and writing instructors all identified as a native English speakers and taught in higher education settings. Together, these nine instructors provided a diverse and experienced sample representing three distinct instructional environments. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the three contexts. Table 2 provides demographic information of the 9 participants. Table 3 provides the pseudonym assigned to each participant and in which context they teach.

Table 1

Description of 3 English Language Writing Class Contexts

Course Name	Context	Required or elective	Average Age of Students	First Language of Students
English Writing	Universities in China	Required	18-20	Chinese
Level 6 Writing (advanced)	Intensive English Program/U.S. University	Elective	18-20	Non-English
Rhetoric and Writing	Undergraduate course/U.S. university	Required	18-22	English and non-English

Table 2

Participant Demographics by Instructional Context

Participant Group	Educational Background	Linguistic Identity	Years Teaching English Writing	Previous and Current Teaching Contexts
China University (n=3)	3 MA in Applied Linguistics	All 3 identified as bilingual (L1 Chinese, L2 English)	16 years; 8 years; 4 years	Chinese universities
Intensive English Program (n=3)	2 MA TESOL 1 PhD in English (Composition and Rhetoric)	2 identified as native English speakers; 1 identified as bilingual (German and English)	30 years; 16 years; 10 years	U.S. Middle school; high school; IEPs in the U.S, and U.S. universities
Rhetoric and Writing (n=3)	2 PhD in English (Rhetoric and Composition) 1 PhD in English (Literature)	All 3 identified as native English speakers	22 years; 10 years; 8 years	U.S. small liberal arts colleges, regional public universities, and community college

Table 3

Pseudonyms Assigned to Participants Aligned with Teaching Context

Universities in China	Intensive English Programs/U.S.	Composition courses/U.S.
Participants A, B, and C	Participants D, E, and F	Participants G, H, and I

Procedures

Participants were provided with open ended interview questions and asked to share the following artifacts: course syllabi, course resources, and sample course assignments. Interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform, and each audio was transcribed. Interview recordings lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. Part of the interview asked the participants to rate

three sample essays provided to them before the interview. The interviews were transcribed, and the artifacts were collected for analysis.

Data Analysis

We approached the data using a constructivist grounded theory methodology, drawing on Charmaz's (2024) iterative strategies for qualitative analysis. After transcribing the interviews and gathering all syllabi and course documents, we spent time reading through materials several times to gain a broad sense of the data. Throughout this process, we kept notes to capture early ideas, questions, and patterns. The coding began with line-by-line coding, a process Charmaz describes as essential for staying close to participants' meanings and identifying actions or processes embedded in the data. These codes were intentionally descriptive and grounded directly in participants' words to avoid forcing premature categories onto the data.

As we moved into focused coding, we began comparing codes within and across the three instructional contexts. Following Charmaz's (2024) constant comparative method, we examined which initial codes were the most significant or representative of emerging patterns across interviews and syllabi. These stronger codes were refined, grouped, and expanded into broader analytic categories, with multiple returns to earlier transcripts as our understanding shifted. This recursive process of comparing, note taking, and refining continued until the categories stabilized, and we approached theoretical saturation.

From this process, three central themes emerged: (1) course learning objectives, (2) writing genres, and (3) assessment practices. These themes were not predetermined; they developed gradually as we compared interviews, syllabi, and memos. The final set of themes reflects both what participants emphasized in their descriptions of writing instruction and the curricular priorities documented in their course materials. These themes align with the study's theoretical

framework. The focus on learning objectives and genre expectations reflects composition theory's view of writing as a purposeful, process-oriented activity shaped by rhetorical and disciplinary conventions. Attention to assessment practices and language development resonates with SLA theory, which emphasizes how multilingual writers learn through feedback and scaffolding. These themes connect to sociocultural theory by showing how writing development is shaped through mediated interaction and culturally defined genre practices.

Results

Interview Questions about Course Curriculum

1. What are the outcomes/objectives for your writing course?
2. What type of writing assignments do you require in your course?

Course Objectives

The participants were asked about the course objectives in the interview and asked to provide their course syllabi, including the course objectives. Writing instructors from the universities in China stated that the course objectives focused on basic writing grammar and syntax (Participant A), writing in different genres and writing structure (Participant B), and a focus on logical and independent thinking (Participant C). Participants B and C noted that one main goal is to convert the student's practice of writing for the Chinese audience to writing for a broader global audience. Students are asked to learn about different global genres of writing to enlarge their own writing style. This list is a synthesis of the objectives from the writing class syllabi from Participants A, B, and C.

