Master’s and Doctoral Theses on Second Language Writing: A Survey of the Emerging Voices in China

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Master’s and Doctoral Theses on Second Language Writing:
A Survey of the Emerging Voices in China

Yue Chen

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Finally, my appreciation goes to my roommates, friends, and the kittens who accompanied, supported, and encouraged me to complete my thesis. Throughout the writing of this thesis, my roommates have created a quiet and encouraging environment for me to focus on writing, and my friends, Yuanjun Qi and Heather Gemmen, have proofread the chapters I wrote. Their support gives me energy to keep writing.
Abstract

Graduate students in China have addressed concerns about second language writing (SLW) in their theses and dissertations since 2000, but their voices are not represented in the current SLW literature. The present study aimed to investigate resident Chinese graduate students’ research in the field of SLW. The author reviewed the abstracts of all master’s theses and PhD dissertations on SLW completed in Chinese Universities between the year 2003 and 2012. The abstracts were collected from China Doctoral Dissertations Full-text Database and China Master’s Theses Full-text Database. Each abstract was coded for major topic, research type, and target population. The coded abstracts were analyzed in order to identify trends and patterns in Chinese graduate students’ theses and dissertations on SLW.

The author found that the number of graduate theses on SLW has increased greatly during this period, with a wide array of topics being investigated each year. Writing instruction was the most frequently researched topic, and empirical research was the most frequently adopted research type. The author also analyzed reasons for the increase in SLW studies, the large variety of SLW topics, the focus on writing instruction, and the large number of empirical studies. The findings indicate that Chinese graduate students have increased their knowledge of EFL writing by including SLW topics in their master’s theses and PhD dissertations.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of Purpose

This study aimed to investigate resident Chinese graduate students’ emerging research in the field of second language writing (SLW) in China. I reviewed the abstracts of all master’s theses and PhD dissertations on SLW completed by Chinese graduate students in Chinese universities in the past ten years (2003-2012), in order to identify trends and patterns in the topics investigated, the type of research undertaken, and the populations studied.

Background of the Problem

EFL Writing in China

China has the largest population of English language learners in the world. According to various estimates, China had a large population of 200 to 350 million people who were identified as English language learners at the beginning of the 21st century (Bolton, 2003; Yang, 2006). At present, English is one of the required subjects in China’s educational curricula, from elementary to tertiary level. Among the four basic skills in English, writing has been regarded as Chinese students’ least proficient skill, even though writing has become an important part of English education in China (Zhu, 2011).

In order to improve the not-so-satisfactory performance of Chinese students’ writing in English, the Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China has improved China’s English curricula in grades 3 to 12 as well as at college level. According to the Ministry of Education, when students graduate from elementary school (Grade 6), they should be able to
write simple descriptive sentences in English based on information from pictures, words, or sample sentences, and when they graduate from high school (Grade 12), students should be able to write personal letters and descriptive essays, and make comments in English. The Ministry of Education has also published detailed curricula requirements for college English teaching and learning. College graduates are required to be able to write about personal experiences and emotions in English, and should be able to write a 120-word English essay in 30 minutes on a common topic with complete content, clear focus, proper word choice, and coherent development.

Even though the Ministry of Education has established goals for the development of English writing abilities for each educational level, Chinese students’ English writing performance is still far from satisfactory. According to the 2012 test score summary for TOEFL Internet-based Test (TOEFL iBT) published by Educational Testing Service, Chinese EFL examinees’ average writing score was 20, ranking a little below the average writing score in Asia, 20.83, and far behind the scores from European countries, which was 22.28 (Educational Testing Service, 2013).

**EFL Writing Studies in China**

Since the 1990s, the poor performance of Chinese students’ English writing has caused scholars to pay more attention to Chinese students’ writing in English and to seek instructional methods to improve it. This led to a dramatic increase in the number of publications on EFL writing in China at the end of the twentieth century. In fact, according to China National
Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) Database, the most comprehensive database of scholarly articles in the country, 96% of the journal articles on EFL writing in China were published after 1995 (See Figure 1). The large number of researchers examining factors related to EFL writing has promoted EFL writing to become a research area in China.

Figure 1. Change in Numbers of China’s EFL Writing Publications (1962-2012)

EFL writing research in China, in general, is heavily influenced by second language writing researchers from other countries. Since the 1980s, researchers in China drew from research findings by western scholars, adopted the western SLW theories and pedagogies to improve Chinese students’ writing abilities, compared Chinese students’ EFL writing with their peers’ ESL writing in western countries, and began to explore various issues related to Chinese students’ EFL writing, including the unique features involved in Chinese students’ EFL writing products and processes (Liu, 2007; McKay & Wong, 1996; You, 2004). Especially during the
past decade, the field of SLW has witnessed a dramatic development with an increase in the number of studies and publications both in China and in western countries (Casanave, 2004; Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008; Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, & Warschauer, 2003; Silva, 2011; Yao & Cheng, 2005; Zhu, 2011).

Researchers in China have examined the differences between ESL writing and EFL writing and identified unique difficulties faced by Chinese EFL student writers (Cai, 1999). Researchers have found that Chinese students have their own distinct patterns and difficulties in English composition, and have argued that writing is a weak link in native Chinese students’ English learning because of differences in thought patterns and lack of sufficient practice (Cai, 1999; Zhao, Hao, & Gao, 2010). After investigating the writing process and textual and rhetoric features in Chinese EFL students’ written texts, researchers developed various pedagogical methods to facilitate students’ familiarization with English composition structures and western expectations towards academic writing (Cargill, O’Connor, & Li, 2012; Cheng, 2008; Li, 2007).

**Chinese Graduate Students in EFL Writing**

The increasing publications on SLW in China have motivated resident Chinese graduate students to address concerns about English writing in their theses and dissertations. In the past decade, resident Chinese graduate students have researched a variety of topics related to foreign language writing in English, including theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical issues.
Graduate students are novice researchers and the new generation of scholarship, whose work contributes to the overall development of EFL writing studies in China. However, their voices are relatively unrepresented in the current EFL writing literature. One reason for this is the difficulty of getting published in professional journals as a graduate student. Another is the fact that established scholars rarely reference graduate works in their own scholarship, and research review articles do not include the database of theses and dissertations among the sources they survey. To date, the EFL writing studies conducted by graduate students in China have not been reviewed.

The present study seeks to address this gap. I analyzed the abstracts of all theses and dissertations on Chinese EFL writing produced by graduate students in Chinese universities in the past decade to identify the topics that have been studied, the preferred research type, and the populations that were studied. In the remainder of this document, I will use the term of “Chinese graduate students” to represent resident Chinese students who completed graduate degrees and wrote theses and dissertations in China.

**Research Questions**

The specific research questions I investigated in this study are:

1. What are the trends and patterns in the graduate theses and dissertations on SLW produced in China over the past ten years (2003-2012)?
   a. What SLW topics have been investigated?
   b. How many of the theses/dissertations are empirical and non-empirical?
c. What student populations have been studied?

d. How have the research topics, research types, and target populations changed over the ten-year period?

2. How do the trends and patterns in unpublished Chinese graduate research compare to those in published research on EFL writing in China?

**Importance of the Problem and Rationale for the Study**

Chinese graduate students’ voices are important to the development of EFL writing in China because they may become future researchers and teachers who lead the directions for EFL writing research and teaching. Many of the future researchers in SLW in China and many of the future English composition teachers will come from the pool of recent graduate students. Therefore, investigating these students’ graduate research will provide us with knowledge about the future of SLW research and EFL writing instruction in China.

Particularly, the recent doctoral students who focused on SLW issues in their dissertations will become future scholars in SLW. We would expect to see works related to the topics of their dissertations appearing in the professional literature in the future. By investigating what graduate candidates have studied, we may be able to predict how EFL writing theories will develop in China in the future. Meanwhile, many other graduate candidates may become English teachers after they graduate, and it is likely that they will apply what they have learned through completing graduate theses to their teaching practice. By examining what these future teachers have researched, we will learn about how SLW theories
will integrate into EFL writing teaching practice in China, which facilitates the development of EFL writing in China.

This study will provide not only an overview of current research trends among graduate students in China but also provide new insights for future research directions and development for both graduate students and professors as they investigate similar topics. The comparison between published literature and graduate students’ work could help Chinese graduate students realize the possible gaps or connections between their works and the published journal articles to better prepare graduate students for future research practice. This comparison may assist future researchers and graduate candidates to choose the previously neglected focus or to avoid the over-researched topics in their studies, which will facilitate the establishment of SLW as a comprehensive area of study in China.

In addition to assisting the future development of SLW/EFL writing studies in China, this examination of these voices is significant to the field of SLW in general because it can bring insights from an EFL context with the largest EFL population in the world. The findings from this study will add to the existing knowledge of how young scholars from an EFL environment perceive and research SLW and what features and patterns are involved in the SLW studies by the EFL graduate candidates.

Moreover, this study will provide a unique valid insiders’ perspective. As a Chinese graduate student interested in the field of SLW, I will use my understanding of China and the Chinese educational and cultural context to interpret my findings related to SLW studies in
China, since I have experienced EFL writing instruction in China from middle school (Grade 7) to undergraduate studies. I will integrate my knowledge of SLW in general and EFL writing in China to the analysis of the research trends and patterns in abstracts of Chinese students’ master’s theses and PhD dissertations on EFL writing.

**Limitations of the Study**

One possible limitation of this study is the focus on only the past decade, as opposed to a longer period. An examination of graduate students’ theses from a longer period may show different patterns and trends from these identified in my study. Additionally, the use of abstracts rather than entire manuscripts of theses and dissertations leads to another limitation, as the abstracts may not adequately represent the study. Only analyzing the abstracts prevented me from identifying the type of research conducted in each study, as many abstracts do not specify this.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Historical Background

The 1960s witnessed the beginning of SLW as a discipline, when researchers started to publish articles on SLW pedagogical approaches (Leki, 1992). Since then, the growing number of English language learners in the United States has promoted a sharp increase in SLW scholarship (Cooper, 1976; Marquardt, 1966; Pincas, 1962; Raimes, 1985; Silber, 1979; Zamel, 1976). During the 1990s, SLW researchers in the United States established theoretical frameworks, identified target contexts, and developed various research methods to investigate ESL composition among the consistently increasing number of international students and immigrants in the United States (Wang & Sun, 2005). Second language writing has become an interdisciplinary field with its own knowledge base for composition and writing instruction (Kroll, 2003; Matsuda, 2003; Silva & Matsuda, 2001).

