

A Survey of English Majors' Writing Ability Based on China's Standards of English Language Ability

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Abstract: *China's Standards of English Language Ability (hereinafter referred to as CSE) was officially released in 2018, marking the first English proficiency assessment standard specifically tailored for English learners in China and ushering in a new phase in the development of China's English proficiency assessment system. This study investigates the English writing abilities of English major students based on the summary table and sub-item descriptions of written expression ability in the CSE, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The aim is to assist teachers in formulating appropriate teaching objectives and designing effective teaching content, thereby improving students' English writing proficiency. The results indicate that the written expression ability of English major students falls between Levels 4 and 5 as defined in the CSE. Students demonstrate their strongest performance in written description, while written argumentation appears to be their relatively weakest area. Based on these findings, this study aims to provide beneficial insights for English writing instruction.*

Keywords: China's Standards of English Language Ability, Written expression ability, English majors.

1. Introduction

China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE), jointly released by the State Language Work Committee and the Ministry of Education in 2018, is China's first English proficiency assessment standard specifically designed for English learners, marking a new stage in the development of China's English proficiency assessment system. It provides a unified reference standard for English learning, teaching, and assessment activities in China by depicting the language use characteristics of English learners. The development of the CSE is grounded in the theoretical model of communicative language ability (Bachman 1990; Bachman & Palmer 1996). It takes language use as its starting point and comprehensively considers the practical needs for describing language abilities as well as the specificities of China's foreign language learning and educational environment. This has established a theoretical framework for language ability that fits China's national conditions and is applicable to English learning, teaching, and assessment practices (Liu & Han 2018). The CSE adopts "Can-Do" descriptors, clearly and directly outlining the overall composition of language ability, various specific skills, and different proficiency levels. It divides the English proficiency of language learners and users into three stages: basic, intermediate, and advanced, each containing three distinct levels, totaling nine levels (National Education Examinations Authority 2018: 2). The CSE not only comprehensively reflects the current skill levels of English learners in China but also provides precise and effective goal-setting guidance for learners pursuing different learning objectives (Liu & Peng 2017). For teachers' instruction, these descriptors serve as valuable auxiliary tools (Wang 2018). Furthermore, the self-assessment criteria within the scale can enhance learners' metacognitive awareness, embodying a learner-centered educational philosophy, encouraging learners to actively plan their learning paths, take responsibility for their learning, and achieve a transition from passive reception to active exploration (Liu 2017).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to the CSE

The international development of language proficiency standards and scales has a long history, dating back to the FSI scale jointly developed by the U.S. government and the Foreign Service Institute in 1955. Subsequently, various language proficiency scales emerged in Europe, Canada, and other regions, among which the most influential is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) developed by the Council of Europe. With the deepening of economic globalization and increasingly frequent international exchanges, English, as an international lingua franca, plays an increasingly prominent role in cross-cultural communication. Against this backdrop, formulating an English proficiency scale suited to China's national conditions became imperative (Zou et al. 2015).

Over the past decade, China's education system has gradually shifted from the traditional "teacher-centered" model to a "student-centered" model during its evolution, focusing on cultivating students' autonomous learning abilities, inquiry-based learning, and cooperative learning skills. Liu (2017) points out that this shift aligns closely with the development philosophy of autonomy, inquiry, and cooperative learning advocated by the CSE. With the popularization and implementation of the CSE, the research on its practical application has increased steadily. Deng and Deng (2017), from the perspective of writing cognitive activities, delved into the writing strategy framework within the CSE, constructing a cognitive model of writing activities that focuses on cognitive processes, is rooted in knowledge application, and highlights strategic regulation, subsequently proposing a writing strategy system for the CSE. Pan (2017), drawing on text type theory from systemic functional linguistics, analyzed the writing abilities within the CSE and constructed a model of typical writing activities therein. Pan

