

# Stepping into writing mystery: What are the Chinese writing difficulties of the South Asian ethnic minority students in Hong Kong?

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**Abstract.** Chinese language, with its heightened status in Hong Kong, holds a key for South Asians with low socio-economic status to obtain upward mobility (Shum *et al.*, 2011). However, South Asian ethnic minority students as a disadvantaged group of second language learners, lack efficient pedagogical support in Chinese language learning in Hong Kong. The study aims to understand the Chinese writing difficulties of these students in order to prepare them for targeted pedagogic interventions for better Chinese language acquisition. Based on the students' pre-tests and interview data, genre-based "Reading to Learn, Learning to Write" (R2L) assessment criteria were used to evaluate and identify the deficiencies in the students' writings. The finding lays a solid foundation for teaching that would be specific to the needs of language learning of South Asian ethnic minority students in Hong Kong.

**Keywords:** Chinese writing, difficulties, assessment, ethnic minority.

## INTRODUCTION

In Hong Kong, Chinese language has been a compulsory subject for all students since 2009. For local South Asian students who learn Chinese as a second language, insufficient language learning skills and inappropriate teaching pedagogy lead to their low proficiency in Chinese (Troia, 2006; Tsung *et al.*, 2010; Zhang *et al.*, 2011). It is thus essential for schools to teach knowledge of Chinese written language, as well as to teach it explicitly (Berninger and Winn, 2006). Through explicit teaching and learning at the end of their schooling, South Asian students will attain a higher proficiency in the various literacy tasks (genres) demanded by schools and by society.

It is of great importance to teach the knowledge of Chinese written language explicitly. However, it is even more fundamental to identify the specific aspects of knowledge with regard to Chinese written language that

local South Asian students are lacking in prior to in-class teaching. Once the symptoms have been determined, the pedagogic intervention is more straight to the point in catering for the learning needs of the South Asian students in Chinese language education. Accordingly, the current study is aimed to understand the Chinese writing difficulties of the South Asian ethnic minority students in Hong Kong in order to prepare them for targeted pedagogic interventions for better Chinese language acquisition, especially in Chinese language writing.

The current study gained inspiration from Halliday's (1985) Sydney School genre-based approach applied to the field of second language learning for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. The work attempts to enhance teaching and learning Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) by making use of a genre-based approach, with the South Asian ethnic minority students in Hong Kong as our

**Table 1.** The functions and forms of some basic genres in Hong Kong school curriculum (Shum, 2015).

Genre	Function	Schematic structure
<u>Narration</u>	Resolving a complication in a story	Orientation^Complication^Resolution^ Evaluation
Description	Describing a person or a phenomenon	Overview of description^Description 1-n ^ Conclusion
<u>Explanation</u>	Explaining a sequence or multiple causes or multiple effects	Phenomenon^Explanation Sequence 1-n
Exposition	Arguing for a point of view	Position^ Argument 1-n^ Reposition
Review	Evaluating a book or a literary text	Orientation^Text description^ Comment

research participants. The genre focused on in the current study is narration and explanation. According to the students' writing of these two genres, the situation related to their Chinese language writing has been identified in order to provide pedagogic support to facilitate their learning.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

From a textual perspective, writing is an integral aspect of literacy, in collaboration with reading (Hyland, 2007). The ability to read and write holds the key to participation in social practices, with involvement of human activities. In addition to its communicative role in socio-cultural events, writing is also perceived as "a cognitive act" representing the writer's imagination, knowledge and experiences (McCutchen, 2006). Recent research shows the influence of cognitive factors on students' writing performance (Guan *et al.*, 2014; Shum *et al.*, 2014). One important factor is working memory, which has been found to have a direct bearing on Chinese text comprehension and writing (Guan *et al.*, 2014; Shum *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, as noted by Hyland (2007), writing has been understood as "personal empowerment" that enables students to gain access to socio-cultural resources and engagement (Hyland, 2007).

The pedagogy of writing has been developed over years of educational practices ranging from the traditional learning of language structure organization in writing to the recent development of genre-based approach to writing (Hyland, 2012). The genre-based approach attaches great importance to text types and meanings in writing that are integral to different social contexts and purposes (Hyland, 2003). As demonstrated by Donovan and Smolkin (2006), exposure to a diversity of genres in writing is conducive to the teaching and learning of writing to/by second language learners in their primary and secondary schooling (Hyon, 1996). The current research proposes to find ways of enhancing the writing achievement of Ethnic Minority students in Hong Kong by identifying their Chinese language writing difficulties within secondary school settings.