Published Journal Articles on EFL Writing Studies in China

Scholars in China also began to publish their research on SLW in EFL contexts since the 1960s. China’s first journal article on EFL writing, according to CNKI, was published in January 1962, by Liuling Dai in the journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research. The article discussed how to improve students’ foreign language writing abilities by creating more EFL writing opportunities in different genres.

Early works on EFL writing in China focused on finding ways to improve EFL students’ writing ability through formal education (Li, 2007). Journal articles published in the 1990s
argued that English writing is one of the core elements in China’s English education. However, according to Zhang (2006), Chinese students’ English writing has been the weak link in improving their overall English proficiencies. Therefore, Chinese scholars integrated the western oriented theories and approaches into Chinese teaching practice in order to improve their students’ EFL writing performances (Cai, 2001; Chen & Li, 1999; Li, 2000; Su & Yang, 2001; Zhang, 2000).

As the field of SLW developed, a growing number of SLW theories and approaches that were developed in other countries were introduced to China, which facilitated the blossoming of EFL writing scholarship in China (Li, 2006; Zhu, 2011). Chinese scholars started to investigate and publish on other topics that are not directly related to teaching pedagogies in their published journal articles on EFL writing. Discourse analysis, feedback, writing assessment, and corpus analysis all became topics investigated and published by SLW scholars in China (Bai, 2012; Wang & Zhang, 2006; Wu, 2003; Yang, 2003; Zhou, Sun & Zhang, 2009). Currently, Chinese researchers publish articles on both theoretical and pedagogical topics related to students’ EFL writing performance (He, 2013; Wang & Wang, 2004; You, 2004; Xu, 2011).

**Conferences on EFL Writing**

In 2003, China held its first national symposium on EFL writing in Guangdong. More than 150 Chinese scholars participated. The symposium focused on the length approach and writing-to-learn. During this symposium, Chinese scholars explained the theoretical and practical significance of the length approach, which aims to improve learners’ English writing
abilities through motivating them to write increasingly long texts (Wang, 2005). The keynote speakers elaborated the concept of writing-to-learn by explaining how teachers can help students effectively transfer their foreign language knowledge to writing through increase the amount of language use.

Since 2003, a total of eight symposiums on EFL writing have been held in China. Refer to Table 1 for the locations and themes of each symposium. A review of the history of the Symposium lends insight into how the field of EFL writing has developed in China over the past several years. The focus of the symposiums has changed from pedagogy to a multi-dimensional perspective on teaching and researching L2 writing in an EFL context. The shift in focus reflects the general trend of L2 writing development in China. According to Xu (2011), Chinese researchers were initially motivated to research EFL writing because of Chinese students’ poor writing performance in English, and they were devoted to improving the teaching of EFL writing. When they started to examine the factors that influence Chinese students’ performance, they realized that EFL writing is multidimensional, and thus that the study of EFL writing would require both psycho-cognitive and social-cultural perspectives, rather than a simplistic focus on how to teach EFL writing (Zhang & Zhan, 2010; Zhu, 2011). This shift indicates the emergence of EFL writing as an interdisciplinary field in China.
Table 1.

*Symposiums on EFL Writing Research and Teaching in China*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dec. 2003</td>
<td>Guangdong University of Foreign Studies</td>
<td>The Length Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sept. 2004</td>
<td>Xi’an International Studies University</td>
<td>New Concepts and Approaches of English Language Writing Instruction in the New Millennium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Oct. 2005</td>
<td>Wuhan University</td>
<td>Diversity and Innovation — EFL Writing and Career Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sept. 2006</td>
<td>University of International Business and Economics</td>
<td>English Writing for Cross-cultural Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sept. 2007</td>
<td>Guizhou University</td>
<td>Teaching and Researching EFL Writing Across Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sept. 2008</td>
<td>Beijing Normal University</td>
<td>Teaching and Research as a Profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sept. 2010</td>
<td>Jilin University</td>
<td>English Writing in Social-cultural Contexts: Reconceptualization, Approaches and Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sept. 2012</td>
<td>Shandong University</td>
<td>The Chinese Context: Cognitive and Social Perspectives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from participating in the Symposiums, SLW scholars in China have also been involved actively in other major foreign language conferences that do not focus specifically on
EFL writing. For example, the International Conference on English Language Teaching (ICELT) in China has attracted many researchers to share their insights and thoughts on EFL writing and its instruction. Since 1985, China English Language Education Association (CELEA) has organized 6 ICELT’s in China, and English writing has been one of the important topics at the Conferences. For example, at the 2004 Conference, 49 out of nearly 500 presentations and workshops focused on EFL writing (You, 2004), and in 2007, at the 5th Conference, discourse analysis and written literacy were included as the content subjects. In the upcoming 7th ICELT in 2014, one of the two (total) workshops is scheduled to focus on academic writing, besides a special parallel symposium on critical thinking through L2 academic writing at the Conference (http://www.celea.org.cn).

**Review Studies on EFL Writing**

The conferences and publications have stimulated Chinese scholars to think about the development of EFL writing in a systematic way. In fact, the research published on EFL writing in China has been the subject of six review articles during the past decade (He, 2013; Qin, 2009; Wang & Wang, 2004; Yao & Cheng, 2005; Zhao, Hao, & Gao, 2010; Zhu, 2011). These articles synthesize the existing scholarship, identify trends in the study of EFL writing, point out gaps between the research and practice on EFL writing, and propose future directions for EFL writing studies.

Both Yao and Cheng (2005) and Zhu (2011) collected their data from China’s major linguistics journals published between the 1980s and the early 21st century. Yao and Cheng
(2005) reviewed 165 articles from seven journals, and Zhu (2011) analyzed 426 articles from
10 journals in her study. In these two reviews, the authors used different categorizing methods.
Yao and Cheng (2005) divided their articles into six groups, including (1) problems in English
writing, (2) factors influencing English writing, (3) the underdevelopment of English writing
instruction, (4) discourse features in Chinese and English writing, (5) English writing
pedagogies, and (6) evaluation and assessment. In contrast, Zhu (2011) grouped her data into
five categories, including (1) students’ writing strategies, (2) teaching methods, (3) language
factors, (4) environment factors, and (5) reflection and reference.

Their different categorizations led to different conclusions on the status of EFL writing
research in China. Yao and Cheng (2005) are more positive about the development in EFL
writing scholarship: the authors focus on the changes in research methods and research subjects,
characterizing them as evidence of “obvious improvement.” However, Zhu (2011) is not as
satisfied with the development of EFL writing in China between 1980 and 2010: she argues that
the percentage of articles on EFL writing in core linguistic journals is still small, and that the
studies are lacking in consistency in subject and scientificity in research methods.

Even though the authors of these two reviews disagree on the status of EFL writing
research in China, in both studies, the authors emphasize the importance of researching China’s
existing literature of English writing, and they note the numerical increase in the journal articles
on English writing during the researched period (Yao & Cheng, 2005; Zhu, 2011). Both studies
suggest that non-empirical studies is the preferred research type in the published journal articles

24
on EFL writing during the past three decades; 57% of Zhu’s data and 73% of Yao and Cheng’s data are non-empirical EFL writing studies. Although non-empirical studies take up the majority of their data, researchers in both studies agree that Chinese scholars are increasing their use of empirical methods to research EFL writing in China.

Wang and Wang (2004) looked at EFL writing in the Chinese context by examining the empirical studies published in China’s major foreign language teaching journals between 1993 and 2003. They found that research on EFL writing in China has focused on 6 major themes: (1) L1 influence on L2 writing, (2) discourse features of L2 writing, (3) language features of L2 writing, (4) factors influencing L2 writing ability, (5) L2 writing instruction, and (6) L2 writing assessment. After carefully analyzing the major topics involved in each theme and comparing the international and domestic research findings on each topic, they conclude that EFL writing research in China focuses extensively on text analysis with relatively less emphasis on students’ writing abilities and the writing process, and they also call for more research on factors influencing Chinese students’ EFL writing performance and features in Chinese students’ written pieces in English.

Qin (2009) narrowed her review to journal articles on college English writing, published between 1987 and 2007 in eight prestigious foreign language journals in China. After closely examining the research topics in 136 journal articles, Qin grouped the articles into seven categories: (1) writing instruction, (2) writing product, (3) writing process, (4) influential factors in English writing, (5) reflection on writing research, (6) reader feedback, and (7)
writing evaluation and assessment. She further categorized the articles in each group of writing instruction into sub-groups, analyzed the research methods, and identified problems within the articles in each group. Her careful analysis of the numerical changes, research methods, and major topics in each category demonstrates developmental trends in studies on EFL writing. Qin found that the field of EFL writing in China is expanding, but a noticeable gap between literature in China and the existing SLW literature in western countries still exists. Qin emphasizes the purpose and significance of writing research and points out that the gap between international and domestic literature on college English writing has narrowed.

Zhao, Hao, and Gao (2010) further narrowed their data to journal articles on teaching EFL writing, and their data were 71 articles published in eight key journals in foreign language teaching between 2005 and 2007. They first divided the data into three groups according to the year of publication, and then they further categorized their data based on the articles’ research types, target populations, research topics, and journal orientations. After analyzing the categorized articles, they point out that China’s research on teaching EFL writing demonstrates a multi-dimensional development trend with a focus on teaching methodologies and factors influencing students’ writing performance, while EFL writing research in China has ignored (1) textual analysis of students’ works, (2) theoretical issues, and (3) curricular development.

