

The Status Quo of Topics Choosing in English Majors’ Academic Writings

—A Case Study of CUPL Junior English Majors

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Academic writings, whether they are BA dissertations or semester papers, are important carriers of one’s ideas and findings of their own study and research spheres. In academic papers, the most important part is the choice of topics which determines the macro direction of the paper. Important as it is, it is difficult for the English majors to choose the most appropriate topics with idea-invested thesis statements instead of some factual statements. Therefore, in order to make clear of the status quo and underlying obstacles of topic choosing, this paper is to study on 98 samples from China University of Political Science and Law’s junior English majors. By observing and analyzing their writings, the paper intends to find out some possible and accessible methods to improve English majors’ academic writing and offer some insights for teachers to make some adjustments in accordance with the status quo.

Keywords: English major’s academic writings, topic choosing, thesis statement writing

Introduction

The Concept and Importance of Academic Writings

When it comes to the academic writing, it is important to make a distinction between it and personal writings. The peculiarity of academic writings renders it a strict formalization and structure which the writers must adhere to accordingly. Academic writing is the process of breaking down ideas and using deductive reasoning, formal voice and third person point-of-view. It is about what you think and what evidence has contributed to that thinking.

Writing is a skill that is required in many contexts throughout life. However, academic writing does many of the things that personal writing does not: it has its own set of rules and practices. These rules and practices may be organized around a formal order or structure in which to present ideas, in addition to ensuring that ideas are supported by author citations in the literature. In contrast to personal writing contexts, academic writing is different because it deals with the underlying theories and causes governing processes and practices in everyday life, as well as exploring alternative explanations for these events. Academic writing follows a particular ‘tone’ and adheres to traditional conventions of punctuation, grammar and spelling.¹

The academic writing serves many purposes such as education, academic development etc. The focus here is the BA dissertation of English majors. The BA dissertation is a must for undergraduate students.

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¹ “What is academic writing?”, Massey University, online:

<<http://owll.massey.ac.nz/academic-writing/what-is-academic-writing.php>>

The BA dissertation of English majors which has its own requirements from topics to research meanings is also a key to evaluate students' academic ability through four-year study.

In recent years, however, there have been a lot of researches in how to improve the teaching quality and courses settings in many other fields among which the study of English majors' dissertation writing is lacking in sufficiency and attention. The writing, directing and oral defense are major teaching activity before graduation for English majors ruled in "Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Academic Degrees".

Though it is of such importance that deserves much attention and effort, its status quo calls for worries. Therefore through analyzing the current situations of topic choosing and thesis statement writing of English major's academic papers, the paper discloses the underlying reasons of the difficulty and provides some tentative measures to improve the quality of academic writings.

The Difficulty of English Majors' Academic Writings

As important as the academic writings are, the students in general access to it in their junior year. They are asked to write on some issues concerned with some specific field to manifest their ideas. Most of them haven't formed a clear concept of what academic writings are and what kind of writings can be categorized into academic writing. As a result, they fail to satisfy the standards set for English majors.

According to the National English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors, the purposes of BA dissertation are as followings: (1) To cultivate the comprehensiveness of students' ability, serious and correct attitudes towards study and research; (2) To highlight the innovation consciousness and to encourage students to express independently and bravely. With the enlargement of enrolment in recent years, however, the students' English abilities vary greatly. Most students possess insufficient knowledge towards dissertations who write it only for the obligatory requirement. They lack the motivation to search for the materials proactively and only can finish the writing with the help of the courses and the mentors. Besides, English majors as they are, they make many mistakes and errors in expressions and grammar, which drags down the quality and level of the BA dissertation as a whole. The most commonly talked about difficulties for students when they work on their academic writings are mainly the following points:

1. Topic choosing.

It is acknowledged that choosing a topic is the most difficult and time consuming process which is usually torturing and changeable. Because it is the foremost question which needs considering and making sure. The factors influencing topic choosing are individual interests, the materials and the courses. Most of the courses for junior English majors are about literatures which therefore pose much more effect on students. In addition, the materials centering on literatures are easy to approach. While the linguistics is in a disadvantageous position for it is often the case that students opine linguistics as profound. They fail to grasp the knowledge of linguistics comprehensively or they easily forget what they have learned. Thus few students tend to write on this field for the data and statistics collection and analyses.

2. Innovation gap.

As a negative result of difficulty in topic choosing, the innovation gap between the present dissertation writing and proceeding researches is narrow. Topic in literature, for instance, the same novel has been studied from the same perspective for countless times. It is difficult for the students to put up forward with some fresh ideas and perspectives. So they just did some useless works and wasted a lot of time, energy and sometimes even money. Their researches are of no value for the development of English major establishment.

