

# **Understanding Nativeness in the Writing of English Language Learners in Hong Kong**

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This study analyzes the occurrence of nativeness in the written work of Chinese students acquiring English as a second language. Nativeness, or differences in expression owing to the author's native language or culture, appears frequently in work produced by students in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Furthermore, students whose native language (L1) differs significantly from their target language (L2) produce nativeness in their expression of the L2 more commonly, and in more complex ways, than students transitioning between languages with more closely linked cultural backgrounds. This project examines the writing of 26 students from local Hong Kong secondary schools, 14 native Hong Kongers and 13 immigrants from Mainland China. The diversity of geographic backgrounds provides a basis for comparison between English Language Learners (ELLs) with extended exposure to Hong Kong's Westernized culture and immigrant ELLs from Mainland China, who are less familiar with Western society. All of the students produced nativeness when expressing themselves in English, though the manner in which it was manifested in their writing varied greatly depending on English proficiency level and extent of prior contact with Western culture. The results indicate that while instances of nativeness occur in all samples of student writing, the most significant cases appear in student's reasoning methods, approaches to composition, and portrayal of Western concepts, particularly the concept of self-identification.

## **BACKGROUND**

The goal of this paper is to investigate the nature of nativeness in speakers of East Asian languages who are working to acquire English as a second language. This project aims to address the following research questions: How do students express nativeness in their writing? What patterns occur when speakers of East Asian languages write in English? To what extent does the cultural background or exposure to other cultures influence a student's nativeness? I selected participants from Hong Kong due to the unique cultural history of the city and the high percentage of both native Hong Kong students and students whose families emigrated from more rural areas. Writing samples were procured from only creative writing classes, allowing students greater freedom of expression, which best reveals the natural flow of their thought process in English.

## **JUSTIFICATION**

Previous research conducted on L2 acquisition neglects to focus on the role of nativeness in L2 expression. This research will help fill the gap in the literature on this important topic and sets the stage for others to generate additional research on the subject. Having worked extensively with ESOL students for the past four years, I have developed a unique insight into the language acquisition process. I have discovered a variety of effective methods for teaching vocabulary, grammar, and writing conventions in English and I fully understand the centrality of English proficiency in

students' academic success in the United States and abroad. Much to the detriment of the growth and development of other languages and cultures, we live in a world saturated by the English language. Therefore, this project and other research conducted in language acquisition provide an essential framework for the many instructors and students approaching second language education. The objectives of this project are to elucidate the ways in which one's native culture and language affect their thought and expression in order to appreciate cross-linguistic influences in bilingual writers, and to better serve ESOL students.

## **Prior Studies**

Little formal research has been conducted specifically on the subject of nativeness. However, many studies have examined the ways in which language manipulates perception and cognition, and these studies provide the foundation for this project. A number of studies have examined cross-linguistic expressions of abstract states such as humor and emotion to determine the ways in which the particular language, or medium of communication, affects the speaker's manner of expressing their ideas. For instance, bilingual individuals commonly report feeling as though they are different people when they speak different languages, and they are often perceived by others as behaving differently depending on the language they are speaking. In their writing, bilinguals often note this innate link between language and self, and reflect on its repercussions for polyglots. It is this need to adapt to a new set of

behaviors and manners of expression associated with different languages that complicates the process of acquiring language, particularly languages systematically different from the L1 (Pavlenko 1–33). Languages contain vast emotional lexicons that do not easily translate, which forces writers to negotiate their own unique ways of expression in the L2. For bilingual writers, full acquisition of a language involves adopting certain underlying cultural values associated with the target language (Besemer 34–58). These findings suggest powerful and deeply rooted connection between language and culture.

Investigations have also revealed that the way bilinguals relate to their two cultures alters their perception of humor in each language, affecting their language of preference for recounting funny stories or expressing sarcasm (Vaid 152–182). Other studies investigated the changes in perspective and voice that occur when transitioning from one language to another. One study observed bilingual speakers recounting true stories in both languages, which showed that not only was emotional experience expressed differently cross-linguistically, but speakers occasionally would change perspective and switch from narrator to interlocutor as they switch languages (Koven 84–117). In Danling Fu's book, *My Trouble is My English*, she describes the difficulty she experienced as a student interpreting American literature and symbolism. These difficulties stemmed not from a lack of English proficiency, but from the vastly different approaches to interpretation employed in Eastern and Western cultures, which can cause non-Western learners to feel alienated in the classroom (Fu 1–16).