He (2013) analyzed 402 articles from 14 key EFL teaching-related journals in China after identifying the lack of review studies on EFL writing published after 2010. This study is the most recently published review study on EFL writing in China. He states that China’s EFL
writing literature has increased between 2001 and 2010 and the studies in the field of EFL writing tend to be more empirical than non-empirical. Also, He points out that although Chinese scholars have investigated a large variety of topics related to EFL writing, all aspects in this field are not in balance. Topics, such as EFL teacher education, teachers’ beliefs, and the evaluation of EFL writing textbooks and curriculum are not fully explored.

Although these reviewers applied different methods to analyze the research on EFL writing in China, and they draw different conclusions about the status of its development, they share some similarities. First, all of them suggest that SLW research started relatively late in China and has drawn from the theoretical and pedagogical accomplishments of studies conducted by researchers from western countries, especially the United States. Second, they use some of the same categories in their reviews, which helps identify the most commonly investigated topics in China’s EFL writing scholarship over time.

**Major Topics Investigated by Chinese Scholars**

An analysis across these review studies indicates that the four most commonly investigated topics in Chinese studies of EFL writing are: (1) English writing instruction, (2) characteristics of students’ written English texts, (3) factors influencing English writing abilities, and (4) English writing assessment.

**Writing Instruction**

English writing instruction is identified as one of the most studied areas by each of the synthesis studies reviewed. Qin (2009) identifies writing instruction as the most commonly
researched topic in her data (she found 54 articles, comprising 40% of the total data). He (2013) lists teaching methodology as the second most heavily discussed topic (he reviewed 50 articles in the category). Finally, in Zhu’s (2011) review, 107 out of 426 studies were directly related to EFL teaching activities.

In the published scholarship on English writing instruction, researchers have tracked the development of different teaching approaches and methodologies and put great effort on how to localize these approaches to improve EFL writing instruction in China (Cai, 2001; Chen & Li, 1999; You, 2010). One of the most comprehensive descriptive studies on how EFL writing instruction develops in China is from You (2010), who reviewed the history of English composition in China, describing how Anglo-American rhetoric and composition has affected English composition teaching practice in China from 1862 to 2008 and providing an integrative knowledge of how China’s English writing instruction has changed due to political, historical, cultural, and economic powers. Other researchers have examined the feasibility of different approaches to EFL writing instruction in China and provided insights into how Chinese teachers can adopt the research-based SLW methodologies from western countries and adjust these approaches to facilitate Chinese students’ EFL writing development (Li, 2006; Su & Yang, 2001; Wu & Zhang, 2000; Zhang, 2000).

**Features of Students’ Written Texts**

The features in students’ written texts is another heavily discussed area in the research on EFL writing in China. In two of the synthesis studies reviewed, the authors identified
“features of students’ written texts” as the most commonly researched topic in China’s EFL writing studies (He, 2013; Zhu, 2011). In He’s (2013) study, 59 journal articles published between 2001 and 2010 are identified as direct investigation of students’ written texts, making this topic the most researched topic in his review. According to the researchers, one of the characteristics of studies on this topic is the large number of corpus-based studies (Liang, Feng, & Cheng, 2004; Qin, 2009; Zhu, 2011). The four main written corpuses used to investigate this topic are: Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners (WECCL), Spoken and Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners (SWECCCL), International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), and the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS).

Chinese researchers have also investigated the lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical patterns in Chinese students’ EFL writing texts. Researchers found that Chinese students do not demonstrate a large variety of vocabulary in their EFL writing (Pan & Feng, 2004), and the organization and development of their English texts indicate their use of L1 in EFL composition (Wu, 2003; Yang & Wen, 1994).

Factors Influencing Students’ Writing

Chinese researchers also investigated factors that influence students’ writing process, including both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. These factors were originally neglected by SLW researchers in China because researchers focused previously on analyzing the written products produced by English learners in China (Yao & Cheng, 2005; Zhu, 2011). The shift in focus from written products to writing process indicates that researchers have come to identify
EFL writing as a complex process that is influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic issues (Qin, 2009; Yao & Cheng, 2005).

Linguistic factors that affect students’ EFL writing include students’ L1 writing abilities, English proficiencies, and L2 writing knowledge (Cai, 1999; Ma & Wen, 1999; Wang, 2002). In recent years, more attention has been paid to non-linguistic factors that influence Chinese EFL writing. Researchers have identified the most frequently studied non-linguistic influential factors as the differences in writing strategies (Yang, 2002), language transfer process (Guo & Liu, 1997; Tang, 1999; Wang & Wen, 2002, 2004), cognitive styles (Wang, 2001), and writing environment and tasks (Chen & Wu, 1998; Wu & Wu, 2008). These factors are not directly related to students’ language proficiencies but have been found to be significant factors that affect students’ EFL writing development (Han, 2008; Wang & Wen, 2002).

**Writing Assessment**

Writing assessment is also among the most commonly researched topics in Chinese studies of EFL writing. In his review study, He (2013) lists writing assessment as the fourth most studied topic in China’s EFL writing scholarship, and Zhao et al. (2010) identify writing assessment and evaluation as the second most commonly researched topic in their data, making up 18% of their total entries. Research in this topic area covers various testing tools of EFL writing in China. One of the most explored topics is the investigation of national standardized English tests for Chinese college students. Researchers have examined the rubric, reliability, validity, and washback effects of two national standardized tests, National College English
Tests (CET) and Test for English Majors (TEM) (Cai, 2002; Gu & Yang, 2009; Yang, 2003; Zou, 1999). In addition to the discussion of CET and TEM, Chinese researchers also developed their own assessment tools to evaluate students’ English writing development in classroom settings (Bai, 2012; Niu, He, & Liu, 2004; Zhou, Sun, & Zhang, 2009).

Graduate Students’ Voices in SLW Studies

A brief review of the publications and conferences on Chinese EFL writing helps us understand the growth and expansion of second language writing studies in China in the past 30 years. However, this body of work does not accurately reflect the state of SLW in China today, as it excludes the work on EFL writing done by the rapidly growing numbers of graduate students pursuing SLW in China, who represent the emerging voices of the field. No published research has reviewed the theses and dissertations written on the topic of EFL writing in China.

My interest in SLW Studies in Chinese graduate programs initially led me to conduct preliminary research on the topic. During the summer of 2012, together with Wen Shan, a colleague from California State University, San Bernardino, I conducted a study to examine the master’s theses completed by Chinese graduate students on issues related to EFL writing. The specific purpose of our study was: (1) to find out how many of the master’s theses completed in Chinese universities between the years 2007-2011 focused on second language writing issues, and (2) to identify the major questions these theses investigated.
Our data were master’s thesis abstracts on SLW produced between 2007 and 2011 from China Master’s Theses Full-text Database. Established in 1999, the Database contains a collection of over one million masters' theses from 530 institutions in China.

We used the keywords “二语写作” (second language writing) and “英语写作” (English writing) to collect thesis abstracts. We included both “二语写作” (second language writing) and “英语写作” (English writing) as keywords because we found that many studies published in China use the term of “英语写作” (English writing) to investigate SLW issues and specify their EFL research contexts (Adamson, 2004; Cao, 2012; Chien, 2007; Feng, 2011; Liu, 2007; Luo, 2012). The keywords we used were in Chinese because, after an initial search, we found that not all of the abstracts contain English titles or abstracts, but all of them include Chinese titles and abstracts. Our search yielded 1,458 abstracts.

To analyze this data, we developed a topic coding scheme based on the coding schemes used by the authors of two reviews of the published Chinese L2 writing research, namely, those of Wang & Wang (2004) and Zhu (2011). Our coding system included 10 codes regarding the major themes investigated in these master’s theses, which are: (1) writing instruction, (2) feedback and error analysis, (3) language features, (4) L1 and L2 relations, (5) writing and cognition, (6) writing assessment, (7) corpus studies, (8) writing for specific purpose, (9) technology and writing, and (10) academic writing.

Each of us coded all 1,458 abstracts individually. To establish inter-coder reliability, we compared our codes for every abstract, discussing all cases where we had assigned different
codes until we arrived at a mutually agreeable code. After discussion, we reached an inter-coder agreement of 100%. We also carefully examined the major topics included in each category and tried to determine whether and how the focus of the scholarship changed over the five-year period.

We found that the number of master’s theses on Chinese EFL writing increased by 15% during the period, from 308 in 2007 to 353 in 2011. The general trend is in a U-shape distribution, with a gradual decline from 2007 to 2009 and a progressive recovery between 2009 and 2011, as shown in Figure 2. In 2009, 249 master’s theses focused on EFL writing, which is the least in number.

![Figure 2: Master’s Theses on EFL Writing, by Year](Chen & Wen, 2012)
We also found that these theses were of various topics, including writing instruction, feedback and error analysis, language features, L1 and L2 relations, writing assessment, academic writing, WSP, corpus studies, technology and writing, and writing and cognition (Figure 3). Writing instruction was the most commonly studied topic identified in our data, making up 35% of the total number of studies.

![Pie chart showing popular topics in China's Master's Thesis on SLW](image)

Figure 3. Popular Topics in China’s Master’s Thesis on SLW

(Chen & Wen, 2012)

We concluded that during this 5-year period, research contexts expanded both in scope and depth. Research content covered a variety of topics, and research subjects were diversified in categories which ranged from secondary education to post-secondary education, from
English majors to non-English majors, from the writing in academic settings to the writing for specific purposes.

My preliminary work on SLW-focused master’s theses in China provided insight into the general developmental trends and patterns in the topics studied by Chinese graduate students. However, due to limited time and knowledge, my co-investigator and I examined abstracts from master’s theses produced only in the previous five years, excluding doctoral dissertations in our data. Therefore, I was motivated to expand this study to investigate China’s graduate students’ theses on second language writing, in more depth, over a longer period of time, and at the doctoral and master’s level.