3. Expression barriers.

As English majors, they need to finish their papers in English. Whereas they make many mistakes in spelling and grammar. Through four years English study, there still exists the gap in logical thinking and way of expression. The Chinese English majors sometimes find it difficult to express their ideas clearly in English. Some students even frown when asked to finish papers in English. So the language barrier also poses more difficulty in academic writings.

4. Theory application.

The theory study in undergraduate years is not the teaching focus. However, in paper writing, the students usually tend to find some supporting theories for their reasoning. While the application of theories in their analyses process is not that appropriate which sometimes is even opposite to the intent meaning of the writers.

5. Lack of preparation and instruction.

It is reported that some students can finish paper writing over only one night. Therefore, they leap off the process of researching and directly to writing which is usually the last procedure of academic writing process. Besides many universities haven't set such courses for academic paper writing. The students must explore how to write on one own during which process they can't approach the timely help from professional teachers. They then form some wrong stereotypes which influence even in their later study.

These are the difficulties the students find in academic writings. In order to overcome these barriers, the teachers, students and the educational policy makers must work together to figure out some measures to improve the academic quality.

The Importance of Topics

During the writing process, the most important part is choosing a topic related to the major. It determines the value of the paper and how much time and effort the writer needs to pay. An appropriate topic is half success of the whole paper. The choice of one topic determines the research directions, writing scales and subjects (DU, 2013). An appropriate topic decides whether the paper is meaningful in the field and whether there are enough materials to support the main ideas. Though it is important, it is a part in which most students find the most difficult and easy to make errors.

Literature Review

There have been some papers researching on the current situation of English majors' academic writings. They find that many of the research subjects have difficulty in understanding the gist of academic requirements, searching for the materials and expressing in English. Moreover, more than half of the students fail to gain the proportional benefit from paper writing (SUN, 2004).

The papers on the status quo of English majors' writing are few. They can be categorized into three types generally: The first is the study of countermeasures towards paper writing and how to write; The second is about the evaluation of teaching academic writing courses; The third is about the comprehensive report of the dissertation writing. MA Jianhua (2006) in his paper generalizes the difficulty of paper writing from the perspective of topic choosing, materials access, tutors etc. He advocates to pay much more attention to regulating the paper writing and reinforce the instruction of the tutors. Some papers analyzed the reasons of choosing topics, DU Jian (2013) lists some in his paper as followings: (1) Interests; (2) The rules of self consciousness; (3) The collaboration between students and teachers. Most of the case in reality, interests and

easiness to access to the materials are the top considerations for students when choosing a topic. Some other papers analyzed the materials for English majors to write a paper. WANG Xiaoyan (2006) finds that there exists a positive proportion between the amount of materials and the quality of the paper. The more the related materials are, the higher quality the papers are.

However, those previous researches are about the general situations of academic writings. There are few from micro level and the topic choosing analyses. Therefore, the paper collects about 100 topics and 100 thesis statements of junior English majors in China University of Political Sciences and Law to find out the status quo of topic choosing in order to put forward some practical countermeasures to improve the academic quality of academic writing.

Choosing a Topic

The Status Quo of Topic Choosing

The paper includes 98 topics in total from junior English majors in CUPL. The range of topics mainly centers around four spheres—translation, linguistics, literature and culture. However, there are still some topics on other field which is not qualified and appropriate to serve the requirements of English majors' BA dissertation. Here is the result of the topic analysis from the perspective of content (see Figure 1):

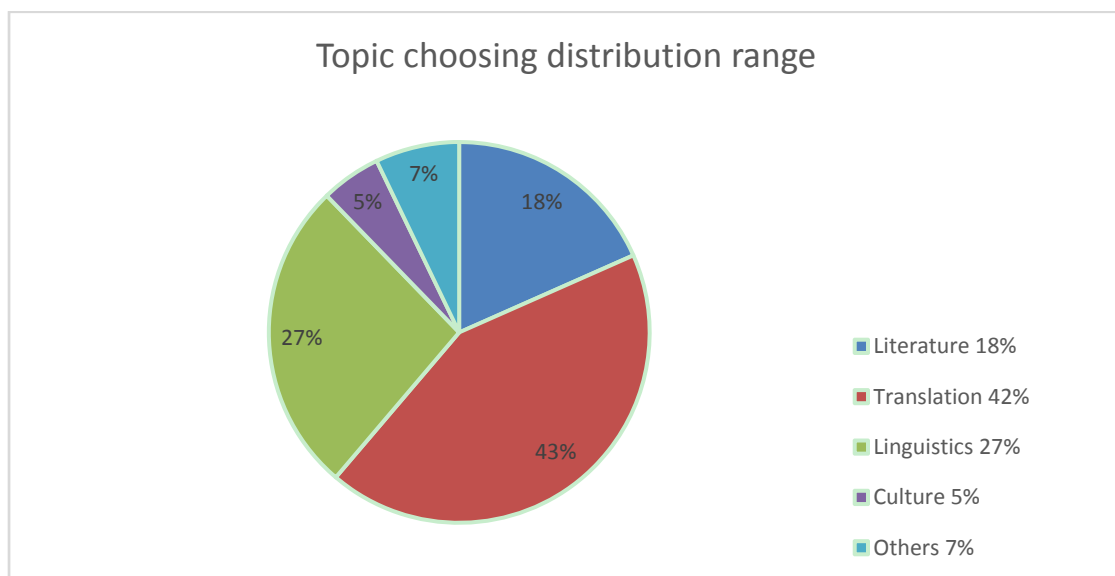


Figure 1. Topic choosing distribution range.