Studies have shown that intense reading instruction is essential for the successful development of the target language (Palmer, Zhang, Taylor, and Leclerc 44–51). Students naturally use their knowledge of L1 to inform their expression in the target language, which allows them to digest new information, gain confidence, and utilize their cultural background to express and understand English in unique ways. This process produces detailed, culturally rich works that embody the voice of the author (Fu, *Writing Between Languages*). These studies inform much of my research and provide the necessary background for a deeper analysis of the ways in which linguistic differences can parallel cultural differences, consequently affecting communication in the L2 of English language learners.

## PROCEDURE AND METHODOLOGY

Data for this project was collected over a two-month period in Hong Kong while I taught at an English immersion summer program for local secondary school students. After obtaining students' permission, I began collecting samples of writing produced in my creative writing classroom and the creative writing class of another teacher in my department. I digitized and analyzed the data collected upon returning to the United States and consolidated my findings in this paper.

## Participants

The English immersion summer program from which I drew the participants of this study is an organization that provides high-achieving, underprivileged students with year-round academic support and summer enrichment programs to improve their academic opportunities and access to higher education. I spent a summer teaching Creative Writing with an emphasis on English language development at this school, familiarizing myself with the challenges students face in English immersion environments, particularly with writing, before initiating this project.

The program recruits motivated students, ranging from fourteen to eighteen years of age, from low-income schools with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While about half of the participants are Hong Kong natives, the other half are immigrants from Mainland China who arrived in Hong Kong in the past two to eight years. Due to higher percentages of female applicants, the student body is predominantly female; this is reflected in the pool of participants, which is comprised of nine males and seventeen females.

## Materials

The only materials necessary to complete this project, aside from the group of participants, were the school's facilities, English department faculty, and the journals used by students in their creative writing classes.

## Variables

Several variables in this investigation must be accounted for in order to properly evaluate the collected data. The aforementioned diversity of participants resulted in multiple variables to consider in the experiment. Students attended different secondary schools and had varying levels of education, contingent on their age and immigration history, all of which influenced their ability to write and express themselves in English. Participants were primarily female, and this unequal gender distribution may have yielded a greater depth of data, since female students were consistently more likely than males to take an interest in writing and spend more time developing their ideas. Additionally, participants had differing levels of contact with Hong Kong or Western Culture and diverse English abilities, ranging from very low to near-native fluency. These last two variables were frequently linked, as contact with Western culture is often closely association with exposure to English, and high levels of Western contact resulted in greater English proficiency. These variables played the most significant role in student production of nativeness, as students who experienced extended contact with the Western world were more likely to imitate to Western ways of reasoning and composing in their writing.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Due to its subjective nature, nativeness is a difficult aspect of second language acquisition to measure. I analyzed multiple samples from twenty-six students and found numerable examples of nativeness in their writing. To facilitate the data interpretation process, I have organized my findings into five different categories, which I have outlined in subsequent sections. The real names of students are blacked out in the samples in order to preserve participants' anonymity.

### Linguistic Expression

Linguistic nativeness refers to the writer's use of idiomatic expressions, phrasing, and grammatical structures associated with their L1. The most common linguistic nativeness trends that I identified in writing samples were instances of repetitive and circuitous phrasing. Students often circumvented the main point and repeated themselves unnecessarily in the way they phrased their sentences. In Figure 1, the phrasing of the idea, "diaries are good to keep," is segmented into three different parts in which the author repeats the word diary needlessly. While not entirely incorrect, this manner of expression would be unusual for a native speaker of English to produce. Figure 2 also illustrates the creative, yet atypical, phrasing utilized by one student in expressing his desire for rainy weather that would correspond to his mood: "Oh sky, what time is raining time? I am so sad...."

Dear [REDACTED],  
Hi, I'm [REDACTED].  
Hey [REDACTED], you must keep  
the [REDACTED] diary, because, diary [REDACTED]  
have a many good thing.