and Wu (2019) further elaborated on how to implement formative assessment using the English writing scale in primary and secondary school English writing instruction. To explore more effective English writing teaching methods and thereby enhance college students' English writing skills, Liang (2020) explored measures for aligning the CSE with English writing teaching. Wang (2020) conducted a study aligning a local university's institutional English proficiency test with the CSE, the results of which hold significant reference value for the future development of college English institutional tests and English teaching. Wang (2021) integrated the written expression strategies from the CSE into summary writing instruction within the College English Integrated Course, actively seeking practical pathways for teaching English writing to college students. Zhou (2021), through a survey of students at a provincial university in Guangdong Province and analysis of collected data using the Rasch model, confirmed the validity of the Self-Assessment Scale. Zhu (2021) utilized the CSE to investigate the English reading self-assessment abilities of vocational college students, finding that the stronger the students' language ability, the higher the accuracy of their self-assessment, and suggested caution when using self-assessment as a testing tool for vocational students. Deng et al. (2021) conducted a validity study on the writing scale. The results confirmed that the descriptors in the writing scale are comprehensive in content, reasonable in classification, and have good discrimination in difficulty levels. This will contribute to accelerating the construction of applied writing assessment standards in China. He et al. (2021) found that when the CSE is applied to writing assessment in institutional tests, the higher the CSE level students achieve, the longer their essays, the more varied and rich their vocabulary use, and the more complex their syntactic structures, but this improvement is not directly related to the coherence of the articles. Zhang and Wang (2022), based on dynamic assessment theory, conducted empirical research on the application of student self-assessment using the CSE in college English writing classrooms. Pan (2022), starting from the characteristics of written expression ability within the CSE, explained its necessity and importance for the application and sustainable development of the CSE. Sun and Wang (2022) assessed graduate students' academic reading and writing abilities based on the CSE. Sun et al. (2024) conducted a study aligning the written expression test of the general high school academic proficiency examination with the CSE; the results

can provide a reference for learners and teachers to understand the language ability reflected by the scores of the academic proficiency examination. These empirical studies and evaluation efforts hold significant reference value for enhancing the efficacy of the CSE and its subsequent revision and improvement.

In addition to domestic applications, it is valuable to compare the CSE with internationally recognized language proficiency frameworks, particularly the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Both scales share a common theoretical foundation in communicative language competence and adopt an action-oriented approach that emphasizes real-world language use. However, several key differences distinguish the two frameworks. Firstly, the CSE is specifically tailored to the Chinese educational context, taking into account the unique characteristics of English as a foreign language learning environment in China, whereas the CEFR was designed as a pan-European framework applicable to multiple languages and diverse learning contexts. Secondly, the CSE employs a nine-level hierarchical structure, providing more granular differentiation at the intermediate and advanced levels compared to the CEFR's six-level framework. This finer gradation allows for more precise placement of learners within China's educational system, from primary school through to postgraduate studies. Thirdly, the CSE places greater emphasis on the mediation skills and strategic competence, reflecting the increasing recognition of these abilities in contemporary language teaching and assessment. The alignment between the CSE and CEFR has significant implications for international recognition of Chinese learners' English proficiency and for facilitating educational exchange and collaboration between China and other countries. As noted by Zou et al. (2015), such alignment studies are essential for ensuring that China's educational standards are internationally comparable while maintaining their relevance to the domestic context.

Taking the writing scale as an example, it consists of four main parts: the general ability scale, sub-skill ability scales, self-assessment scale, and writing strategy scale, as illustrated in Figure 1. The general ability scale comprehensively presents an overview of the writing abilities that English learners and users should master. The self-assessment scale provides learners with a self-assessment tool to help them evaluate their own English writing proficiency.