From Figure 1, we could find that English majors tend to write on translation for BA dissertation whose proportion is up to 42 percent, outweighing other fields in large numbers. This result is quite different from some previous research on topic choosing of English majors. WANG Xiaoyan (2006) in Chang Chun Normal University finds that more English majors prefer writing on literature. The reasons she concludes are that there are more courses on literature and literature has its own characteristics such as attractiveness, easier to understand and to get access to the needed materials. While in CUPL, the situation is different: topics in either translation or linguistics are more than that of literature.

There is another particular phenomenon: Among the 98 topics, there are 24 of which is related to law, such as the modality in law texts, legal English and legal translation etc..

Besides, the methods or theories used also manifest some features (see Figure 2):

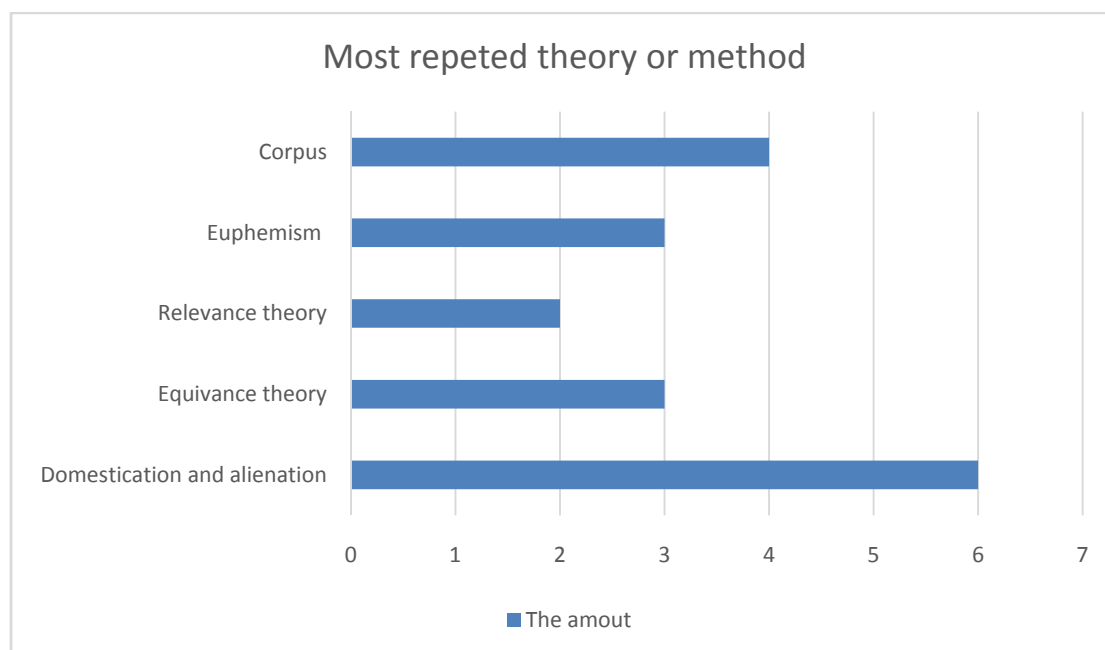


Figure 2. Most repeated theory or method

Among all the topics, the most repeated theories or methods are domestication and alienation as well as corpus study. Students adopt those to analyze legal texts and translation. Then typed these key words in CNKI website, there are average more than 2,000 papers on domestication and alienation in the past five years; more than 30,000 papers on equivalence theory; more than 200,000 papers on relevance theory; more than 1,000 papers on euphemism. The number of papers on corpus study presents a rising trend, from 2010 more than 6,000 to 2015 more than 10,000.

In addition to the range of topic choosing, there also exists the problem of repetition and similarity among the topics (see Table 1).

Table 1

Topic Choosing Distribution and Repetition Rate

	Literature	Linguistics	Translation	Culture	Others
The amount	18	26	42	5	7
Similar topics	0	2	5	0	0
Repetition rate	0	8%	12%	0	0

Among the 26 topics in linguistics, there are 2 topics of high similarity, which are about the analyses of modality in contract law. While among the 42 topics in translation, there are five topics of high similarity. Three of them are about subtitle translation and two are about modal verbs translation. Thus it can be concluded that the topics in modality analyses are very popular nowadays. There are some topics belonging to the category of “others”, however, which is the result of divergence from the major.