Figure 1. Student sample of gratuitous repetition

put the water down. Oh sky,  
what time is raining time, I am  
so sad, raining now, please. Oh

Figure 2. Student sample of atypical phrasing

### Word Choice

In this category, nativeness refers to unusual word choices utilized in the expression of non-native speakers. The word choice is neither incorrect for the situation nor indicative of a deficient vocabulary, but is somehow still jarring to the native speaker who would not likely use the word in that way. In Figure 3, the word passion (or lack thereof) to describe one's lessons is an example of this phenomenon. The word "optimistic" to describe Hong Kong as a city, though perfectly accurate, still strikes the reader as strange (see Figure 4).

Students were not very focused and did not have passion to have lesson. So Meg had a game.

Figure 3. Student sample of atypical word choice (passion)

HONG KONG

I think Hong Kong is a beautiful and optimistic city! Hong Kong have many cultures! Example we have dimsum, this Dimsum is food, and have many different! I love Hong Kong, as it is very clean, very beautiful!

Figure 4. Student sample of atypical word choice (optimistic)

### Composing Strategies

Approaches to composing writing vary to some extent in every culture, causing difficulties for second language learners attempting L2 writing. The majority of the participants struggled most with this aspect of English acquisition. Even students whose oral English and reading comprehension reached near-fluent proficiency struggled with standard Western composition. Most frequently, students would resort to listing in order to express themselves (see Figure 5). Many times the lists contained well thought out ideas, but students were unable to merge the ideas into an organized narrative paragraph. Even when students successfully created their own stories, they employed unusual methods of composing introductions, conclusions, and the flow of ideas. Several students wrote short, choppy sentences in a sensible order but without any style of transitioning from one idea to the next (see Figure 6). A few students, such as the author of Figure 7, even employed a stream of consciousness method in their writing while composing in English.

Hand: I heard nothing of the thing.  
 Touch: I touch the thing. It is tough and  
 See: I saw nothing as I lose my eye.  
 Smell: I smell very good and sweet.  
 Taste: I taste it likes chocolate and sea.

Figure 5. Student sample of list substituted for paragraph

But her brother was an evil wizard. He was called Ken. He always wanted to be the King of the world. The elderly said when they grow up, they must be opponents.

Figure 6. Student sample lacking transitions

**Who am I?**  
**Handsome guy**  
 I am a smart, handsome guy; my name is [redacted]. I live in Sung Yi. It is a great place. In weekends, I ~~go~~ away play sport, like football, ride bicycle... sometimes I reading books. I have many friends in school. In weekends, we play together, sometimes watch the film. Sometimes, we go swimming and talking. When I grow up, I want to be a ~~doctor~~ designer; this is a great job.

Figure 7. Student sample of stream of consciousness

### Reasoning Methods

Ways of reasoning in student writing often reflect the logic or linguistic style common to the author's native language. Although the summer program did not require students to write formulated argumentative essays, some writing samples still demonstrated interesting patterns in the ways of reasoning. Figure 8 represents a page from a

larger fictional story about several "chicks" who ask their friends to help them defeat their evil stepmother. The page in the figure depicts the climax of the story where the main character momentarily switches sides without any reasoning given. This trend occurred often, even in the writing of students with the highest levels of English proficiency. Contrary to Western ways of writing, which emphasize the importance of reasoning in the writer's flow of ideas, writers moved from one idea to another without providing a reason for the connection. Similarly, in Figure 9, a student ends a list of reasons to move to Taiwan by saying "Last, Taiwan is democratic, unlike China, I don't need to worry if the food will kill me" without providing any reasoning behind the idea that food in non-democratic societies will kill you.

Suddenly, stepmother came out Donald felt very scared and ran next to her. 'Stepmother Yoyo want to kill you Last, Yoyo was gethart because Donald and stepmother celeste tought her together.

Figure 8. Student sample of incomplete reasoning

Last, Taiwan is democratic, unlike China, I don't need to worry if the food will kill me.