- Master basic knowledge of English writing, including grammar and syntax.
- Understand and express in English the concepts and terminology discussed in the textbook.
- Memorize and grasp the basic theories of English writing and master the requirements of different genres and styles of English writing.

- Explain personal views in a reasoned and well-founded manner based on one's own position.
- Write in a variety of genres, including short essays, descriptive, expository, argumentative, book reports, and abstract.
- Write with substance, correct views, and clear organization.

In the IEP writing courses, the overarching goal is to prepare students for academic-level writing in undergraduate or graduate-level courses. The primary objective of the IEP course includes writing an argumentative essay with appropriate sources (Participants D and E). Another objective includes paraphrasing and summarizing (Participant F). Students are asked to provide persuasive evidence in writing and include thoughtful and accurate evidence. Critical thinking is another objective mentioned in the IEP course (Participant E). This list is a synthesis of the objectives from the writing class syllabi from Participants D, E, and F.

- Write an argumentative essay evaluating multiple ideas and values.
- Incorporate appropriate sources to support argument.
- Effectively paraphrase and summarize texts.
- Demonstrate vocabulary development, control of grammar, organization, idea development, and critical thinking.
- Organize writing to promote clarity and consistency of ideas.
- Follow guidelines given in class for structure and conventions in writing including following a pre-determined format and understanding and recognizing aspects of plagiarism.

In the composition courses, the objective is to train students to develop comprehensive writing abilities that can persuade and inform readers (Participant G). Composition instructors hope to instill the principles of rhetoric to apply in the student's everyday life (Participant H). Developing ideas involves peer support, providing reliable evidence, and thinking critically (Participant I). Additionally, there is an emphasis on individual and group work as well as writing with a variety of mediums (Participants G, H, and I). This list is a synthesis of the objectives from the writing class syllabi from Participants G, H, and I.

- Understand the rhetorical situation and employ it while writing in various genres.
- Compose texts using various media.

- Develop effective strategies of invention, drafting, and revision.
- Integrate primary and secondary research as appropriate to the rhetorical situation.
- Employ critical thinking in evaluation, speculation, analysis, and synthesis.
- Employ format, syntax, punctuation, and spelling appropriate to various rhetorical situations.
- Employ critical thinking in evaluation, analysis, and synthesis.

After reviewing the three sets of objectives, the writing classes at the universities in China focus on students' initial mastery of basic English writing knowledge, including understanding concepts and terminology, grasping theories, and expressing personal views coherently. It emphasizes foundational skills and understanding. The IEP objectives expand on the initial mastery and require students to develop advanced writing skills such as creating arguments, organizing ideas effectively, evaluating sources, incorporating them into writing, and understanding intellectual property. It emphasizes practical application and critical thinking. The composition courses in the U.S. require further advanced writing skills, including understanding persuasion, developing effective rhetorical strategies, composing texts in various media, integrating research, becoming critical readers, and demonstrating professionalism in writing. It emphasizes creativity, audience awareness, and collaboration.

Writing Genres

The writing instructors were asked about the type of writing assignments assigned to students. The question was open-ended and could include in-class writing assignments, drafting, and graded and un-graded assignments of any genre. We also reviewed each participant's syllabus, which contained information on the writing assignment genre. The responses demonstrated that writing assignments in the three contexts varied to some degree.

Writing Courses in China. The writing syllabi reflect a highly structured, skill-based approach to writing instruction that relies heavily on guided practice and teacher-led activities, a pattern reinforced throughout faculty interviews. Class sessions focus on foundational elements

such as sentence formation, paragraph construction, vocabulary use, and punctuation, supported by thinking questions, pre-class preparation, and small-group analysis of model texts. Instructors described a consistent emphasis on teaching paragraph patterns, such as cause-and-effect or time-sequence organization and reinforcing the expected structure of a topic sentence followed by supporting details. One syllabus noted that students complete 15 minutes of in-class writing to practice the specific rhetorical pattern introduced that day. The instructor then collects a sample of drafts, identifies common issues, and uses subsequent class time for collective error analysis, making teacher-led correction a central component of the course. Specific major writing assignments include reader response, narrative, an observational essay, and an argumentative essay.