In conclusion, the problems in choosing topics can be summarized as followings:

1. The range of the topics is narrow so that there is a relatively high repetition rate. Though topic choosing, reflecting from the research in CUPL, shows a rising trend of translation and linguistics analysis instead of

literature and culture, the range of topics is still restricted within some fields such as comparing two translation versions of legal text, the study of modality in legal text or political discourse etc. In the field of literature, the works as the research objects are still with high repetition rate, for example there are two topics on *The Great Gatsby*.

2. The topics chosen by the students are lacking in novelty and creativity. In the field of literature, the students tend to choose the classics as the analyses objects which have been studied for a long time and by many scholars. It is difficult for them to analyze from new angles with some original ideas. Therefore, the value and meaning of the paper decreases along with many other papers in similar topics.

3. The topics are too broad to focus on one problem. Some of the topics are broad so that it is difficult for the writers to finish it within thousands of words, such as the topics: "About Food Expression in English"; "A brief analysis of the similarities and differences between British and American slangs". These two topics can be written even as a book. The topics with no focus sometimes can confuse the readers and of less meaning.

4. The chosen topics do not satisfy the requirement of English majors' dissertation. Some of the students choose some topics which appear to be relevant to English majors but in fact it is not. "A comparative study of the laws and regulations on campus violence between China and Britain" for example, is the study of legal terms between China and Britain. It can be categorized as law majors' papers. "An analysis on the Development of American Newspaper Industry and Freedom of the Press" is another example of divergence from English, which can be categorized as news and journalist majors' papers.

5. The method and theory adopted are of high repetition rate. Most of them chose relevance theory, equivalence and domestication and alienation theory to analyze translation or some texts.

6. Except the problems in content above, there are some problems in expression and format of the topics. Chinese students tend to adopt the pattern: "An analysis on/of...", while English natives seldom adopt this pattern in writing a title for "an analysis on/of..." is a repetition of the focus of analyzing process.

The Underlying Reasons of the Current Situation

Faced with the status quo of topic choosing in CUPL, the underlying reasons of the phenomenon can be summarized as followings:

1. The feature of "English plus law" education mode. The resources of law in CUPL are utilized to a large extent, so the students can choose some courses on law. As a result, the students show interests in translation analysis and legal discourse analysis and choose them as the topics for dissertation which are written less before and of much value for the cultural exchange and progress of law in China.

2. The easiness and abundance of accessing materials. This is an important reason in choosing a topic.

3. The setting of courses. The students are prone to choosing topics derived from the content of courses. It is often the case that most of the literature courses, linguistics courses and translation courses are set in junior year. So the students can prepare for their dissertation beforehand.

4. The researching trend. The newest and most popular research method or theory is adopted by the students in their papers.

5. The instruction of tutors. Some of the topics are chosen and distributed by teachers. While some others change their topics under the instruction of their teachers.

6. The interests of the students. Some of the students choose the topics based on their interests, such as the topics: "A cognitive study of metaphors in 2016 European Cup news" and "Approaches to Translation of Video

Game". The students combine their interests with their majors to do researches which are of high originality and novelty.

The Tentative Countermeasures

Choosing a topic is the preparation of writing a paper, which is very important. It can be said that a topic determines the quality and value of a paper to some extent. Only with an appropriate topic, the author can take his/her advantage in writing and avoid detour in the process.

Then how to choose an appropriate topic is imperative. Except the rule of "making a mountain out of a molehill", time, handy materials and the difficulty of the topics are also the factors needed to be taken into consideration.

Some students focus on creativity and research on some fields which has rarely been studied before. While it is more difficult to research on this field. The more appropriate is to find the gap existing in the previous studies. There used to be three standards in choosing a topic: the importance and interests, operability and sufficient references.

Here are some specific measures:

- (1) To set some relevant courses on academic writing.
- (2) To add academic paper reading to extensive reading class.
- (3) To use academic writings as a part of teaching materials.
- (4) To introduce some edged theories and methods in class.
- (5) To develop and respect the interests of the students in choosing a topic.
- (6) To strengthen teacher's instruction in the writing process.

Discussion

The paper is a case study of the junior English majors in China University of Political Science and law. Therefore, the conclusion in the paper may find it difficult to fit in other situations. However, most of the problems of topic choosing are applicable in other universities' English majors' writing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper through case study concludes the status quo of junior English majors' topic choosing of academic writing. There is a new trend that more and more students choose to write on translation analysis instead of literature. Then the paper analyzes the underlying reasons of the phenomenon and offers some tentative suggestions such as interest-driven, tutor instruction and paper reading etc. on how to improve the quality of English majors' academic writing.

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