Figure 9. Student sample of conclusion lacking logical evidence

### Concept Confusion

Concept confusion usually occurs when students write about abstract ideas, which are often tied to a culturally ingrained understanding that is not always shared with the target language and culture. When a concept in the target language differs from the native culture's impression of the same idea, it produces striking examples of nativeness in the writers' L2 expression. As

Eastern and Western cultures diverge in numerous ways, the data produced in this project is ideal for identifying examples of concept confusion in bilingual writing. The most consistent example in the data set was students' interpretation of self, which varied greatly from Western norms. In describing themselves, students were highly critical, if they used adjectives at all, and rarely applied positive attributes to themselves (see Figures 10, 11, and 12). Additionally, in describing their heroes, these students were more likely than their Western counterparts to write about simple figures, ranging from friends and caretakers to cartoon characters. Although there are some similarities to Western thinking in the way these students approached heroism, it seemed that they were more drawn to write about the everyday hero who made them laugh or cooked them dinner (see Figure 13). Many of their hero choices were not subjects typically considered heroes by Westerners. The idea of teaching was another concept from which students derived varied meanings. Following lessons on writing and interpreting the moral of the story, some students approached the assignment of writing to teach a lesson very literally, producing step-by-step how-to instructions rather than a story (see Figure 14).

Name: [REDACTED]  
 Age: 16  
 Birthday: 22 March  
 Family: Mother X/  
 Younger brother X/  
 Favourite cartoon character:  
 Twinkle Belle  
 Favourite subject: Music  
 Favourite colour: silver  
 Favourite drink: bubble tea  
 Favourite book: many  
 Favourite music: many  
 Favourite musician: Chopin

Figure 11. Student sample of concept of self-lacking adjectives

~ About [REDACTED] ~

My full name is [REDACTED],  
 and you can call me [REDACTED].

I'm a girl. I was born in  
 14th Oct. 1995. I'm 15 years old now.

Moreover, I live in CSW with my  
 dad & mum.

Also, I'm F4 student from Buddhi  
 Tai Hung College.

Many people think that I'm a  
 hardworking, kind girl. Actually, I'm  
 very lazy, stupid... girl.

Figure 10. Student sample of negating positive attributes

ABOUT [REDACTED]

My name is [REDACTED] Have 2 [REDACTED]  
 in SB. I'm [REDACTED].

I born in Hong Kong. My birthday  
 is 11th January and I'm 16 years  
 old now. Ice-cream is my favorite  
 food. My hobby is swimming, I  
 go to swimming every week. It very  
 exciting and healthy. I study in  
 Jn Ching Chu Secondary School, Form  
 4 student. I work very hard to  
 rise to my dream job, hope it can  
 come true.

Figure 12. Student sample of self description lacking adjectives

**Your Hero**

I think my mother is my hero. She seems like a robber because she does the same thing everyday. She cleans the house, washes the clothes and dishes everyday. I think she is an angel too. When we feel sick, she looks after us impatiently. We love our hero and we feel she loves us, too.

**Figure 13.** Student sample of admiration for the common hero

How to make fruit salad

- 1.) Prepare apples, pears, kiwi, strawberries (any fruits you like), and salad sauce
- 2.) Pare all the fruit peel.
- 3.) Cut all fruit into pieces.
- 4.) Mix all fruit with salad sauce

**Figure 14.** Student sample of writing Intended to teach a lesson

## RESULTS

Although all study participants produced nativeness in their writing, the degree of production and manner in which it was produced varied greatly depending on the student or individual sample of writing. Instances of nativeness are most frequently apparent in students' linguistic expression and word choice, but were less problematic for students than attempting to adapt to Western reasoning methods, approaches to composition, and portrayal of concepts, such as self-identification. Examples of nativeness in the data set relating to reasoning methods were fewer than the occurrences of nativeness in composing and concept depiction. However, this may be the result of insufficient samples of persuasive/argumentative writing. This type of restrictive and formulated writing was not required of students attending the summer program, but may have been useful in eliciting more instances of nativeness in reasoning methods. Native Hong Kong students generally struggled less in adapting their writing to Western expectations. However, all students entering the English immersion program were current Hong Kong residents and had studied English in school, which points to a greater exposure to English and Western Culture for those involved in this study than the average Chinese adolescent.