To date, no published study has reviewed this body of scholarship in China; however, several scholars have reviewed the theses and dissertations produced by graduate students in other countries (e.g. Lin & Cheng, 2010; Silva, 2012), and these reviews served as a basis for the development of the present study. Lin & Cheng (2010) examined the research trends in selected MATESOL programs in Taiwan. They collected 493 thesis abstracts completed between 2003 and 2007 from the Electronic Theses and Dissertations System of National Digital Library in Taiwan. Using content-analysis method, they identified the most common research contexts as high school and undergraduate education, and the most popular research topics are language skills, teaching methodologies, curriculum, and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). They also attributed the students’ different research choices to the patterns of research agenda on English education in Taiwan. Silva (2012) collected the doctoral dissertations on L2 writing
completed worldwide between 1963 and 2011 from the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. He calculated the total number of dissertations produced in each year and categorized the dissertations according to author, year of completion, advisor, and university where completed. Silva found that the majority of dissertations on SLW have been completed in higher education institutions in North America by individuals from outside North America. Based on his analysis, he concludes that the field of SLW has become a “full-fledged” area of study that is producing increasingly large numbers of PhD’s—more than 450 since 2000, averaging more than 40 per year in the period between 2000 and 2011.

**Conclusion**

As this review of literature shows, SLW issues have been the focus of increasing amounts and types of research in China over the past several decades, by both professional and student researchers. However, the published literature has excluded the voices of China’s emerging scholars in SLW—namely, master’s and doctoral candidates. No published journal articles have examined China’s graduate students’ theses and/or dissertations on second language writing. The present study aims to fill this gap in the scholarship.
Chapter Three: Research Design

I collected the abstracts of Chinese students’ master’s theses and PhD dissertations on SLW completed between 2003 and 2012 and coded each abstract based on its research topic, research type, and target population. I analyzed the coded data to identify research trends and patterns in Chinese graduate students’ theses and dissertations on SLW.

Data Sources

The data sources for this study were the abstracts of Chinese master’s theses and doctoral dissertations. Writing a thesis or dissertation is an important endeavor for graduate students in China; these documents are considered the end products and records of their academic training and research efforts (Lin & Cheng, 2010). I chose to collect abstracts as my data source because they summarize the content of theses and dissertations and perform as “advance indicators” of the content and structure of the theses and dissertations (Swales, 1990, p. 179). Examination of the abstracts of Chinese master’s theses and doctoral dissertations should provide me with a substantial understanding of topics, research types, and target populations of the second language writing studies conducted by Chinese graduate students.

I chose to draw on abstracts produced between 2003 and 2012 because second language writing studies has experienced a dramatic development in China in the past decade. A decade is a sufficient period of time to identify the general trends and patterns in scholarship, and trends and patterns in the past decade are particularly representative because the field witnessed its rapid development during these years. An examination of the abstracts from the past ten
years can give us an understanding of how Chinese graduate students perceive and research second language writing issues in their own works and how their investigations have developed over the past decade.

**Data Collection**

To find relevant research, I searched two major databases: China Doctoral Dissertations Full-text Database (CDFD) and China Master’s Theses Full-text Database (CMFD) on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). These two databases are the most comprehensive databases of graduate students’ works in China, and include a collection of over 311,000 master’s theses and over 60,000 doctoral dissertations for degrees from 621 master’s institutions and 404 doctoral academies in China since 1984. Also, CNKI Databases provide free access to all of their abstracts, which makes them readily accessible.

The keywords I used to search were all in Chinese, and I allowed Cross-Language Search in the databases because every one of the entries in these databases has a Chinese title and abstract, but not all of the entries have English titles or abstracts. I used three sets of subject keywords to find relevant abstracts. I started researching by using the terms of “二语” (second language) and “写作” (writing) and looking for them as the subject in Basic Search with a publication date ranging from 2003 to 2012, and I found 1,380 entries in CMFD and 34 entries in CDFD. I went over the search results and found that in some of the entries the student researchers used the term “English writing” instead of “second language writing” to address EFL writing issues in China. I went back to consult the existing literature and realized that
English is the most popular and the most frequently studied foreign language in China, and scholars use “English writing” or “foreign language writing” as an alternation of “second language writing” in their SLW studies (Adamson, 2004; Cao, 2012; Chien, 2007; Feng, 2011; Liu, 2007). Therefore, I included two additional sets of keywords in my search, “英语 AND 写作” (English AND writing) and “外语 AND 写作” (foreign language AND writing).

I decided to collect an independent set of data of theses abstracts from the past decade instead of combining the data I had collected for the years 2007 to 2011 in my 2012 study with abstracts for the years 2003 to 2006 and the year of 2012. I did this for several reasons. First, the databases update their content annually, and new items may be added to any given year each time. Second, and more importantly, the keywords I used to collect data for this study are different from the keywords I used in the 2012 study. Collecting an independent set of abstracts for this study contributed to the credibility of my analysis.

An initial search using the three sets of keywords yielded 9,558 abstracts related to second language studies during the ten-year period under investigation—160 for doctoral dissertation abstracts and 9,398 for master’s theses. This initial data set included studies related to second language writing, second language studies, and literary analysis. I reviewed the title and abstract of each entry to decide whether it focused specifically on second language writing. I used two primary criteria to assess the relevance of the abstracted research to my study: (1) the purpose of the study, and (2) the focus of study. I included only those abstracts that aimed to improve students’ EFL writing performances or that directly focused on EFL writing issues. For
example, I included abstracts that examined how reading in English can facilitate students’ English writing performances. These abstracts did not focus specifically on EFL writing, but they aimed to provide implications for improving students’ English writing skills. I excluded all entries that focused on second language teaching methodologies in speaking, reading, listening, and translating, and entries examining a certain character in a novel or poem. A total number of 6,537 abstracts were excluded due to topic irrelevance. This initial review of the entries’ topics narrowed my data set to 3,021 abstracts—2,962 for master’s theses and 59 for doctoral dissertations.

Data Analysis

Prior to coding and analyzing the 3,021 abstracts I collected, I divided the data into two groups by level (master’s versus doctoral), and then I further divided these each of these sets of data into separate folders based on the year of completion.

Coding Schemes

To code my data, I drew from my earlier study of SLW-focused master’s theses (Chen & Shan, 2012). My colleague and I had developed a ten-code scheme to categorize the abstracts of master’s theses on SLW produced in China between 2007 and 2011. Since no one has investigated graduate work on SLW in China specifically, we based our development of this coding scheme on the coding schemes used in four published reviews of the published research on SLW (Lin, & Cheng, 2010; McMartin-Miller, Pelaez-Morales, & Lin, 2012; Wang & Wang, 2004; Zhu, 2011). The major categories in the coding schemes employed in these reviews are
presented in Table 2. Wang and Wang (2004) reviewed the empirical studies of SLW in the Chinese context from 1994 to 2004, grouping them into six categories based on their major topics. Lin and Cheng (2010) categorized 493 TESOL MA theses produced between 2003 and 2007 in Taiwan into 14 groups based on their topics. Zhu (2011) developed four general categories to look at China’s published papers on SLW between 1980 and 2010, and she investigated the patterns in both research methods and research content. Finally, McMartin-Miller et al. (2012) synthesized scholarships on SLW produced in 2011 using a twelve-code system according to the topics discussed in each article.

Drawing on these four coding schemes and our preliminary reading of our data, my colleague and I created a coding scheme that included ten codes, namely: (1) language features, (2) writing and cognition, (3) corpus studies, (4) technology and writing, (5) writing instruction, (6) feedback and error analysis, (7) L1 and L2 relations, (8) writing assessment, (9) writing for specific purposes, and (10) academic writing (Chen & Shan, 2012).
Table 2

_Coding Schemes in the Literature I Reviewed_

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• L1 and SLW</td>
<td>• Affective Factors</td>
<td>• Students’ Strategies</td>
<td>• Language</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• L2 Discourse Features</td>
<td>• CALL</td>
<td>• Teachers’ Instruction</td>
<td>• Feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• L2 Language Features</td>
<td>• Culture, Social, or Gender Issues</td>
<td>• Language Factors</td>
<td>• Assessment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Factors affecting L2 Writing</td>
<td>• ESP</td>
<td>• Writing</td>
<td>• Writing Center</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• L2 Writing Abilities</td>
<td>• Integrated Skills (IS)</td>
<td>• Environment</td>
<td>• Motivation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• SLW Instruction</td>
<td>• Learner Development</td>
<td>• Feedback &amp; Reflection</td>
<td>• Genre</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• SLW Assessment</td>
<td>• Linguistics</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Academic Writing Challenges</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Language Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Population</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Materials/Curriculum Design &amp; Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Corpus</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• L2 Development</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Technology</td>
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<td>• Testing &amp; Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Identity</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher Factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>• L1-L2 Comparison</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Teaching Method</td>
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<td>• Teacher Professional Development</td>
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</table>

In the current study, I began my data analysis by coding a subset of my data using the ten-code scheme from my 2012 study. I randomly chose and coded 100 pieces of data, which
comprise 3.3% of the total number. This initial coding revealed that the ten categories conflated research topic and research method. For example, when coding a corpus-based study on the differences between students’ L1 and L2 writing strategies, I had difficulty deciding whether to code it as “(3) corpus studies”—to highlight its research method, or “(7) L1 & L2 relations”—to emphasize its topic. To avoid these conflicts and to represent both the content and methods of the studies I was surveying, I expanded my coding scheme. I developed three independent sets of codes to document the following three aspects of each study: (1) major topic under investigation, (2) research type, and (3) the population studied.