Since 2000, various studies have been done in identifying the subject-specific genres in Chinese found in the Hong Kong public examinations in the school

subjects; Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, Geography, Economics and Liberal Studies (Shum *et al.*, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2006b, 2012; Shum, 2004b, 2006a). Subject-specific genre pilot teaching in collaboration with the Education Bureau was also conducted to promote the learning of various school subjects in Chinese (Shum and Ki, 2008). The finding revealed a significant improvement by students in learning school subjects through Chinese. These above-noted research studies of learning through Chinese have laid the basis for the proposed study of learning Chinese as a second language, which is geared towards enriching the existing body of knowledge of genre-based literacy for second language Chinese learners in Hong Kong.

## METHODOLOGY

With the support of funding from the Hong Kong Education Bureau, there has been a provision of Student Support Programmes (SSP) on Chinese language learning for South Asian ethnic minority students since 2007. A strong relationship has thus been built between the schools that recruit non-Chinese speaking students and the research team. Among those schools, two local direct subsidy schools, in which a large proportion of enrolled students are South Asian ethnic minorities, show their interest and willingness in participating in this proposed research. Supported by these two secondary schools, the present research can be undertaken more widely to facilitate the South Asian ethnic minority students in Hong Kong in learning Chinese and enhancing their capability of Chinese written composition.

A taxonomy of genres from the literacy tasks in schools and in society has been developed (Shum, 2015). The functions and forms of some basic genres in school curriculum in Hong Kong are shown in Table 1 (Shum, 2015). It is essential for students to master these genres in order to achieve academic success. This research focuses on the two most common genres: narration and explanation. With a view to understanding the obstacles faced by non-Chinese speaking students in Chinese language writing, a pre-test of task writing before pedagogic intervention was undertaken to measure the students' performance in their genre-based Chinese written composition of narration and explanation. All the

writings were evaluated and analyzed by “Reading to Learn” assessment criteria.

The “Reading to Learn” assessment criteria are based on four textual components, that is, Context, Discourse, Grammar and Graphic Features. Context mainly covers the scoring items of writing purpose, staging, phases, field, tenor and mode, while Discourse focuses on the lexico-grammatical aspects of lexis, appraisal, conjunction, reference and grammar used in the writings. The last dimension of Graphic Features emphasizes the students’ fundamental skills of spelling, punctuation and text presentation. The scoring system and assessment criteria of each dimension range from 0-3, with 14 items in total constituting the highest score of 42. All the students’ writings were sent to two independent markers who had been trained to mark via the “Reading to Learn” assessment criteria and were also experienced in the marking of GCSE Chinese examination writings. The writing samples composed by the student’s representative of low and high levels of achievement from these two targeted local secondary schools are analyzed and discussed. Focus group interviews were conducted to solicit information from the students themselves from the insiders’ point of view in perceiving their own difficulties in Chinese language writing.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows the assessment results of the students’ writing performance in the composition of narration and explanation. All the students with different levels of achievement were invited to participate in the writing tasks of genre writing without any intervention. The purpose of the genre-based literacy tasks designed for the students is to help diagnose the weakness and problems existing in their writings that hinder their literacy development at the secondary institutional level.

As introduced in the section on methodology above, the “Reading to learn” writing assessment is composed of 14 items covering four main dimensions: Context, Discourse, Grammar, and Graphic Features. Each dimension has different foci and emphases in mediating the ingredients constructing a good piece of writing. As shown in Table 2, it was found that the students with all levels of achievement (low, medium, high) performed better in narrative writing than in explanatory writing, especially when it comes to the dimensions of Context and Discourse.

In the dimension of Context, most of the students could fulfill the purpose of writing with different genres. The narration is composed to engage the readers in story telling for recreation, while the explanation intends to provide information for readers with the function of informing. As to the Staging and Phases, the students were found to be more familiar with the stages of narrative writing than with those of explanation. Phase can be referred to as the steps that a text follows within

each stage, which can hardly be detected in both of the students’ narrative and explanatory writings. The three core elements of Field, Tenor, and Mode in Context were scored approximately around 1 and 0. Most of the students in all three ranges of achievement were able to show a weak evidence of Field and Mode in constructing the main content of the text with a fundamental level of written language. However, no evidence of Tenor was found, especially for low and medium levels of students, who failed to build relationships with the readers in engaging them in the plot and informing them of factual messages.