Faculty also explained how writing assignments progress across levels. Participant B and C noted that in beginning level composition courses, assignments are intentionally “not so challenging, sentence writing or paragraph writing,” whereas advanced writing courses require “whole composition writing,” often centered on argumentation. Genre practice is explicitly structured across the curriculum; as Participant B explained, students are required to write “narration, exposition, argumentation and description.” Although extended writing projects are relatively rare, advanced students “might have some chances to do some project, like conduct a survey on this topic to get the material before they write the whole composition,” (Participant C) suggesting limited opportunities for process-based or research-informed writing. Writing development in this context is embedded in incremental, text-based, and error-focused activities designed to build linguistic accuracy, control of rhetorical patterns, and mastery of foundational writing skills rather than through long-form, process-oriented writing projects.

Writing Courses in IEPs. The course requirements as noted in the syllabi include writing a research paper and participating in timed writings. Additional homework assignments are given to practice specific writing skills. In-class activities consist of exercises from textbooks or assignments, reading sources, timed writings, journal entries, and discussions. Homework includes assigned readings, reflections, outlining papers, and developing essays piece by piece. The research paper focuses on factual content and source searching, moving away from personal opinions. The final exam prompts students with advance notice, but they are expected to produce a spontaneous first draft. Emphasis is placed on critical thinking and independent writing skills, encouraging students to demonstrate their real performance. The instruction covers various essay structures, including introductions, supporting ideas, and conclusions, with students developing each part gradually. Activities also involve creating outlines, devising hooks to engage readers, and searching for sources. Specific major writing assignments included a narrative, a cause-and-effect essay, and an argumentative research paper.

Faculty reinforced the structured nature of the IEP writing curriculum while highlighting daily writing practice, scaffolded instruction, and sustained work with academic genres. Participant D explained that the course “required a research paper and timed writings” confirming the emphasis on academic preparation reflected in the syllabi. Participant E described a classroom environment where writing occurs continuously, noting that “every day in class, students write something and discuss the writing.” Participant F also described a highly scaffolded approach to essay structure, emphasizing that students develop “introduction, supporting ideas, and conclusion alongside practice in outlining, generating hooks, and locating credible sources. Interview data portray an instructional environment that blends structured academic expectations with intensive daily practice, step-by-step scaffolding, and an emphasis

on building multilingual learners' rhetorical confidence, source-based writing skills, and readiness for mainstream university courses.

Composition Courses in the United States. The composition course instructors provided assignments in a range of writing genres. The instructors mentioned writing projects such as summaries, cause and effect analyses, compare essays, synthesis papers, in-class argument papers, out-of-class papers, and research papers. Reading assignments were also required, which included students engaged in reading for discussion, analysis, and response. Informal writing assignments were also mentioned. These assignments include journals, reading reflections, in-class writings, or smaller pieces intrinsic to major research projects. They serve to help students process course content and plan their course projects. Specific major writing assignments include the narrative essay, rhetorical analysis essay, argumentative research paper, and a multimodal rhetorical project.

Faculty interviews revealed a rhetorically diverse and process-oriented approach that moves students through a sequence of academic genres while cultivating broader rhetorical awareness. Participant H explained that students begin with summaries and then progresses to cause-and-effect and compare-and-contrast essays. Participant G emphasized helping students see writing as a social practice, noting that “arguments, research, and rhetoric are ubiquitous” and shape everyday interactions. Interestingly, Participant I shared that the peer review process was an assignment to build “confidence through practice.” Participant I focused on developing writing skills over completing projects indicating that the peer review process helps students understand the requirements of the assignment while working on confidence and sense of connection to purpose of the assignment. Instructional practice links diverse writing genres with

systematic scaffolding, reflective practice, and collaborative feedback, supporting students' growth in rhetorical flexibility.