**Coding scheme for research topics.**

To code the major topic in each study, I initially developed seven categories: (1) strategies and cognition, (2) writing instruction, (3) language issues, (4) writing and technology, (5) assessment and feedback, (6) L1 & L2 writing, and (7) writing for specific purposes (WSP). These seven codes came from the coding scheme of my earlier study and the codes used in the published review studies. As I began to code the topics, I found (1) that the number of entries coded as “writing and technology” was too small compared with the numbers of entries under other codes, and (2) that Code 7 “writing for specific purposes (WSP)” and other codes (such as Code 3 “language issues,” Code 4 “writing technology,” and Code 5 “assessment and feedback”) are not mutually exclusive, as both may be the focus of the study. For example, I could apply both Code 7 and Code 3 to a thesis that examined the language features in students’ WSP text. Therefore, I revised my topic coding scheme once again.
Table 3

The Codes Used in This Study for Research Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Features in Students’ Written Products</td>
<td>• Word choice and vocabulary variety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sentence structure</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Organizational features</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Rhetorical features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Factors Influencing Students’ Writing Process</td>
<td>• Writing strategies</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Writing tasks</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• L2 proficiency and L2 writing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Metacognition and writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Writing Instruction</td>
<td>• Application of various teaching methodologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Status of writing instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Factors influencing writing instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• CALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Assessment and Feedback</td>
<td>• Standardized writing tests: CET, TEM, IELTS, TOEFL</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher written feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Peer feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Discourse Analysis and Contrastive Rhetoric</td>
<td>• Genre analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Language characteristics in ESP texts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Comparison between texts written by L1 and L2 writers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Comparison between texts written in the writers’ L1 and L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Language Transfer and Error Analysis</td>
<td>• L1 transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• L2 transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Errors in Chinese students’ English texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interlanguage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final topic coding scheme I used in this study included 6 codes: (1) features in students’ written products, (2) factors influencing students’ writing process, (3) writing instruction, (4) assessment and feedback, (5) discourse analysis and contrastive rhetoric, (6)
language transfer and error analysis (Table 3). Each code represents a major theme investigated by Chinese graduate students in my data and contains several related topics.

Codes (1) Features in Students’ Written Products, (2) Factors Influencing Students’ Writing Process, (3) Writing Instruction, and (4) Assessment and Feedback were included in my scheme because they are the major four topics investigated in the published journal articles on SLW in China. In the category Features in Students’ Written Products, I included abstracts for studies that analyzed the linguistic and textual features in EFL students’ written works. Research questions of studies in this category include what cohesive markers Chinese students prefer to use in their English writing, how Chinese students use adverbial phrases in their English writing, and how students decide to use passive voice in their English essays. In the category Factors Influencing Students’ Writing Process, I included abstracts of studies that examined linguistic and/or non-linguistic features that can influence students’ writing processes. Abstracts in this category investigated what factors can affect students’ English composition and how these factors influence the writing processes. In the category Writing Instruction, I included topics on the status of EFL and L2 writing instruction in China and the localization and application of different teaching pedagogies. Example topics in this category include how teachers can integrate various teaching approaches into English writing instruction, how students can benefit from the localized teaching pedagogies, and what are the solutions to the current problems in English writing instruction in China. In the category Assessment and Feedback, I included abstracts of studies that focused on writing assessment and feedback on
students’ writing. This category contains abstracts on the application of various writing
assessment tools to evaluate students’ writing abilities and abstracts on teacher and peer
feedback as well as its significance in students’ English writing development.

Codes (5) “Discourse Analysis and Contrastive Rhetoric” and (6) “Language Transfer
and Error Analysis” are based on codes used in professional reviews of the published SLW
research in China (He, 2013; Yao & Cheng, 2005; Zhu, 2011). In the category Discourse
Analysis and Contrastive Rhetoric, I included abstracts of studies that used discourse analysis to
analyze language and organization features in the written English texts produced by English L1
speakers, as well as the abstracts of studies that compared the written texts produced by Chinese
EFL users and L1 English users. I decided to include this code because it is used as one of the
major categories in published Chinese review literature. The studies in this category differ from
those in category 1 “Features in Students’ Written Products,” because they discuss the textual
features in the written products produced by English L1 speakers, whereas those in category 1
address only features in L2 texts produced by Chinese students.

In the category Language Transfer and Error Analysis, I included abstracts of studies
that examined how Chinese students transfer their L1 writing skills to their L2 writing practice,
whether this transfer is positive or negative, how students’ L2 proficiency can influence their
L1 writing, what common errors occurred in Chinese students’ written texts in English, and
what possible factors contributed to the occurrence of these errors. Studies of language transfer
and error analysis were grouped together because I found that, in a majority of the studies that
analyzed errors in students’ works, the researchers attributed most errors to the language transfer process, and/or used transfer theory to discuss the possible solutions to correcting these errors.

Coding scheme for research type.

I also coded the abstracts according to the studies’ general type. Data were coded as empirical studies or non-empirical studies based on the description of research design in the abstracts. There is ambiguity in the differentiation of empirical and non-empirical studies. Some researchers define empirical research as studies using observed and measured data to answer particular research questions; some researchers adopt a broader definition that empirical research derives knowledge from actual experience rather than from theory or belief (Matsuda & Silva, 2005; Silva, 2005). I made the decision for this study that empirical studies are studies involving data collection and analysis, while non-empirical studies involve no data collection process. The empirical studies identified in my study include qualitative studies, quantitative studies, and studies with mixed methods. The non-empirical studies identified in my study include the description of personal experiences and the syntheses of literature.

I did not further analyze the research methods in the empirical studies because not all of the abstracts contain adequate information on the design of the study. Some abstracts of the empirical studies in my data contain detailed description of research design, including information on the target population, the data collection procedures, and data analysis instruments. However, other abstracts did not contain information on research design or how
the data were collected and analyzed. Therefore, it was impossible for me to code the specific research method in the studies.

**Coding scheme for research populations.**

I developed codes for the populations who were either studied or discussed based on the division of China’s education system, which consists of five levels: (1) elementary, (2) middle school and high school, (2) college, (4) master’s programs, and (5) doctoral programs. English is one of the required subjects in China’s 3-12 education, and English tests are included in China’s college entrances exam and graduate program admission exam.

Also, since English is one of the most popular college majors, I included English majors as one individual code within the category of college and post-college populations to identify how many studies involve English majors as their specific target population. An investigation on the number of graduate theses on English major can help us understand how these English majors explore their own writing performance, since most of the theses abstracts I collected were produced by English majors.

**Reliability**

In order to establish the reliability of my coding schemes, I coded all of the data twice—for all three aspects—with an interval of two weeks between the first and second time. The intra-coder agreement was 98%. I coded the abstracts with inconsistent codes a third time, and the third-time codes became the final codes for these abstracts.
According to the literature I reviewed, it is a common practice to determine whether my
codes were consistently assigned to my data by asking a peer who is trained or familiar with the
coding scheme to participate in an inter-coder agreement coding session (Brice, 2005; Chen &
Shan, 2012; Lin & Cheng, 2010). Therefore, I asked my colleague with whom I conducted the
2012 study to code 10% of my newly collected data that were not included in our earlier study.
I sent my colleague a copy of the coding scheme I used for this study and explained the changes
I made in our previous coding scheme to develop this new coding system. I randomly picked 10%
of data from the abstracts in each year, and my colleague coded 122 pieces of random data in
total. Our inter-coder agreement was 95%. I did not discuss the inconsistently coded abstracts
with my colleague because of schedule conflicts. After my colleague sent back the abstracts she
coded to me, I reviewed the codes she assigned to each piece of data, compared her codes with
my original codes, and decided the final codes for the inconsistently coded abstracts based on
my knowledge of the abstracts after consulting the codes she assigned.

Compilation of Findings

After coding all of the abstracts, I calculated the total number of abstracts, the number
of abstracts in each year, and the number of abstracts coded under each topic, each target
population, as well as each research type. I identified developmental trends in the data based on
numerical change in the total number of abstracts during the past decade. The patterns involved
in major topics, populations, and research methods were also examined. I identified the
frequently studied topics, the heavily investigated populations, and the research type preferred by China’s graduate students.

I also compared Chinese graduate works to the published reviews of second language writing in China, in order to decide whether graduate works are consistent with the published scholarship. This comparison can provide implications for the future development of SLW in China.
Chapter Four: Results

Graduate research on second language writing in China has increased dramatically in the past decade. Between 2003 and 2012, master’s and doctoral students have investigated a wide array of theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical topics related to EFL writing in China. The vast majority of the studies are empirical and focus on high school and college students. Although studies on SLW comprise only a small portion (9%) of the total number (34,311) of theses and dissertations focusing on foreign language studies in China (including those focusing on SLW), the development of graduate theses on SLW demonstrate some positive trends.

Developmental Trends

The total number of graduate theses on SLW in China has increased dramatically in the past decade, as shown in Figure 4. In 2003, there were only 67 studies on SLW, but by 2012, the number increased to 467. The overall time span can be divided into three periods: 2003-2006, 2006-2010, and post-2010, based on the rate of increase. From 2003 to 2006, the number increased by 372%, from 67 to 316. The numbers plateau between 2006 and 2010, and then there is another rapid increase between 2010 and 2012, from 357 to 467, representing an increase of 31%.
In addition to an overall increase in the number of graduate theses on SLW, I found that the SLW topics investigated in these theses were greatly varied. The most frequently researched topics focus on six major themes: (1) features in students’ written products, (2) factors influencing students’ writing processes, (3) writing instruction, (4) assessment and feedback, (5) discourse analysis and contrastive rhetoric, and (6) language transfer and error analysis (see Figure 5). A majority (3,010 or 99.6%) of the studies focus on EFL writing, while the remaining studies focus on the Chinese FL writing of international students (studying in Chinese-medium institutions) whose first language is not Chinese.
Chinese graduate students have investigated a wide variety of topics related to SLW. In the following text, I will present the number of theses identified under each topic and the specific issues discussed under each topic. I have arranged the findings according to frequency, from most-studied to least-studied topic.

**Writing Instruction**

Writing instruction is the most frequently studied topic in the data I collected. A total of 985 abstracts, which comprises one third of the data, focus on issues related to writing instruction. Over the ten-year period, there was an overall increase in the number of studies on writing instruction, though it was not consistent, as shown in Figure 6. Between 2003 and 2007...
the increase was dramatic, but the numbers plateaued in 2008, declining through 2010, after which they increased again.