With respect to the discourse, attention has been diverted to the lexico-grammatical level rather than the contextual level. The use of lexis, as a key element in Field construction, indicates the basic lexical resources that the students have got mastery of at their current stage of schooling. However, little evidence was found in the usage of Appraisal, Conjunction or Reference in the students’ writings. Few evaluating words were found as Appraisal for personal feeling expression, behavioural action judgement and environment appreciation, with few conjunctions in sentence connection and unclear use of pronouns in references. Detailed analysis was undertaken in the following sample case studies.

Table 3 shows the writing performance of one of the student representatives as high achiever in the genre-based composition tasks of narration and explanation. In the pre-test before teaching, each student was required to write a narration about a school picnic and an explanation regarding their favourite sports. As shown in the sample writings of the high achiever, it is found that the student has difficulty in telling the difference between recount and narration. Students tend to confuse narration with recount. Although recount and narration share the time function of engaging, as they are distinct from each other in genre construction. The purpose of a narrative story is to engage the readers by solving a problem or resolving a complication among the major characters designed in the plot, while a recount aims to record a series of events without any involvement of complications. The high achiever is able to partially fulfill the writing purpose based on a better understanding of the narrative writing task of a memorable experience on a school picnic trip, including where and with whom the students went, as well as what they did during the trip. However, little attention was paid to any interesting happenings occurring at the spot and the lesson learnt from the incident afterwards. Hence, the main body of the writing lays a strong emphasis on a record of events mainly concerned with ball playing, eating and drinking during the school picnic, followed by a rushed ending of an evaluation with personal feeling expression as a typical usage of appraisal. The same problems were detected in the student’s explanation writing. Their insufficient genre knowledge results in their confusion in genre writing. Instead of taking place in narration, the stage of complication was surprisingly found in the student’s

**Table 2.** Writing assessment across genres with different levels of students.

Items	Details	Low		Medium		High	
		Narr	Exp	Narr	Exp	Narr	Exp
<b>CONTEXT</b>							
Purpose	How appropriate and well-developed is the genre for the writing purpose?	0	0	1	1	1	1
Staging	Does it go through appropriate stages, and how well is each stage developed?	0	0	1	0	1	1
Phases	Phases are the steps that a text goes through (within each stage). How well organized is the sequence of phases in the text?	0	0	1	0	0	0
Field	How well does the writer construct the content?	1	0	1	1	1	1
Tenor	How well does the writer interact with the readers?	0	0	0	0	1	1
Mode	How highly written is the language for the school stage?	1	1	1	1	2	1
Context Total Marks		2/18	1/18	5/18	3/18	6/18	5/18
<b>DISCOURSE</b>							
Lexis	How well is lexis used to construct the field?	1	0	1	1	1	1
Appraisal	Appraisal is about the word choices that writers use to evaluate. They include feelings, judgement of people, and appreciation of things.	0	0	1	0	1	0
Conjunction	Is there a clear logical relation between all sentences?	0	0	0	0	1	1
Reference	Is it clear who or what is referred to in each sentence?	0	0	0	0	1	0
Discourse Total Marks		1/12	0/12	2/12	1/12	4/12	2/12
<b>GRAMMAR</b>							
Grammar	How accurate and varying is the syntactical structure?	1	0	1	1	2	1
Grammar Total Marks		1/3	0/3	1/3	1/3	2/3	1/3
<b>GRAPHICAL FEATURES</b>							
Spelling	How accurately spelt are words?	2	1	0	1	1	1
Punctuation	How appropriately and accurately is punctuation used?	1	1	1	1	1	2
Presentation	Are paragraphs used? How legible is the writing? Is the layout clear?	1	0	1	1	2	2
Graphic Features Total Marks		4/9	2/9	2/9	3/9	4/9	5/9
Total Marks		8/42	3/42	10/42	8/42	16/42	13/42

explanation writing after an identification of phenomenon and a brief explanation.