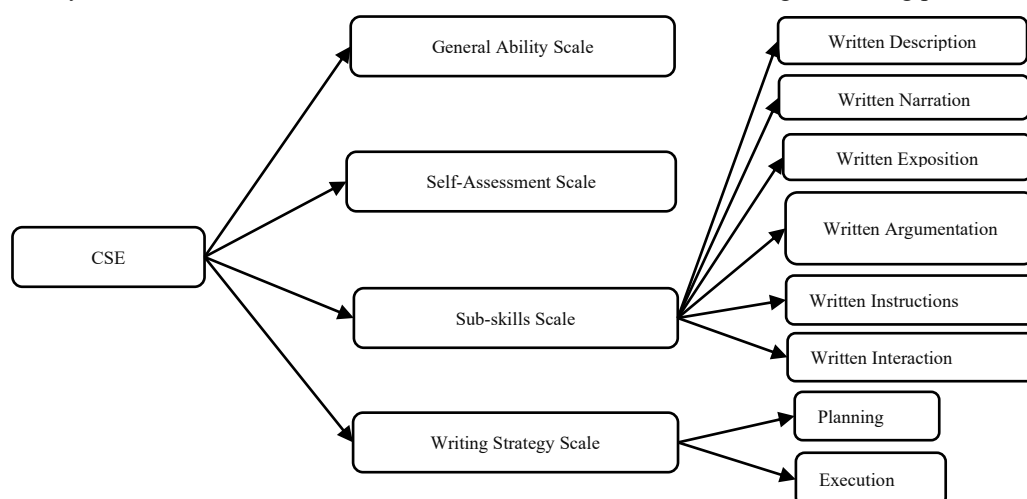


Figure 1: Composition of the Writing Scale

In the CSE, the level of “intermediate learners and users” (covering Levels 4-6) corresponds to China’s educational system, primarily targeting students in the senior secondary education stage and university English learners in the higher education stage, especially lower-level English majors. Specifically, Level 5 and Level 6 are roughly equivalent to the current College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) and Band 6 (CET-6) levels, respectively (Wang 2018).

2.2 Theoretical Foundation

Constructivist learning theory, proposed by Piaget and other Western psychologists, is rooted in cognitive learning theory and advocates a teacher-guided, student-centered learning model. Gray (1997) also asserted that constructivism is student-based rather than teacher-based, and the teacher’s role should be to facilitate students’ learning process by allowing them to observe, create, guess, and construct knowledge. The core of constructivism lies in subverting the traditional classroom role of the teacher as the sole transmitter of knowledge, instead encouraging students to become active explorers and discoverers of knowledge during the learning process. Teachers are no longer mere knowledge imparters but transform into planners and guides of learning activities, dedicated to creating a classroom atmosphere that stimulates students’ active inquiry and independent exploration. Within this framework, the teacher plays a crucial guiding role, not only imparting knowledge but also cultivating students’ self-assessment awareness, enabling them to reflect on and adjust their learning processes, thereby continuously improving learning efficiency and quality. Constructivism posits that the learning process is essentially a natural process in which learners actively process and personally construct foreign language information based on their own language ability and life experiences. The ultimate goal of this process is to achieve a profound understanding and mastery of the meaning of knowledge. Furthermore, constructivist learning theory emphasizes that learning activities are not limited to understanding and memorizing knowledge content but also serve as crucial pathways for the development of students’ self-assessment and self-regulation abilities. It encourages learners to understand their learning situation promptly through self-diagnosis and evaluation, achieving a role shift from passively accepting assessment to actively engaging in self-assessment. This shift not only helps enhance learners’ self-awareness but also stimulates their learning motivation and promotes personalized growth. Additionally, the teacher acts as a guide in teaching activities, needing to understand students’ self-assessment situations deeply, and stimulate students’ intrinsic learning motivation through effective guidance strategies. This includes teaching students practical learning strategies, cultivating their self-assessment ability, encouraging them to bravely engage in self-diagnosis and reflection, thereby helping them set and achieve personal learning goals, and jointly promoting the improvement of teaching quality. In summary, constructivist learning theory provides a new perspective and method for modern education, aiming to achieve more efficient and personalized learning by enhancing students’ subjectivity and autonomy.

Based on constructivist theory, this study adopts the writing ability self-assessment scale and sub-skill scales from the CSE to enable students to conduct self-assessments of their

English writing abilities, thereby allowing teachers to comprehensively understand students’ current writing situations and provide effective support for teaching. The relevance of constructivist theory to the CSE framework merits further elaboration. The CSE’s emphasis on “Can-Do” descriptors aligns closely with constructivist principles, as these descriptors describe what learners can achieve through active engagement with language tasks rather than merely listing discrete linguistic knowledge points. This shift from knowledge-based to competence-based description reflects the constructivist view that learning is demonstrated through performance in authentic contexts. Furthermore, the self-assessment scales embedded within the CSE embody the constructivist principle of learner autonomy. When students engage in self-assessment against the CSE descriptors, they are not passive recipients of external evaluation but active participants in constructing their understanding of their own abilities. This process of self-diagnosis and self-reflection is central to constructivist pedagogy, as it enables learners to identify gaps in their knowledge, set personal learning goals, and monitor their own progress. The teacher’s role in this process, as conceptualized by constructivism, is to facilitate this self-assessment process by providing appropriate scaffolding, modeling reflective practices, and creating a classroom environment that values learner agency. In the context of writing instruction, this means moving beyond teacher-dominated feedback cycles toward collaborative assessment practices that empower students to take ownership of their writing development. The integration of CSE-based self-assessment into writing classrooms thus represents a practical application of constructivist principles, transforming assessment from a measurement tool into a learning tool. Therefore, constructivist learning theory lays the theoretical foundation for this study.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a combination of questionnaire surveys and individual interviews to address the following two questions:

- 1) Using the CSE as a benchmark, what is the overall level of the current English written expression ability of first-year English major students?
- 2) Based on the sub-item descriptions of written expression ability in the CSE, what problems and deficiencies still exist in the English writing of first-year English major students?