The Research Paper. All contexts discussed the research paper as one type of writing assignment. All instructors in the writing courses at the universities in China spoke of a research paper or an argumentative paper. Participant A states that the culminating assignment is the argumentative essay after the student has had extensive instruction in paragraph design. Participant B discusses an observational research paper where the student is required to observe something in nature and discusses how they used their senses to observe which will lead to the student writing about their impressions. Participant C stated, "they have to conduct a survey on this topic to get the material before they write the whole composition.... and the advanced writing course, they're still mainly focused on the argumentative writing." Similarly, writing instructors in IEPs stated that the research paper was required: "the goal is to write a research paper, so students need to be able to make an argument and use sources" (Participant D); "students write a research paper... [the students] focus on facts and source searching; moving away from personal opinions" (Participant E); and "students need to produce academic research paper of 5-6 pages, including a certain number source" (Participant F). U.S. composition instructors mentioned a synthesis paper: "So we start out with a synthesis paper where they're kind of combining a couple of different sources, and then we have, again, an in-class argument paper and an out-of-class argument paper, and then a research paper" (Participant H). Participant G noted that "four or more writing projects, approximately three to four pages each that address different rhetorical situations" are required while Participant I defined those writing projects "such as narrative essay, rhetorical analysis essay, argumentative research, and multimodal rhetorical project." For all, the culminating essay focuses on finding resources, summarizing and synthesizing resources,

and using those resources to support writer positions. One difference of note is that in the writing courses at the university in China and the US IEP courses, the initial focus is on basic sentence structure and paragraph design, moving into one research paper. Though the U.S. composition courses indirectly focus on these items: “smaller pieces that lead to the major writing assignments, class writings, or smaller pieces intrinsic to major research projects” (Participant G), course time is spent on writing the entire essay, and in the case of our composition participants, four essays are required in one semester period.

Interview Questions about Assessment Practices

1. How do you assess your students' work?
2. What are three main qualities you look for in a qualified paper?

Assessment

The writing instructors provided insight into the assessment methods and practices of the courses. Overall, writing courses taught at universities in China rely on closed-book examinations and regular assessments, with a substantial portion of the grade coming from final examinations (Participants A, B, and C). The IEP and U.S. composition courses use a variety of assessment methods, including homework, research papers, quizzes, tests, and engagement in class activities (Participants D-I). For all courses, assessment criteria included essay structure, grammar, content, and critical thinking. Instructors use rubrics and holistic grading, focusing on both lower and higher-order concerns in writing. The importance of multiple drafts and revisions was also highlighted. The writing instructors were also given three writing samples before the interview and asked to evaluate each. Each writing sample demonstrated varying degrees of writing quality, and each was between 325-425 words. As part of the interview, the writing instructors were asked to provide verbal feedback for each writing sample.

Sample Writing 1. The responses show a range of perspectives on student writing, with some evaluators prioritizing language accuracy and others focusing more on the content and critical thinking aspects. Many respondents (Participants A, C, D, F, G, and I) mentioned issues with spelling and grammar. Participants C and D note that language issues, especially misspellings, can impede clear communication. There is a consensus about the importance of clear structure and organization in writing. Participants A, C, D, and H expressed concerns about the lack of clear paragraphing or organization in the writing sample. The lack of structure, as mentioned by Participants D and H, makes it hard for readers to follow the writer's main points.

The diversity in feedback and assessment criteria reflects different educational backgrounds and teaching philosophies among the respondents. The feedback ranges from critical analysis of weaknesses to constructive suggestions for improvement, indicating varied approaches to pedagogy and student development. Participants H and I offer more constructive advice, suggesting ways to improve the structure and clarity of the essays, while Participants A and D focus more on pointing out the flaws without much guidance on improvement.

Sample Writing 2. The writing instructors generally agreed on the importance of clear content and organized structure but differed in their assessment of how well the student achieves these. Participants A, C, D, E, F, G, and H noted issues with the clarity of the content and the organization of the essay. There is a shared concern about the lack of a clear thesis or argument, particularly in addressing the essay “prompt” directly. Several writing instructors (Participants C, G, and I) acknowledged language skills compared to the previous sample, particularly noting the absence of spelling mistakes.

The responses reflect varied educational priorities and perspectives: some focus on linguistic competence and clarity, others on argumentative structure and adherence to the

prompt. Participant H finds it hard to follow the idea, while Participant C and I appreciate the student's communicative ability and use of examples. Participants G and H focus on the essay's inability to make a clear claim. Participants A and G commented on problems with paragraph structure and coherence, while Participant I pointed out the organization of the paper into smaller passages for clarity.

Sample Writing 3. For this writing sample, there is a consensus on the improved structure and organization of the essay, with respondents appreciating the clear division and logical flow. Many respondents (Participants A, C, G, H, and I) recognize and appreciate the clear structure of the essay, noting the use of logical markers and a traditional essay format (introduction, body, and conclusion). Respondents recognize the writer's effort in language use and variety, though they note minor errors. Participants A, C, and D note the use of simple, understandable language and a wider range of vocabulary and grammatical patterns despite minor errors. Most writing instructors (Participants A, C, E, F, G, and H) comment on the content in terms of how well it addresses the prompt, with some noting the effective use of examples.