The inappropriate development of stages and phases specific to the genre of narration and explanation further leads to a weak construction of plot, settings and characters in stories and the field of information in factual texts. Without an attractive storyline or convincing

explanation, it would be quite hard for readers to be emotionally engaged and objectively informed in texts. As a representative of high achievers, the student has a relatively better command of lexico-grammatical resources of conjunctions to help establish temporal, causal and adversative relationships between sentences, with a clear track of the person or thing throughout the

Table 3. High achiever.

Narration	Explanation
<p>上星期日，我和我的朋友—美美、小明和姚明去沙田旅行。我的老師和同學都有來<b>因為(Conjunction)</b>這是一個學校旅行。<b>(Orientation)</b></p> <p>我們玩得很多，我們去籃球場打籃球，有打挑毛球和排球。<b>這是很有趣(Appraisal)！(Record of Events)</b></p> <p><b>然後(Conjunction)</b>我們吃午餐，我們吃了魚蛋，魚柳包，氣水和肉。我們吃得很飽。<b>(Record of Events)</b></p> <p>老師叫我們上巴士回學校。學校旅行完了。我很<b>開心(Appraisal)。(Evaluation)</b></p> <p>Last Sunday, my friend and I—Meimei, Xiaoming, Yaoming went to Shatin for travelling. My teachers and classmates came here <b>because (Conjunction)</b> this is a school picnic. <b>(Orientation)</b></p> <p>We played a lot, we played basketball at basketball court, played badminton and volleyball. This is very <b>interesting (Appraisal)!(Record of Events)</b></p> <p><b>Then (Conjunction)</b> we had lunch, we ate fish ball, fish hamburger, soft drinks, and meat. We were very full. <b>(Record of Events)</b></p> <p>The teacher asked us to get on the bus to return back to school. The school picnic was ended. I am very <b>happy (Appraisal). (Evaluation)</b></p>	<p>我最喜歡的運動是籃球。籃球是一個橙色和圓圓的球。<b>你要用毛打籃球。</b></p> <p><b>(Phenomenon Identification)</b></p> <p>在香港，很多男孩都喜歡打籃球。我每星期六都會和他們打籃球。我們會去到籃球場打籃球。我的弟弟都會來。</p> <p><b>(Explanation Sequence)</b></p> <p>我們會有時打架<b>但(Conjunction)</b>會很快做回朋友。他們玩得很多<b>然後(Conjunction)</b>在晚上回家。<b>(Complication)</b></p> <p>我很喜歡打籃球<b>因為(Conjunction)</b>打籃要有很多人一起玩<b>所以(Conjunction)</b>我可以有很多朋友！<b>(Conclusion)</b></p> <p>My favourite sport is basketball. Basketball is an orange and round ball. You should use feather (hand) to play basketball. <b>(Phenomenon Identification)</b></p> <p>In Hong Kong, lots of boys like to play basketball. I every Saturday play basketball with them. We will go to basketball court to play basketball. My brother will also come.</p> <p><b>(Explanation Sequence)</b></p> <p>We sometimes will fight <b>but (Conjunction)</b> will become friends again fairly soon. They played a lot and <b>then (Conjunction)</b> went home at night.</p> <p><b>(Complication)</b></p> <p>I love playing basketball very much <b>because (Conjunction)</b> playing basketball needs many people together <b>so (Conjunction)</b> I can have many friends!<b>(Conclusion)</b></p>

text by using appropriate personal and demonstrative pronouns. However, appraisal was seldom used to express the insider's emotional feeling for the events taking place in the storyline or to appreciate the targeted thing that had been explained in the factual text. Although the sample writing has correct syntactic structure, a diversified use of sentence that has plenty of space for improvement, which could mostly be expressed with simple SVO structure. Due to the different language systems, the student also found difficulty in writing Chinese characters and felt confused in many word choices with similar forms but different meanings, as in angry 氣 and bubble 汽, hug 抱 and full 飽, feather 毛 and hand 手.