Figure 6. Abstracts on Writing Instruction

The examination of various writing pedagogies is the most common topic in this category. The most frequently discussed teaching methodologies are (1) process approach (115 abstracts), (2) collaborative learning (87 abstracts), (3) the lexical approach (81 abstracts), (4) task-based approach (79 abstracts), (5) “Read-to-Write” approach (61 abstracts), and (6) process-genre approach (33 abstracts). Through theoretical analysis and empirical studies, Chinese graduate students have examined whether and how these writing pedagogies facilitate students’ acquisition of EFL writing in classroom settings at different academic levels.
Researchers have also studied how writing is taught in various contexts, problems in writing instruction and possible solutions, the use of technology in EFL writing classrooms, and the quality of L2/EFL writing, the evaluation of curricula and textbooks.

**Language Transfer and Error Analysis**

Chinese graduate students applied language transfer theory to analyze the errors they identified in Chinese students’ foreign language writing. This is the second most frequently studied SLW topic investigated by Chinese graduate students, with a total of 507 abstracts addressing this issue. As Figure 7 shows, the number of studies on language transfer and error analysis fluctuated between 2006 and 2010, but the overall change represents an increase of 531%, from 13 in 2003 to 82 in 2012.

![Figure 7. Abstracts on Language Transfer and Error Analysis](image-url)
Studies in this category can be grouped into two sub-categories: language transfer and error analysis. Language transfer is the focus of 133 abstracts. Studies in this category examined questions such as whether and how positive L1 transfer facilitates students’ L2 writing development; how students transfer their knowledge of L1 grammar, syntax, and organization to their L2/EFL writing; and how negative transfer can be limited.

Error analysis is the focus of 285 abstracts. These studies focus specifically on linguistic errors in students’ writing, analyzing the characteristics of different types of errors, multiple reasons for the errors, and possible solutions to correcting the errors. For example, twenty-six of the 285 studies investigated errors in collocations; twenty-one studies focused on treatments designed to help students reduce their errors in future writing, except the treatment of transfer theories; twenty studies investigated errors in coherence; nineteen studies investigated errors in subject-verb agreement; and thirteen studies investigated errors in syntax.

Factors Influencing Students’ Writing Process

Factors that influence students’ writing process is the topic of 421 abstracts, which comprise 14% of my data. The developmental trend in the number of abstracts in this category looks more consistent than that for writing instruction, with the exception of the decrease between 2009 and 2010, as is shown in Figure 8. In 2003, there were only 4 abstracts discussing factors influencing students’ writing process, and the number of abstracts increased to 73 in 2012.
The studies reported in these abstracts focus on a wide variety of factors that influence students’ writing processes, including writing strategies, metacognitive knowledge and writing performance, anxiety in foreign language writing, and motivation to write in English. Eighty-seven abstracts discuss what strategies different students use in their writing process and the relation between strategies the students used and their EFL writing performance; forty-six abstracts discussed the relation between Chinese students’ metacognitive knowledge and their EFL writing performance; twenty-five abstracts examined anxiety in EFL writing and how anxiety can influence students’ writing development; and eleven abstracts talked about students’ motivation in EFL writing and how it relates to students’ writing performance.
Discourse Analysis and Contrastive Rhetoric

Discourse analysis and contrastive rhetoric are frequently researched topic area investigated by Chinese graduate students. Researchers studied the discourse features of written works produced by native speakers of English and compared Chinese students’ English texts with texts written by native English-speaking peers. The numerical trend of studies on this topic demonstrates an M-shape distribution with fluctuations over time (See Figure 9).

![Graph](image)

Figure 9. Abstracts on Discourse Analysis and Contrastive Rhetoric

This category includes 401 abstracts, and they can be further divided into two groups, abstracts on discourse analysis (198 abstracts) and abstracts on contrastive rhetoric (182 abstracts). In the first group, abstracts focus on features in written works produced by native
English speakers. Studies in this group investigated the language, rhetoric, and genre features of newspaper articles, academic papers, business writing, legal texts, and scientific reports written by native English speakers. The features examined in these studies include the variety in structure of English texts written by native English speakers, sentence- and paragraph-level cohesion, use of metaphors and simile, sentence types, use of metalanguage, and thematic progression.

The second group compares discourse and language features in written works produced by native Chinese speakers and native English speakers. Topics in this group include contrastive discourse analysis of editorials, business letters, book reviews, newspaper articles, journal articles, educational emails, students’ research papers, and application letters. Studies compared how native and non-native English speakers differ in their choices of cohesive markers, metaphors, modal verbs, hedges, and thematic structures in their written texts in English.

**Features in Students’ Written Products**

Compared with other topics, features in students’ written texts drew less attention from Chinese graduate students. A total of 376 abstracts were identified as focusing on features of Chinese EFL written texts between 2003 and 2012, comprising 12% of all abstracts. Although small in proportion, the number of theses on this topic increased from 6 in 2003 to 73 in 2012, as shown Figure 10.
Graduate theses in this category investigated various features in Chinese students’ written English products, ranging from lexical variety and sentence structure to rhetorical, discourse, and pragmatic features. Lexical features in Chinese students’ EFL writing is the most researched topic in this category. Students’ use of verbs, nouns, prepositions, adverbs, connecters, lexical chunks, and the phenomenon of nominalizations in their texts were among the topics studied in the 127 abstracts. Sentence-level features that were investigated include the use of colloquial expressions, students’ use of different clauses, and the features in Chinese students’ thesis statements. The rhetorical features investigated include aspects of writer identity and rhetorical patterns in Chinese students’ EFL texts.
Assessment and Feedback

The least frequently studied topic in my data is assessment and feedback, with only 107 abstracts categorized in this group. The amount of research on SLW assessment and feedback increased from 4 in 2003 to 59 in 2012. In addition, in contrast to the trend observed for all other topics, the number of abstracts on assessment and feedback increased in 2009. (See Figure 11).

Figure 11. Abstracts on Assessment and Feedback

Studies in this category investigated a variety of issues related to the assessment of and feedback on EFL writing. Eighty abstracts focused on EFL writing assessment, and these abstracts investigated (1) the reliability and validity of the writing section in China’s national
standardized English tests, and (2) the development and evaluation of various classroom-based assessment tools. Twenty-nine abstracts directly discussed feedback in EFL writing, including teacher-written feedback, peer response, self-correction, and direct and indirect feedback in Chinese EFL writing classrooms.

Research Type

The vast majority of Chinese theses and dissertations on EFL writing involve empirical studies. Based on the authors’ explicit mention of research design in the abstracts, I identified 2,796 studies as empirical. I identified the remaining 275 studies in this category as non-empirical based on their description of the studies and their lack of explicit mention of data collection and analysis procedures. Non-empirical studies include the syntheses of existing literature on SLW, the genre and discourse analyses of western compositions, and summary of the authors’ personal experiences.

During the past ten years, empirical studies have become a more frequently chosen research type in Chinese graduate students’ SLW studies, as shown in Figure 12. The number of empirical studies on SLW increased greatly, while the number of non-empirical studies decreased. In many of the abstracts, however, the student researchers did not state explicitly how they conducted their studies. Instead, they used the word “empirical” in the titles or abstracts of their theses and dissertations in order to indicate the research types. The word “empirical” is included in the titles of 175 abstracts, but not all of them contain detailed descriptions of the students’ research design.
In the 3,021 abstracts I analyzed, 2,429 abstracts clearly identified the population that was investigated. In both empirical and non-empirical research, Chinese graduate students have studied a variety of writing populations, ranging from elementary school students to PhD candidates, as shown in Table 4. The two populations that have been studied most frequently are college undergraduates and secondary school (grades 7-12) students. College undergraduates were the focus of 1,418 studies, and secondary school students were the focus of 917 studies. Among the studies investigating undergraduates, 414—or nearly one-third
(29%)—focused on English majors, and the number of studies focusing on this population increased greatly during the 10-year period, from 7 in 2007 to 77 in 2012.

Table 4.

Target Populations in Chinese Graduate Theses and Dissertations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1-6</th>
<th>7-12</th>
<th>Under-graduate</th>
<th>Master’s</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Unspecified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MA Theses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>1391</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertations</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>917</td>
<td>1418</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>592</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attention to these two most studied populations has changed over the decade, as shown in Figure 13. According to these data, Chinese graduate students have started to pay more attention to the 7-12 population recently. In 2003, the number of studies on the 7-12 population comprised 22%; whereas nine years later, in 2012, this percentage increased to 37%. Despite this increase in attention to secondary students, more studies investigated undergraduate students than any other population during the period, even though the proportion has fluctuated (between 40% and 55%) over time.
Comparison between Master’s Theses and PhD Dissertations

Proportion of Research on SLW

The proportion of research on SLW conducted by Chinese master’s students is slightly larger than that of their PhD peers. Between 2003 and 2012, 2,962 master’s theses were identified as studies on SLW, which comprises 8% of the total number of theses on second language studies in China, and 59 PhD dissertations were identified as studies on SLW, comprising 5% of the total number of dissertations on second language studies. Both the number of master’s theses and the number of PhD dissertations on SLW have increased over the ten-year period, but the total number of PhD dissertations is much smaller than that of master’s thesis (See Figure 14).
As to the increase rate, the number of master’s theses on SLW has increased by 589% from 66 in 2003 to 455 in 2012, and the number of PhD dissertations on SLW has increased by 1,100% from 1 in 2003 to 12 in 2012. Figure 15 demonstrates the increase rates of graduate theses completed by master’s and PhD students respectively. The horizontal axis represents the year of completion, and the vertical axis represents the increase rates of works in each year compared with the number of works in 2003. For example, in the year of 2009, the increase rate of PhD dissertations is 7, which means the number of PhD dissertations in 2009 (8 abstracts) has increased by 700% compared with the number of PhD dissertations in 2003 (1 abstract).
Although both master’s and doctoral students investigated all six of the major EFL writing topics, the two groups demonstrate different preferences among these research topics, as shown in Table 5. Writing instruction is the most widely studied topic in master’s theses, comprising 33% of master’s theses on SLW, while discourse analysis and contrastive rhetoric are the most studied topics in PhD dissertations, comprising 36% of the SLW dissertations.
Table 5.