3.1 Research Subjects

This study selected students from two first-year classes of English majors at a university in Northeast China as research subjects. Questionnaires were distributed to them via the Questionnaire Star platform, and subsequently, three students who participated in the survey were selected for interviews.

3.2 Research Instruments

This study employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative research instrument is a self-designed questionnaire on the writing ability of English major college students. Its content is developed based on the

descriptions in the general table and sub-skills of written expression ability in the CSE, covering aspects such as students' basic information, overall written expression ability, vocabulary knowledge application ability, syntactic knowledge application ability, and discourse knowledge application ability. The questionnaire consists of 34 items. Part 1 (Items 1-13) comprises Level 4 ability descriptors, Part 2 (Items 14-25) comprises Level 5 ability descriptors, and Part 3 (Items 26-34) comprises Level 6 ability descriptors. Level 5 is equivalent to the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) level (Wang 2018). The questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale, where "1" represents "strongly disagree," "2" represents "somewhat disagree," "3" represents "somewhat agree," "4" represents "relatively agree," and "5" represents "strongly agree." To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, this study used SPSS 27.0, integrated with Questionnaire Star, to conduct a reliability analysis. The Cronbach's Alpha value for the questionnaire was 0.938, indicating good reliability. The analysis results are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Reliability of the Questionnaire

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.938	34

Reliability refers to the consistency of the questionnaire and can be judged by the Alpha value. Generally, if the Alpha value is greater than 0.7, it indicates that the quality of the questionnaire is relatively good. As can be seen from Table 1, the Alpha value of the questionnaire is 0.938, which is greater than 0.7. This demonstrates that the questionnaire has high reliability.

The qualitative research method employed was semi-structured interviews. To supplement the findings of the questionnaire survey, after analyzing the questionnaire results, three students were selected as interviewees based on high,

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of College Students' English Written Expression Ability

Level	Sample Size	Mean	Completely Unable	Barely Able	Basically Able	Relatively Able	Completely Able
Level 4	60	3.88	3.67%	5.9%	16.67%	38.62%	37.15%
Level 5	60	3.21	8.33%	18.33%	35%	31.67%	6.67%
Level 6	60	2.42	31.67%	30%	18.33%	13.33%	6.67%

4.1 Analysis of the Overall Level of English Majors' Written Expression Ability

As shown in Table 2, the overall written expression ability of first-year English major students is at CSE Level 4 (M=3.88), approaching Level 5 (M=3.21), but has not yet fully reached the proficiency required for Level 5. This result indicates that students possess foundational English writing skills and can complete general writing tasks, but they still struggle when faced with more complex and abstract writing requirements. The mean for Level 6 is only 2.42, falling within the low-level range, indicating that the vast majority of students have not yet acquired high-level writing skills, such as writing logically rigorous, deeply argued essays or academic short papers.

This finding aligns with Wang's (2018) assertion that Level 5 corresponds to the CET-4 level. As first-year English majors, their goal should be to quickly and stably achieve Level 5 proficiency and lay the foundation for transitioning to Level 6.

medium, and low proficiency levels for approximately one-hour semi-structured interviews after the questionnaire results were analyzed. The interview outline was developed based on the CSE and the questionnaire results. Before the interviews, the purpose and significance of the interviews were explained to the respondents. With the consent of the interviewees, the interviews were audio-recorded using a voice recorder throughout the session. The discussions focused on various aspects of English writing ability, allowing students to share their current status, problems, and needs regarding their own English writing abilities.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

This study employed the Questionnaire Star platform and SPSS statistical software. First, the reliability and validity of the questionnaire were tested, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.938, indicating good reliability and suitability for formal investigation. Subsequently, questionnaires were distributed to two first-year classes. A total of 64 questionnaires were distributed, and 60 valid questionnaires were returned, yielding an effective response rate of 93.8%. Based on this, three students who participated in the questionnaire survey were selected for semi-structured interviews to delve deeper into the reasons behind the data. The CSE's descriptors for proficiency levels are concise, clear, and standardized, enabling a clear demarcation of different ability levels (Liu 2017). In this study, items 1-13 belong to Level 4 descriptors of the written expression scale, with an average score of 3.88. Items 14-25 belong to Level 5 descriptors, with an average score of 3.21. Items 26-34 belong to Level 6 descriptors, with an average score of 2.42. According to Oxford's (1990) classification criteria for the five-point Likert scale, a mean ≤ 2.4 indicates a low level, a mean in the range of 2.5-3.4 indicates a medium level, and a mean ≥ 3.5 indicates a high level.