Table 4 shows the writing performance of one of the medium achievers in fulfilling the literacy task of narrative and explanation writing in L2 Chinese language classroom. As the representative high achiever in Table 3, the medium achiever is also able to understand the task requirement and appropriately realize the writing purpose in genre-based composition. In narrative writing, the text starts with an orientation clearly indicating where they went for a school picnic, followed by a record of events about what they did during the school picnic. What makes a difference is the appearance of complication as a problem taking place when the author's good friend fell

down and further solved with the assistance from the author, constructing the stage of resolution, which is finally evaluated to express the feelings and self-reflection of the author – who is the main character – upon what has happened, as a practical lesson learnt from the incident. The author's explanatory writing also concurs with the stages of phenomenon identification about their favourite sports at the very beginning and the explanation of the identified sport in detail immediately afterwards. However, the student only very briefly touches upon the staging distribution of genre specific texts, without further development in phases. Based on the understanding of the task requirement, the student has a fundamental awareness of plot construction in stories as well as field elaboration in explanation. But due to a lack of elaboration in complication, the writer fails to build tensions to attract the reader's attention.

As seen from the text, it can obviously be noticed that the writer misleadingly uses many English wordings to replace Chinese character writings in both narrative and explanation writing because of a relatively low level of Chinese language proficiency, especially in the lexicogrammatical scale of language acquisition. Most of the words written in English are the core words that are indispensable for field construction, which hinders the text comprehension of Chinese language readers. The

Table 4. Medium achiever.

Narration	Explanation
<p>我和我的朋友去學校旅行。我們去Sai Kung Park園。我們的老師睹有去。(Orientation) 我們一起玩games和吃食snacks。早上的時間，我們媽媽cooked me breakfast。(Record of Events) 旅遊時有甚麼有趣的事情發生，我的好朋友fell down。(Complication) 我的老師came and helped her。(Resolution) 我學到我的need to be careful。But (Conjunction) 我們有很多fun。我是很開心 (Appraisal)。 (Evaluation)</p> <p>My friend and I went for a school picnic. We went to Sai Kung Park. Our teachers also went there. (Orientation) We played games and ate snacks together. At the morning time, our mother cooked me breakfast. (Record of Events) What interesting things happened when travelling, my friend fell down. (Complication) My teacher came and helped her. (Resolution) I learnt that I need to be careful. But (Conjunction) we had a lot of fun. I am very happy (Appraisal). (Evaluation)</p>	<p>我最喜歡的運動是排球。(Phenomenon Identification) 我們要毛打。我的朋友都很喜歡排球。我們一起打排球。我打排球每星期一和星期五。有時星期六。我喜歡打排球因為 (Conjunction) 很快心 (Appraisal)。我的爸爸都可以knows打排球。(Explanation)</p> <p>My favorite sport is volleyball. (Phenomenon Identification) We need feather (hand) to play. All my friends like to play volleyball. We play volleyball together. We play volleyball every Monday and Friday, sometimes Saturday. I like playing volleyball because (Conjunction) very fast heart (happy) (Appraisal). My father also knows how to play volleyball. (Explanation)</p>

Table 5. Low achiever.

Narration	Explanation
<p>學校旅行</p> <p>我去太埔旅行。我和我們朋友去太埔旅遊。(Orientation) 我和我們朋友吃水果。我和我們朋友做功課和跑步。(Record of Events)</p> <p>School Picnic</p> <p>I went for a trip in Taipo. My friend and I went for a trip in Taipo. (Orientation) My friend and I ate fruit. My friend and I did homework and went jogging. (Record of Events)</p>	<p>我最喜歡的運動項目</p> <p>我們喜歡的運動是場足球。(Phenomenon Identification)</p> <p>My Favorite Sport</p> <p>My favorite sport is football. (Phenomenon Identification)</p>

text is also deficient in the application of the lexical resources of appraisal to express emotional feelings towards a series of happenings during the trip in a school picnic as well as to appreciate the writer's favourite sport to engage the readers. With little involvement of conjunctions, the logical relationship between the sentences throughout the whole text has been weakened to some extent. Co-structured with relatively loosed bunch of sentences, the whole text is also presented only in one paragraph, leading to a weak performance on graphic features.

Table 5 shows the student's performance of narrative and explanatory writing as a sample text of the low achievers. Due to the student's weak Chinese language proficiency, the student's writing performance tends to be restricted by their limited lexico-grammatical resources. In comparison with the writing samples composed by the high and medium achievers, the student at the relatively low level of achievement was not able to write a complete text of narration and explanation. The first text of narration is a typical recount, only mechanically recording

the happening events (eating fruit, doing homework and going jogging) without any complication or conflict involved during the writer's trip to Tai Po. It is even getting worse in explanation writing with only one sentence composed for phenomenon identification without any further elaboration for detailed explanation. The field thus fails to be well constructed, with no climate of expectation for reader engagement.