## Implications for English Language Instructors

English language learners are consistently identified as an underserved population in mainstream education. In a case study conducted by a Gifted Resource Teacher at a public American middle school, not one of eight hundred ESOL students was admitted into the school's Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program. The study demonstrated that the homogenous demographic of gifted students did not accurately reflect the promising intellectual talent found in groups of minority students. Standardized tests used to identify gifted and talented students were often biased in favor of native English-speaking Americans, which impacted the demographic of students represented in the program, and limited many talented students' access to academic opportunities (Reed 16–22). Previous studies indicate that ELLs also struggle to represent accurately learned material on tests in university classrooms. These difficulties arose, not from a lack of understanding, but rather from an inability to represent acquired content knowledge cross-linguistically (Teemant 89–105). Furthermore, ESOL students commonly face challenges interpreting writing tasks within the classroom. In a study on task representation and text construction, students with typologically different L1s struggled to reconcile the classroom demands of L2 writing with their way of composing ideas in the L1 (Cheng 1–21). The conclusions of this study correspond with my findings that a student's cultural background formulates his or her approach to writing tasks and influences the ability to adapt to new, in this case, Western standards of writing. In light of these difficulties faced by ELLs in the classroom, the results of my study convey varying implications for students and instructors in the ESOL community. This study primarily illuminates a part of the L2 writing process occurring in Chinese L1 students as they learn English, and thus can be useful in improving approaches to ESOL education.

In previous studies, ELLs have been shown to benefit more than average students from interactive teaching methods, which are necessary to bridge the language divide experienced by ESOL students (Curtin 22–27). This need is especially present in writing instruction, where ESOL students face distinct dilemmas in expressing what they mean (Nowalk 53–66). While both English immersion and bilingual education methods can be successful, students still need the use of their L1 to build on content knowledge and to continue developing literacy skills in order to gain proficiency in English (Fu 152–158). The dilemmas faced by writers in ESOL classes may be related to cultural challenges surrounding the link between language and self or linguistic challenges of untranslatable vocabulary, which are highlighted in previously mentioned studies. However, these struggles are exacerbated by instructors that stifle students' application of L1 and cultural background in the classroom environment.

Nativeness involves the use of L1 knowledge in production of L2. While students learning English as a second language are often encouraged to think and rely solely on L2 while writing, this teaching practice forces an adherence to Western cultural norms and may limit a student's range of expression. When this natural thought process is consistently stifled, students feel lost and divided from the rest of the class. In a case study conducted by Fu on a Laotian immigrant family, a significant distinction was discerned between the type of writers the children were taught to be in school and the type of writer they were naturally. In a particularly poignant passage, Fu recounts a student's explanation of the differences between writing at home and in the United States: "I learned to write poems in Laos, but here they just ask you to write step by step. In Laos, we don't write this way. We write about subject, but not step by step" (Fu 88–129). This passage reveals students' struggles with cross-cultural adaptation within the context of rigidly enforced standards in American schools that exclude students coming from cultural backgrounds which contradict American standards. Pushing students to think exclusively in their target language is unreasonable and can suppress the voice and valuable insights that ESOL students can produce in writing. Instead, we must appreciate the differences and nuances of thought and expression in the classroom so that students can be empowered to apply knowledge of their native language to new circumstances, and feel confident as second language learners. This project demonstrates the value of nativeness, of the rich and coherent writing produced by non-native speakers of English, which should not be inhibited but rather celebrated in ELL and bilingual writing.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although all of the students participating in this study produced forms of nativeness in their writing, the type and frequency of occurrence varied greatly from student to student. Many variables may have influenced the

students' writing abilities and production of nativeness. Students differed in age, gender, education level, and exposure to English and Western culture. Students with longer exposure to the more Westernized culture of Hong Kong showed a greater tendency to adopt Western ways when writing than students who emigrated from Mainland China. The results indicate that while word choice and linguistic nativeness occur commonly, students struggle more with adapting to Western reasoning methods, composing strategies, and the portrayal of Western concepts, particularly the concept of self. These findings demonstrate the powerful relationship between language and cognition, as well as the ways in which language and culture manipulate perception. The findings of this study indicate that it is natural for students to apply their knowledge of the L1 to L2 reading and writing activities. Thus, nativeness in bilinguals is a natural occurrence that often adds depth and voice to writing, though it may be interpreted as unusual or eccentric by some native speakers. In order to properly address issues arising in ESOL classes, instructors must learn to understand and appreciate the variation in expression produced by their diverse student body.

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