However, the current data shows that a considerable proportion of students still choose "Barely Able" (18.33%) or "Basically Able" (35%) for the Level 5 descriptors, indicating a significant gap from "Relatively Able" and "Completely Able."

Subsequent interviews further confirmed this finding. Among the three interviewed students, two self-assessed themselves as being between Levels 4 and 5, and one self-assessed as having reached Level 5. Respondent A (self-assessed Level 4) mentioned: "I think writing daily emails or diaries is okay, but if I need to write an argumentative essay with a viewpoint, I don't know how to organize the language, and I often can't finish writing halfway through." Respondent C (self-assessed Level 5) stated: "I can basically express my views, but I need more practice to make the arguments more persuasive and the wording more authentic." These qualitative feedback complements the questionnaire data, revealing the genuine difficulties students face in their writing abilities.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of College Students' English Written Expression Sub-skills

Dimension	Sample Size	Mean	Completely Unable	Barely Able	Basically Able	Relatively Able	Completely Able
Description	60	3.64	4.65%	11.74%	23.47%	33.5%	26.64%
Exposition	60	3.21	9.3%	17.6%	27.6%	34.2%	11.3%
Argumentation	60	3.09	15.06%	30.84%	21.6%	21.9%	10.6%
Interaction	60	3.52	7.01%	12.27%	25.98%	30.26%	24.45%

4.2 Analysis of English Majors' Sub-skills in Written Expression

To delve deeper into the current state of students' written expression abilities, this study divides written expression ability into four dimensions based on the CSE's written expression sub-skills scales: written description, written exposition, written argumentation, and written interaction.

As shown in Table 3, students' performance across the four dimensions ranks from highest to lowest as follows: Written Description (M=3.64) > Written Interaction (M=3.52) > Written Exposition (M=3.21) > Written Argumentation (M=3.09).

"Written description" refers to the ability to clearly describe familiar people, objects, scenes, or experiences in daily life. Students performed best in the description dimension, with a mean of 3.64, falling within the high-level range. This indicates that students are more adept at writing tasks closely related to their life experiences. During the interview, Respondent B said: "Writing descriptive things is relatively easy, like introducing my hometown or my friends. I have pictures in my mind, and sentences are easier to organize." This finding is consistent with the research results of Sun and Wang (2022), indicating that students perform better on concrete, life-oriented writing tasks.

"Written interaction" refers to communication through written forms, such as letters, emails, and social media messages. The mean for this dimension is 3.52, also a relatively high level. This suggests that students can better adjust their language style and content in writing tasks requiring attention to the reader and achieving communicative purposes. This may be related to the frequent use of English by contemporary college students for online communication (e.g., social media, email correspondence).

In contrast, the means for "written exposition" (M=3.21) and "written argumentation" (M=3.09) are significantly lower, with argumentation being the weakest of the four dimensions. Written exposition requires students to objectively explain or clarify things or phenomena, while written argumentation goes a step further, requiring students to elaborate on personal views on an issue and provide corresponding supporting evidence. The data shows that in the argumentation dimension, 45.9% of students are concentrated in the two lower score segments ("Completely Unable" and "Barely Able"), while the combined proportion for "Relatively Able" and "Completely Able" is only 32.5%. This indicates that over 40% of students face significant difficulties when confronted with writing tasks that require independent thinking, logical organization, and critical expression. The interview data provide richer insights into these quantitative findings. Respondent B, who demonstrated stronger writing abilities, elaborated on the challenges of argumentative writing: "When

I write descriptions, I can rely on what I see and experience directly. But for argumentation, I have to construct a logical framework in my mind first. Sometimes I know what I want to say in Chinese, but when I try to express it in English, the logic gets lost because I'm struggling with the language." This observation highlights the interaction between cognitive and linguistic demands in argumentative writing. The cognitive load of constructing a logical argument competes with the linguistic load of accurate expression, often resulting in simplified arguments or fragmented logic. Respondent A added: "I notice that my classmates who read more English news and opinion articles seem to write better arguments. They have more ideas and know how to structure them." This comment supports the language input perspective mentioned in the literature review, suggesting that exposure to argumentative texts in English may enhance students' genre awareness and provide models for their own writing. These qualitative insights suggest that improving argumentative writing requires not only linguistic support but also cognitive scaffolding that helps students manage the dual demands of content generation and language formulation.