When it comes to the dimension of discourse, no traces were detected for any use of appraisal, conjunction and reference. There are no expressions of personal feelings, no judgement of moral behaviours in narration and no appreciation of the phenomenon under explanation. Even in the high achiever's texts, each sentence exists separately, with no conjunctions logically relating them into a whole. The writer has no sense of reference to keep track of the person and thing with personal and demonstrative pronouns. A repetitive occurrence of the same subject keeps appearing in a consecutive series of sentences. Every sentence starts with "my friend and I", without any awareness of using "we" to replace the

subject at the second time of its appearance. These two incomplete texts are both presented in one paragraph. Paragraphs are not used in the writings. Thus, deficiency in all these dimensions indicates low performance in genre writing. The results further enriched the understanding the under-developed educational experiences of South Asian ethnic minority students in Hong Kong, especially in writing, from a linguistics perspective (Shum et al., 2011; Shum et al., 2012).

### **Challenges faced by different levels of students in Chinese writing**

With a view to having a more thorough understanding of the students' challenges in Chinese language writing, text analysis was triangulated with semi-structured focus group interviews with the students. Each level of students' low, high, and medium achievers, was composed of two student representatives, with a total of six engaged in the interviews. The purpose was to supplement the pre-test data to explore the students' writing difficulties from their own perceptions. Based on the interview data, the findings indicate that the students with different levels of achievement have a different focus on their perceived difficulties in Chinese language writing.

#### **Lack of knowledge about text structure (high achiever)**

*H1: Remembering the structure of the writing, like depends on letter. You have to remember the sequence of a letter...But then...but if you don't memorize the different structures of the writing skills, it's hard to for you to follow the process. Like if you're supposed to write the letter, but you don't remember the process, then you lose marks.*

*H2: If you forget the structure, you're gonna lose marks and it will affect your writing skills.*

*H3: I want to express my feelings or I want to write the words but I don't know how to write, so it's difficult for me to, you know, finish my writing very clearly. And I'm not sure... I can't be hundred percent sure if the teacher can understand, so that affects my marks.*

As to the high achievers, most of the students indicated that their lack of knowledge about the schematic structure of genre-based text hindered their writing performance when they were asked about their difficulties faced in Chinese language writing. It was their deficiency of understanding on text structure that led to their poor performance in writing and even negatively influenced their writing skills and their cognitive thinking. Learning how to write properly depends pretty much on the students' genre knowledge of how the text is structured.

The prerequisite for writing is to be aware of the text structure as to what is conventionally included in the context of culture for narrative and explanatory composition in order to realize their social functions of engaging and informing. Without genre knowledge, even if the high achieving students have all been equipped with ideas and lexico-grammatical resources ready for written composition, they can still not be able to write clearly and effectively due to an insufficient involvement of appropriate staging and phasing for text development. Students' contextual knowledge of genre constrains their writing creativity as well as their development of language skills in the dimension of Discourse.

#### **Lack of lexical variation (high achiever)**

*H1: For English exactly, really, because we are very fluent in speaking. So we know what we're writing. So instead of saying 'I feel really happy', we can say 'I felt great' or 'I felt... I have really good time' Ah, Yea...but for Chinese sometimes we don't know how to describe other than using the same word over and over.*

Lack of lexical variation is another difficulty that the students with high levels of language proficiency usually come across in their writing practices of literacy tasks. It is mostly reflected in the use of Appraisal in the writings to express the authors' emotions and to appreciate the surroundings in narration and explanation. In English writing, they are equipped with sufficient lexico-grammatical choices to realize meaning diversity in their writing. Instead of using "happy" to express the feeling of pleasure, they are also capable of using "feeling great", "having a good time", "cheerful", even "delighted", etc. to show their enjoyment towards the event they are engaged in. However, in Chinese writing, although the students of high achievers have acquired the fundamental lexis to express happiness in Chinese as "開心", they have not yet been explicitly taught how to describe feelings and thinking with some other words with similar meanings. This limitation of lexical resources is the main reason why the students have to use a word over and over again, resulting in word repetition rather than lexical variation in their Chinese writings.