Writing instructors differ in their views on how effectively the essay addresses the prompt and the clarity and relevance of the content and examples used. Participants A and E critique the relevance and clarity of examples used, while Participants C and I appreciate the use of examples and coherence in expressing ideas. Participants D and H asked how well the essay responded to the prompt, while Participant I felt it responded more directly than the previous samples. Participants F and G express concerns about the persuasive strength of the essay, while Participants E and H note issues with the writer's understanding of key concepts (facts vs. ideas).

Table 4 synthesizes the major areas of feedback provided for each of the three writing samples. The table highlights broad patterns in how instructors assess content, organization, and language use, while also noting points of convergence and divergence across Chinese university faculty, U.S. Intensive English Program instructors, and U.S. first-year composition faculty.

Table 4

Summary of Cross-Context Evaluator Feedback Across Three Writing Samples

Writing Sample	Main Areas of Feedback	Points of Agreement	Points of Disagreement
Sample 1	language accuracy (spelling, grammar); lack of structure; unclear ideas; weak organization	spelling and grammar errors impede clarity (A, C, D, F, G, I); structure is weak or missing (A, C, D, H)	focus on identifying flaws (A, D); offer constructive suggestions (H, I)
Sample 2	difficulty addressing the prompt; unclear thesis; weak organization; variable content development	content and structure are unclear (A, C, D, E, F, G, H); concern about a missing or weak thesis (C, G, I)	some see language as improved (C, I) others see coherence issues (H, G)
Sample 3	clearer structure (introduction–body–conclusion); logical flow; improved language variety; varying views on argument strength	improved structure and clarity (A, C, G, H, I); logical markers and standard essay format	relevance of examples (A, E vs. C, I); evaluation of persuasive strength (F, G)

Evaluation of Composition: Desired Qualities

The research yielded interesting findings concerning the ideal qualities that instructors seek when evaluating papers. Specifically, it was common over all three categories of participants to underscore the importance of student growth and improvement over time, suggesting a more developmental approach to assessment. However, the writing instructors in China and the IEP instructors in the U.S. were more concerned with lower-order skills such as grammar, word choice, and spelling, while the U.S. writing instructors prioritized higher-order

skills such as sophisticated use of sources to support a claim, the rhetorical situation, critical thinking, and overall paper organization.

The instructors at the universities in China who participated in this study, all of them non-native English speakers teaching English composition, appear to have a dual focus on the ideal qualities that they look for in papers. The primary focus is lower-order skills such as vocabulary and sentence accuracy, and the secondary focus is on logical reasoning. The lower-order skills are ranked most important among participants teaching at the universities in China in this study. Participant A stated that in-class writing in their classroom focuses on language proficiency, with the goal being 80% accuracy. This instructor said that “the structure will be 25% and language will be 25%, I tend to focus on the language...[the] language will take around maybe 80%” (Participant A). Participant C argues the same point, that logical reasoning is important but emphasizes vocabulary and sentence accuracy, “I mean, the choice of vocabulary, the choice of sentence accuracy, diversity of sentence organization, logical reasoning, so on, so forth” are the most important qualities in a paper (Participant C).

However, it is important to note that all the participants in this group favor a more developmental approach to assessment, in which the emphasis is on lower-order skills at the beginning of the course but moves to an emphasis on higher-order skills by the end. One participant argues that the focus in paper assessment is more on the “big picture” things such as structure, organization, logical reasoning, and support of claims, but this emphasis comes after the new writers have mastered sentences, paragraphs, and topic sentences (Participant B). This participant states that they look for “just whether this student has a really good diction or has been really good master of freedom speech or the fluency, coherence and cohesive and things like that. But as to the essay writing, then we just look at all-around global structure, context,

thoughts” (Participant B). Therefore, the emphasis is on how students evolve as writers and on the importance of student growth and improvement over time, with a definite movement from lower-order concerns to higher-order concerns over the duration of the course.