4.3 Specific Manifestations and Cause Analysis of Students' Writing Weaknesses

Combining questionnaire data and interview feedback, this study identifies the following specific problems in students' writing:

1) Unclear Arguments and Insufficient Evidence

In the argumentation dimension, students commonly report "not knowing what viewpoint to write" or "having a viewpoint but not knowing how to prove it." Respondent A candidly stated: "When the teacher asks us to write an argumentative essay, I often feel my own views are naive, or I can't find suitable examples to support them." This indicates a lack of independent thinking and critical analysis skills among students, who are accustomed to the standard answer model of exam-oriented education and struggle to form and express personal opinions.

2) Logical Confusion and Loose Structure

Some students lack a clear logical thread when organizing their essays, with abrupt transitions between paragraphs and a lack of necessary connection between arguments and evidence. This reflects a deficiency in students' application of discourse knowledge, particularly in macro-structural design and the use of micro-cohesive devices. This echoes the findings of He et al. (2021), namely that the CSE level is not directly related to article coherence, indicating that coherence is a weak link in writing instruction.

3) Monotonous Language Expression and Lexical Poverty

Although students perform well in the description dimension, the complexity of language expression notably decreases in the exposition and argumentation dimensions. Students tend to use simple sentences and basic vocabulary, lacking the ability and awareness to use complex sentence structures and advanced vocabulary. Respondent C expressed: "I know I should use some advanced vocabulary and sentence patterns, but I can never think of them while writing, or I use them unnaturally." This suggests that students' language output ability is not yet fully internalized, and they tend to revert to their most familiar ways of expression under the pressure of writing.

The causes of the above problems are multifaceted: First, the influence of exam-oriented education is a fundamental factor. English teaching at the high school level focuses heavily on training for objective test items like reading comprehension, cloze tests, and listening. Writing instruction is often perfunctory, relying on templates and formulaic approaches, lacking systematic cultivation of students' critical thinking and logical expression abilities. When students enter university and face writing tasks that require independent thought and in-depth expression, they naturally feel overwhelmed.

Second, the type of writing training is monotonous. Pan (2017) pointed out that the writing abilities in the CSE cover multiple text types, yet current writing teaching still predominantly focuses on narration and argumentation, with insufficient training in exposition and practical writing, leading to students' weak ability to transfer skills across different text types.

Third, students lack effective writing strategies. The writing strategy framework proposed by Deng and Deng (2017) includes stages such as planning, execution, evaluation, and regulation. Interviews revealed that most students lack planning awareness before writing, self-monitoring during writing, and effective revision after writing. This absence of strategic knowledge limits the improvement of students' writing abilities.

Finally, metacognitive ability is insufficient. Constructivist theory emphasizes learners' self-reflection and self-regulation, but currently, students generally lack reflective awareness of their own writing processes, unable to accurately identify problems and actively adjust learning strategies. Liu (2017) pointed out that using the CSE self-assessment tools can help enhance learners' self-awareness. However, in this study, students' use of the self-assessment scale is still in its initial stage, failing to fully leverage its function in promoting metacognitive development.

5. Conclusion

Through questionnaire surveys and interview analyses of first-year English majors' written expression abilities, this study reveals the overall level, structural characteristics, and existing problems of their writing skills. These findings not only enrich our understanding of the current state of English majors' writing abilities but also provide empirical evidence for the application of the CSE in teaching practice.

5.1 Main Findings

The results of this study show that the overall written expression ability of first-year English major students lies between CSE Levels 4 and 5, not yet fully reaching Level 5. This finding contrasts with Wan's (2021) study on non-English major students, where the latter generally remained below Level 4. Comparatively, English major students, due to the advantages of their professional orientation and curriculum, do demonstrate a higher starting point in English writing. However, as a student group about to face the Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4), the fact that the transition of their writing ability from Level 4 to Level 5 has not yet been fully achieved.