#### **Difficulty in memorizing vocabulary and writing (medium/low achiever)**

*M1: Sometimes we don't know how to write the vocabularies, we often forget... I often forget how to write some vocabularies which I should remember.*

*M2: It is easy to understand the question but sometimes it is hard to write the like... answer the questions in Chinese, because I don't know how to write some of the words. It's hard.*

*L1: Actually my favourite subject is Chinese. I really want to learn Chinese. But sometimes I forgot the words, so I feel it's hard for me to learn Chinese. Yea, actually I really want to learn Chinese. But, but I can't really remember all the words.*

*L2: Sometimes if I, like, I can speak Chinese but then when it comes to writing, I can understand the question but then when I answer, I cannot write some of the Chinese words.*

*L3: For me Chinese writing is okay. But that, the thing is that I can't remember the words.*

As for the medium and low achievers, the most challenging part in the midst of Chinese language writing is their difficulty in Chinese word memorizing and writing. Most of the students found it extremely difficult to write in Chinese. It is even more demanding for non-Chinese speaking students to memorize the Chinese words, not only with respect to their meaning, but also to the formatting of the stroke-based characters. As Chinese and English originated from different language systems, they have developed two totally different writing systems. Differently from English, Chinese characters are composed by non-alphabetic stroke-oriented constituents. To non-Chinese speaking students, the writing of Chinese characters is like drawing, which seem quite interesting to them but at the same time causes many practical problems to their memory as well as for word memorizing and writing.

During the process of Chinese writing, the students could well understand the literacy writing tasks that they were required to complete. However, having been kept informed of the topics that needed to be written up, most of the students at the low and medium level were not able to construct their thinking and feelings into writings with Chinese characters with meaning potential. However, meanings can be relatively easier to make by speaking as shared from the perspective of the students' own experience. When it comes to writing about the same question, students may fail to write their utterances into Chinese characters due to their forgetting of the stroke construction of the words that have come up in their minds. Thus, in regard to students' meaning making, writing is more challenging than speaking. Writing prevents the students' ideas from being realized. Hence, there is a great need for intensive strategies to help students to learn to recognize and write Chinese characters and wordings in order to facilitate their Chinese language writing for literacy improvement.

## CONCLUSION

This study is of great significance in language teaching, learning and assessment. In order to facilitate the teaching process, identifying the symptoms faced by the

students is a prerequisite to a thorough understanding of their learning process. Hence, with a view to helping students improve their writing skills, revealing their difficulties in their L2 Chinese writing is the first step and a key to gaining access to the ways that improve the students' writing capacity. Based on the text analysis by means of Reading to Learn (R2L) assessment criteria, the students' writing difficulties at word level, sentence level and whole text level have been revealed by examining students with different levels of learning ability.

At the whole text level, the students at all levels of achievement were found to have difficulty in constructing correctly the schematic structure and the staging of narration and explanation. Their writing performance in these two genres indicates that explanatory composition is harder than narration writing. Without the support of accurate stages and detailed elaboration in phases, the writing purpose can only be partially fulfilled, leading to an underdevelopment of field, tenor, and mode for content delivery and reader engagement. At the sentence and word levels, the students were confronted with a deficiency of lexico-grammatical knowledge for syntactical and lexical variation to build the field. Some students with weaker language proficiency experienced special difficulty in Chinese character writing, even using English for meaning-making in Chinese language writing. In the process of discourse construction, students had little awareness of using appraisal to express personal feelings or subjective reflection towards the happenings in narrative writing, and did not use it to appreciate the target surroundings in explanatory composition. All writings were loosely constructed without strong connections by conjunctions. Repetition of noun subjects instead of using pronouns was usually detected in the writings of the relatively lower achievers.

The students themselves have also been aware of their own deficiency in Chinese language writing, which corresponds to and is well reflected in their writing performance. As to the high achiever, lack of genre knowledge about text structure and lexical variation are the main challenges faced by non-Chinese Speaking students in the course of L2 Chinese writing. Differently from the high achievers, students at the low and medium levels found Chinese word memorizing and writing extremely difficult, thus hindering their thinking in writing when engaged in the literacy tasks. Hence, students at different levels of achievement have different kinds of difficulty in the language learning process. Once the symptoms of the students' learning problems have been identified, there is a great need for pedagogic instruction that is straight to the point, thus catering for the students' learning needs with different pedagogic devices.

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