The IEP instructors who participated in this study, all of whom are instructors in U.S. universities teaching English as a second language, echo the dual focus of the instructors who are teaching at universities in China, and they also echo the emphasis on lower-order writing concerns being the priority. Participant E starts with a focus on lower-order concerns such as “grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structures” (Participant E), with a movement toward higher-order concerns such as organization and critical thinking coming later in the course and with more support. Participant D claims that “structure, grammar...and then strong ideas” are most important in the evaluation of papers, “but fluency and source utilization are also important” (Participant D). The outlier here is Participant F, who states that higher-order skills are their priority in writing: “structures of the paper; cohesiveness of the writing, transition devices” are their main foci (Participant F). A broader assessment of IEP instructors would be necessary to establish the patterns of IEP paper grading more firmly, but the case studies here allow for the beginning of an understanding of the major differences in the teaching of early college-level composition.

Writing instructors in U.S. universities outside of IEP programs focus on more sophisticated, higher-order skills in their assessment of papers. When Participant G discusses paper evaluation, there is no mention of grammar, “I’m looking for the ability to think critically as they follow instructions, focus on sophisticated skills such as introduction strategy, understanding the audience and appealing to a specific audience, being able to make strong claims...and sophisticated use of sources with specific details for support” (Participant G).

Participants H and I echo these ideals: “Does the student have something worth saying? What is the claim? Is the paper organized to support the claim?” (Participant H). Participant I adds: “Most sophisticated skills are privileged: engaging reader interest, conveying ideas clearly, effective organization” (Participant I). Grammar and other lower-order skills are mentioned as valued, but at a much lower level. Participant H mentions “a focus on mechanics and spelling” but only after speaking at length about having a sophisticated claim, organization, and proper source support. With Participant I, as well, grammar is a secondary priority (Participant I).

Implications

One overall desired outcome for this research was to discover complementary relationships between these contexts and consider how this information can inform our own teaching to improve the learning opportunities of L2 writers. Here are some possible queries to consider.

Review Curriculum

Consider your current curriculum and how it may bring in aspects from the three contexts. Consider looking beyond your current needs and reach around to different English language writing courses. Experiment with a shared curriculum at least in the aspects of assignments if possible.

Potential questions of query:

- a. What assignment structures may be familiar to your students?
- b. What assignment structures are in other contexts that may benefit the course?
- c. What added value would adopting these assignments bring to the classroom experience?

Create Communities of Practice

Collaborate with colleagues in varied contexts of composition instruction. If your university has an IEP, meet with the composition instructors and vice versa. Consider doing a combined assignment with both courses. Consider sharing assignments, assessment practices, and overall curricular goals. Consider creating a community of practice within your contexts that involves writing instructors in various departments including education, English, and IEPs.

Though finding international faculty to join your discussions may be challenging, consider reaching out to international faculty at your institution (even outside of your department). They may assist in connecting you to international English writing faculty. Consider joining international organizations and reaching out to published authors in international academic journals.

Assessment Practices

Self-evaluate your own assessment practices. How do your assessment practices look in relation to practices of other colleagues? When assessing writing, how can you build upon the assessment practices of other contexts? Within a community of practice, consider participating in a grade norming activity.

Conclusion

Our investigation into the curricular practices of English language instructors across three diverse teaching contexts has revealed valuable insights into the teaching of writing. Through interviews with writing instructors from universities in China, Intensive English Programs (IEPs), and undergraduate composition courses at universities in the United States, we have uncovered a tapestry of approaches, objectives, and evaluation practices. Our exploration of the writing assignment genres highlighted significant variations across the three contexts. From the

structured emphasis on argumentative writing at universities in China to the multifaceted requirements of research papers in IEPs and U.S. composition courses, we note that each context prioritizes distinct skills and objectives tailored to their student demographics and academic goals. Our analysis of course objectives underscored the evolving nature of writing instruction, moving from foundational mastery of English writing knowledge in writing courses in China to the development of advanced writing skills and critical thinking in IEPs and U.S. composition courses. These objectives reflect a progression from lower-order concerns, such as grammar and vocabulary, to higher-order skills, like critical analysis and effective use of sources.

Moreover, our examination of assessment methods and desired qualities in student writing revealed nuanced perspectives among instructors. Nonetheless, a common thread emerges in all contexts: a developmental approach to assessment that values student growth and improvement over time. In essence, our study highlights the importance of understanding the unique pedagogical approaches and cultural contexts that shape writing instruction across different educational settings. By fostering greater collaboration and dialogue among instructors from diverse backgrounds, we can enhance the effectiveness of writing instruction and better support the diverse needs of students in today's globalized world.

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