*Research Topics in Master’s and PhD Students’ Studies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Master’s Theses</th>
<th>PhD Dissertations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features in students’ written products</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors influencing students’ writing process</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing instruction</td>
<td>980</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and feedback</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse analysis and contrastive rhetoric</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language transfer and error analysis</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Type**

The vast majority of master’s and PhD students conducted empirical studies for their theses and dissertations. As shown in Table 6, 93% master’s theses and 88% PhD dissertations involve empirical methods, and only 7% master’s theses and 12% PhD dissertations are non-empirical studies.
Table 6.

*The Research Types of Chinese Master’s and PhD Students’ Studies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Empirical Studies</th>
<th>Non-Empirical Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Theses</td>
<td>2744</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD Dissertations</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Target Population**

Chinese master’s and doctoral students have investigated a similar range of populations in their theses and dissertations. College undergraduates and secondary school students comprise the most frequently studied populations for both groups, as shown in Table 4. However, the percentage of dissertation abstracts that did not specify the target research population (48%) is much larger than that for master’s theses abstracts (19%).

**Chinese Graduate Students’ Works versus Published Studies**

I found that the trends and patterns in Chinese graduate students’ studies are similar to the ones identified in published reviews of the published research on EFL writing in China. I compared my study results with the results of Zhu (2011) and He (2013) because they are the only two review studies that examined China’s SLW publications in the same time span as my study.
In their reviews, Zhu (2011) and He (2013) described the development trends of EFL writing studies in China as “gradual increase.” He also stated that EFL writing makes up a small proportion (2%) of the scholarship on foreign language studies. The description from Zhu (2011) and He (2013) of the numerical changes in the number of EFL writing publications is consistent with my findings from the abstracts of Chinese graduate students’ theses and dissertations.

As to the research topics, Chinese graduate students demonstrated a range of topics in their theses and dissertations on SLW that parallels the range of topics found in the published literature on EFL writing in China. Although Zhu (2011) and He (2013) used different coding schemes with different data sources from those in my study, we identified the most frequently researched topic as writing instruction.

In addition, Chinese graduate students’ increasingly frequent use of empirical studies to investigate SLW topics is also consistent with the findings from the review studies of Zhu (2011) and He (2013). Both reported an increase in the number of empirical studies on EFL writing in China since the beginning of the 21st century.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

Although this study is descriptive in nature and limited in scope, the trends and patterns identified in the abstracts indicate that Chinese graduate students have increased their knowledge of EFL writing by including SLW topics in their master’s theses and PhD dissertations. The topics investigated in master’s theses and doctoral dissertations demonstrate a slight difference, but this difference does not influence the overall trends and patterns in Chinese graduate research on SLW. The trends and patterns in this scholarship are consistent with the ones in the existing literature of EFL writing in China.

The terminology used in the graduate theses to define their research areas also reflects the development of SLW as a research field among graduate students in China. I noticed that different terminology was used in graduate theses to identify the major research areas. While a majority of theses and dissertations used “英语写作” (English writing) to identify their research area, in the 3,021 abstracts, 2,574 contain the term “英语” (English) in their titles; 78 contain “二语” (second language) in their titles; and 37 contain “外语” (foreign language). The use of different terms suggests that the theses writers are aware of the differences among foreign language writing, SLW, and English writing. Additionally, the large use of “English writing” in Chinese graduate students’ theses might be affected by the fact that English is the most frequently studied foreign language in China and also one of the required subjects in China’s 3-12 education.
An Increase in SLW Studies

The dramatic increase in graduate theses on SLW in China during the past decade evidences an expansion of the field of Second Language Writing Studies in China. Between 2003 and 2012, the number of theses and dissertations on SLW increased from 67 in 2003 to 467 in 2012. This rapid increase indicates the continuous growth of Chinese students’ interests in and efforts on SLW.

One of the possible reasons for this growth is the increase in the number of published journal articles on SLW issues in China. The yearly number of published journal articles on SLW has increased from 1 in 1962 to 2,256 in 2012, which demonstrates a dramatic development. Since graduate students in China are required to read research published in journals before they start writing their theses, it is possible that this required reading led increasing numbers of students to explore SLW issues in their theses and dissertations in the past decade.

Another possible reason is the organization of national symposiums on EFL writing research and teaching in China, which facilitates academic exchange on a broader platform. Graduate students are encouraged to attend academic conferences and present their works during their graduate studies. The Symposia focusing on EFL writing make apparent the existence of the field of SLW in China and provide students with a stage to share their insights in SLW. Therefore, it is possible that presenting at the Symposium becomes a motivation for
Chinese graduate students to research the field, and the student presenters might have extended their presentations to their graduate theses.

Another reason for this continuous growth may be the influence of a large number of English publications entering Chinese market. During the past decade, an increasing number of English publications, including textbooks, fiction, newspapers, and magazines, entered China’s publication market. At present, Chinese people are able to buy and read these English works in their daily lives. These publications may be inspiring Chinese graduate students in Second Language Studies to examine the differences in discourse and rhetoric between English and Chinese writing.

A Large Variety of SLW Topics

In addition to a dramatic increase in the number of graduate theses, the wide variety of topics in these theses also suggests that SLW is being viewed as a multi-dimensional field by Chinese graduate students during the past decade. In 2000, when the first SLW theses appeared in China, only seven graduate theses completed by Chinese students focused on SLW topics, and these theses investigated only topics of discourse analysis and writing instruction (CNKI). Between 2003 and 2012, Chinese graduate students investigated a large variety of SLW topics in their theses and dissertations. I identified six major topics in my data, ranging from writing pedagogies and textual analysis to writing processes and language transfer. One-third of the studies focus on writing instruction (33%), but the remaining abstracts (67%) are divided roughly equally among the five other major topics I identified (each comprising 11% to 17% of
the data). The similar percentages indicate a wide array of topics in Chinese graduate students’ theses and dissertations on SLW.

This expansion can be attributed to the introduction of SLW theories and studies from western countries, especially the United States. Researchers in the United States have explored a large variety of issues related to SLW and identified the field of SLW as a multi-dimensional area of study drawing from other fields, such as applied linguistics, rhetoric and composition, and psychology (Silva & Leki, 2004). Chinese researchers have investigated the SLW theories developed by scholars from other countries and pointed out that Chinese scholars need to study and localize those theories to facilitate the SLW development in China (Wang & Sun, 2005). Given the distinct features demonstrated in Chinese students’ writing in English and the differences between SLW and EFL writing, they have argued that instructors cannot simply adopt SLW pedagogies that were developed in western contexts to teach EFL writing in China. According to Li (2006), professors are encouraged to combine various pedagogies, connect reading and writing instruction, introduce the differences between Chinese and English rhetoric and thought, design life-related writing practice activities, and adopt flexible ways to assess students’ writing performance.

Another notable feature in graduate students’ thesis topics lies on the investigation of assessment and feedback in SLW. The topic of assessment and feedback is the least researched area but the only area that witnessed an increase in number in the year of 2009, while all of the other topics as well as total number of abstracts experienced a drop in number in 2009. Also,
the number of abstracts on assessment and feedback increased significantly from 4 in 2003 to 59 in 2012, which suggests that these issues are being viewed as increasingly significant to EFL writing development in China.

The increase in attention to SLW assessment and feedback might well be a result of the recent educational reform of the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE). NCEE is a national standardized test, with English as its required subject. Since NCEE is a very high-stakes exam and the most important admission procedure for Chinese students to go to college, high school students in China normally spend at least an entire school year to prepare for it. However, the writing section of the NCEE has been identified as the section with the least validity in the old version of the exam. In her survey, Zhang (2006) found that even though some examiners got high scores in their writing section in the Exam, their English writing abilities were assessed as not-so-satisfactory when they went to college. Therefore, in the past several years, the Ministry of Education of China has investigated multiple ways to improve the college admission process in order to make this examination more valid and reliable. This reform may motivate and inspire Chinese graduate students to investigate assessment issues in their theses and dissertations.

Additionally, according to the current NCEE specifications, examinees are required to use accurate grammar and vocabulary and various sentence patterns to express their thoughts clearly and coherently on the given topic in around 100 words. The writing section focuses on words and sentence-level structures, which does not reflect students’ writing abilities as a whole.
Therefore, the washback effect of the Exam may lead examinees to pay attention to vocabulary and sentence-level concerns rather than the development and organization of ideas when they write in English. This problem in validity and negative washback may have led increasing numbers of students to address assessment issues related to the NCEE in their theses and dissertations.

**A Focus on Writing Instruction**

An examination of the numerical change of each topic area and the specific topics discussed in each group can give us a basic understanding of how Chinese graduate students have investigated various topics to enrich the existing scholarship and demonstrate their effort in developing the field of SLW. As described in the previous chapter, writing instruction has been the most frequently studied topic area in the theses and dissertations on SLW completed by Chinese graduate students between 2003 and 2012. With a total of 985 abstracts, works on writing instruction comprise 33% of the total theses. No matter how the number of abstracts on each major topic changed over the period, writing instruction remained the most frequently researched area. Abstracts in this category mainly discussed theoretical development and empirical applications of various teaching methodologies to facilitate students’ acquisition of L2 writing. Other issues investigated in this group include the problems in current EFL and SLW teaching in China and possible solutions to these problems.

This focus on writing instruction is likely a result of the pedagogical orientation of SLW in China. The very first journal article on SLW published in China discussed possible ways to
improve students’ writing abilities in English through creating more practice opportunities (Dai, 1962). The article suggested that Chinese students should be encouraged to write in different genres, especially to practice writing more narrative essays, and to combine reading and reciting model essays into writing practice. Other early work on SLW explored the distinct features of Chinese students’ writing in English and how to improve the English writing performance of Chinese students (Cai, 1999; Cheng, 2008; Li, 2000).