At the sub-skill level, students' written description ability ($M=3.64$) is significantly better than their written argumentation ability ($M=3.09$), presenting a structural characteristic of "strong description, weak argumentation." The causes of this disparity are multifaceted: From a cognitive difficulty perspective, descriptive writing relies on life experiences and intuitive perception, belonging to basic cognitive activities; whereas argumentative writing demands abstract thinking and logical reasoning, belonging to higher-order cognitive activities. From a language input perspective, the reading materials students encountered in high school are predominantly narrative texts, with limited exposure to argumentative texts, resulting in insufficient perception of the discourse features of argumentative writing. From a writing strategy perspective, students show significant deficiencies in metacognitive stages such as planning, monitoring, and revising, which further exacerbates the difficulty of argumentative writing.

5.2 Implications

The CSE serves not only as a yardstick for measuring the English knowledge and abilities of Chinese learners but also as a crucial basis for English teachers to formulate teaching objectives, select teaching methods, and design assessment tasks, thus bridging English learning, teaching, and assessment (Liu 2017).

The results of this study have multiple implications for the reform of English writing instruction for English majors. First, strengthen systematic training in argumentative writing. Addressing the current weakness in students' argumentation skills, teachers should increase the proportion of argumentative essay writing in writing courses and adopt a process-oriented teaching approach, guiding students through the complete writing process of topic selection, idea generation, outlining, drafting, revising, and reflecting. In the initial stages of training, discourse templates and argumentation frameworks for argumentative essays can be provided to help students establish a basic argumentative structure; in later stages, gradually reduce scaffolding support to encourage students to form their own writing styles.

Second, emphasize explicit teaching of discourse knowledge. Students' problems with logical confusion largely stem from a lack of discourse knowledge. Teachers should consciously teach paragraph development methods (such as

exemplification, comparison, cause and effect), discourse cohesion devices (such as transition words, reference, ellipsis), and argumentation structures (such as the claim-reason-evidence model). This explicit teaching should be combined with model text analysis, allowing students to perceive through reading, acquire through imitation, and internalize through creation.

Third, integrate critical thinking cultivation into writing teaching. Writing and thinking are inseparable. The weakness in students' argumentation ability is rooted in their weak thinking ability. Teachers can guide students to learn questioning, analysis, and evaluation through activities such as question chain design, Socratic questioning, and debates. The "claim-evidence-reasoning" triangle model can be introduced to train students to identify valid arguments and construct logical chains. He et al. (2021) suggested that writing instruction should shift from a purely "linguistic accuracy" orientation to a "language and thinking equally emphasized" orientation, a viewpoint worth adopting.

Fourth, leverage the formative assessment function of the CSE. Pan and Wu (2019) explored the application of the CSE in formative assessment in primary and secondary school English education, and their experience has reference value for college English teaching as well. Teachers can transform the CSE sub-skill descriptors into classroom assessment rubrics for student self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher feedback. This rubric-based evaluation method can make assessment criteria transparent, help students clarify their direction for effort, and achieve "assessment for learning."

Fifth, cultivate students' metacognitive abilities and autonomous learning habits. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that learners' self-reflection and self-regulation are key to effective learning. Teachers should guide students in formulating personal writing development plans, engaging in regular writing reflections, and establishing writing portfolios to document their growth trajectory. As Gu and Liu (2022) pointed out, establishing study groups or writing tutoring centers to provide personalized writing guidance for students is an effective way to enhance the effectiveness of writing instruction. When students learn to monitor their writing process, evaluate their writing outcomes, and adjust their writing strategies, they truly become masters of their own learning.

5.3 Limitation

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the sample is limited to 60 first-year English major students from a single university in Northeast China, which limits the generalizability of the findings. English majors from different regions or institutions may exhibit different writing profiles due to variations in entrance requirements, curriculum design, and instructional quality. Future research should include multiple institutions across different geographical regions to capture the diversity of English majors' writing abilities nationwide.

Second, this study employed a cross-sectional design,

capturing students' writing abilities at a single point in time. A longitudinal design tracking the same cohort of students throughout their university years would provide valuable data on how writing abilities develop over time and which instructional interventions are most effective at different stages. Additionally, this study relied primarily on self-report data through questionnaires. While self-assessment is valuable for understanding students' perceptions of their abilities, future studies should incorporate actual writing samples analyzed using analytic scoring rubrics to provide more objective measures of writing proficiency.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of research on CSE application in Chinese higher education and provides practical implications for English writing instruction.

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