Graduate students’ focus on writing instruction in their theses might also be affected by personal factors, such as personal interest and career preparation. According to Lin & Cheng (2010), students who planned to embark on teaching tended to investigate language pedagogies and benefitted from their research experiences and practical skills obtained from completing their theses. When I was writing my undergraduate thesis at a Chinese university, I made the decision to investigate teachers’ scaffolding in teaching English writing based on my own interests and career preparation. I was devoted to being an English teacher in the future and was fascinated by the differences between L2 writing in English and L1 writing in Chinese. Therefore, I proposed a teaching model using scaffolding theory to facilitate Chinese college students’ English improvement.

The large amount of research on writing instruction in Chinese graduate students’ theses and dissertations can also be attributed to instructional factors, such as the writing courses they took, the research training they received, or their advisors’ research interests. The increasing number of published journal articles on EFL writing in China indicates that a growing number
of Chinese professors started to investigate various SLW issues. Graduate students mentored by professors with an interest in EFL writing may also choose to investigate SLW issues in their theses and dissertations. However, further qualitative data are needed to determine the exact factors affecting Chinese graduate students’ focus on writing instruction in their theses on SLW. Interviews with students and professors, a survey of the curricula in relevant graduate programs, or a follow-up study on the research focus of newly graduated in-service teachers would lend more insight into this question.

A Large Number of Empirical Studies

The majority of graduate theses on SLW involve empirical studies. In the data I collected, 93% reported empirical studies with descriptions of data collection and analysis procedures. I believe that there are four likely reasons for graduate students’ production of large number of empirical studies in their theses and dissertations on SLW, which are (1) the design of the graduate curricula in China; (2) the Ministry of Education’s requirements for graduate theses; (3) the large number of studies on writing instruction in Chinese graduate students’ theses and dissertations on SLW; and (4) the access to EFL writers in classroom contexts.

I suspect that the design of graduate curricula in China is one of the major factors that contribute to the bias towards empirical research. I studied the curricula of two M.A. programs in one of the most prestigious foreign language universities in China: (1) English Language and Literature, and (2) Foreign Language and Applied Linguistics. After reading the published curricula description and consulting a few current and newly graduated students, I found that
both of the programs require students to pay extensive attention to research, especially empirical research. In both programs, students have to take a course named Research Methods and Thesis Writing in their fourth semester in the program. In this Research Methods class, professors introduce various research methods and the procedures to collect and analyze data to the graduate students, in order to provide students with a holistic understanding of what research is and how to design their own research to complete their graduate theses. Empirical research has been the focus of instruction in this course because in their third year in the program, students are encouraged to collect data and to investigate how English is being taught and learned in an authentic teaching/learning environment. Many of the graduate students developed and extended their findings from this empirical investigation to write their M.A. theses, thus leading a vast number of empirical studies in Chinese graduate students’ theses.

According to the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, in their theses and dissertations, graduate students are required to read research, learn about research methodologies, and report their own research and/or understandings in the field of study. The Ministry also states that the completion of graduate theses should include the application of students’ own knowledge to discover, analyze, and solve practical problems. In order to fulfill this requirement, students in China need to conduct and report their own research to complete their graduate theses. This led to the large amount of empirical research appearing in graduate theses on SLW in China.
Another reason for the preponderance of empirical research is the widespread focus on writing instruction in SLW graduate theses. One-third of the abstracts I reviewed directly discussed the teaching of EFL and/or L2 writing. According to Silva (2005), researchers who question the effectiveness of certain teaching methodologies are expected to compare different pedagogies with empirical evidence, so they connect theory and practice in order to decide what works and what does not in the classroom settings. Also, teachers can connect theories and practice in a classroom setting to facilitate both pedagogical and theoretical development of the field of SLW (Atkinson, 2010).

Access to student writers in real teaching/learning environments likely also contributes to the bias toward empirical studies in graduate theses. Many graduate students in English and applied linguistics go to local middle and high schools to complete required teaching practicums toward the end of their M.A. programs, around the same time they are working on their theses. This gives them ready access to student EFL writers, since English is a required subject for all secondary students in China. By teaching in a classroom environment, Chinese graduate students may notice the difficulties students have in their English writing and become motivated to investigate pedagogy-related SLW topics in their graduate theses.

A Comparison with China’s Published Journal Articles on SLW

I compared the results of my study with the findings from two review studies on published journal articles on EFL writing in China (He, 2013; Zhu, 2011). Findings from both my study and the published reviews are consistent. We both indicated an increase in the number
of SLW studies during the past ten years with a large variety of topics, and we both recognized writing instruction as the most popular research area. Also, according to both sources, empirical studies have become the more frequently used research type compared with non-empirical studies.

This consistency in trends and popular research topics is not surprising. According to the graduate curricula in China, graduate students are expected to integrate the existing with their knowledge when completing their theses and dissertations, so this consistency indicates that Chinese graduate students draw from the existing literature to develop their research topics and improve their research design. In addition, this consistency can result from significant partial replications. Researchers have argued that the idea of partial replication is valuable for the purpose of apprenticeship of novice researchers (Cumming, 2012). As novice researchers, graduate students in China are encouraged to study and draw from previous studies conducted by other researchers when completing their initial research design. This partial replication will lead to a significant consistency in research topic and design with their model studies, and this consistency will lead to a continuous growth of the field of SLW in China.

A major difference lies on the neglect of investigation on target populations in the published review studies. Neither Zhu (2011) nor He (2013) investigated the populations studied by EFL writing scholars in China. I believe that the examination of target population is important in EFL writing development and should be included in the review studies. The
analysis of the most studied population can reflect the change of instructional focus of EFL writing and help researchers identify the unstudied and understudied populations.

**Problems Identified in Chinese Graduate Students’ Works**

I found two problems in the data I collected. The first problem relates to the reporting of the research that has been conducted, and the second deals with the gap in research agenda. These two problems might cause great loss in the development of the field if not paid attention and corrected.

One of the problems is the lack of national and field-specific standards and specifications of Chinese graduate students’ theses and dissertations on SLW. In China, each program designs their own thesis and dissertation specifications, and the standards are sometimes different. In the data I collected, some of the abstracts are as long as two pages, while some are only five lines. In the abstracts of empirical studies, some student researchers include the term “empirical” in their title but provide only a brief introduction to their topic in the body text, without explaining the research design or identifying the target population, while in the abstracts of other empirical studies, the student researchers offer a detailed description of research design and findings. This lack of standards in content, structures, and documentation compilation of graduate theses makes the theses abstracts difficult to read and even affect intellectual exchanges negatively when the novice researchers start to communicate with their peers of the same interests from other institutions or countries.
The second problem relates to the neglect of some important topics in second language writing in the existing graduate theses. Chinese graduate students have investigated a large variety of SLW topics in their theses and dissertations during the past decade (2003-2012). However, compared with the existing literature of SLW in China, the research conducted by graduate students did not include topics that were identified as important topics in the published scholarship on EFL writing in China. For example, according to the literature I reviewed, it is important to investigate teacher training programs to understand what constitutes quality EFL writing instruction and determines how to develop these qualifications in future teachers through formal training (Wang & Sun, 2005). However, none of the abstracts I examined addressed the preparation of SLW teachers. This may result from the fact that among the 458 graduate programs related to English and foreign language studies in China, only 57 currently focus on the training of teachers of EFL, and all of these programs were established after 2009 (http://www.moe.gov.cn/). With the development of these 57 graduate programs focusing on EFL teacher training, it is reasonable to assume that there will be more theses and dissertations on the topic of China’s SLW teacher training in the future.

**Future Direction of SLW Studies in China**

The trends and patterns in Chinese graduate students’ work can give us insight into the future direction of SLW studies in China. Many graduate students will go on to become the scholars and teachers of the future, and their knowledge and understanding of SLW, as reflected in their theses and dissertations, may well affect how they conduct SLW research and teach
English writing in the future. It is likely that China will experience a continuous increase in the number of graduate theses on SLW, with a focus on EFL writing and the localization of theories and pedagogies introduced from western countries.

Chinese graduate students’ frequent use of empirical studies will lead to an increasing number of published empirical studies on SLW in China in the future. Empirical studies, in return, will provide valuable information on what theories work and how theories can facilitate practice. As a consequence, this increasing number of empirical studies on SLW may serve to promote the development of China’s own SLW theories, thus leading to the blossoming of the field of SLW in China.

The focus on writing instruction in Chinese graduate theses will promote the development of localized SLW teaching methodologies that can facilitate Chinese students’ acquisition of L2 writing. In the abstracts I studied, Chinese graduate students have demonstrated their knowledge on SLW and EFL writing, especially on how different teaching strategies can affect the development of Chinese students’ EFL writing abilities. In the future, these emerging voices from graduate students in China can contribute to improving Chinese students’ acquisition of SLW by inspiring pre- and in-service teachers to teach EFL writing using research-proven localized methodologies. In addition, the increasing attention paid to secondary education in the SLW theses will cause a shift in research interest from college students to secondary school students, which will better prepare high school graduates for their college studies.
In addition to the influence of a large number of theses on writing instruction, the SLW conference will be another factor that can promote the development of SLW in China. In the Fall of 2013, the 12th International Symposium on Second Language Writing (SSLW) will be held in China for the first time. The SSLW is an annual international conference focusing on second and foreign language writing which began in 1998. Each year, SSLW brings together teachers and researchers from all over the world to discuss important SLW issues. I presented my previous study with my colleague at the 2012 Symposium, and as a graduate student, I benefited greatly from the questions and comments from the audience. It will be a mutually beneficial opportunity for Chinese and western SLW scholars to learn from each other. Especially, for Chinese graduate students, attending and presenting at this Symposium will help them achieve a comprehensive understanding of the current development in the field of SLW. Therefore, with the Symposium coming to China for the first time, it is likely that China’s SLW development will witness a rapid growth in the following years, and an increasing number of Chinese graduate students may be encouraged to include SLW issues in their theses and/or dissertations.

Conclusion

After collecting, coding, and analyzing 3,021 abstracts of master’s theses and PhD dissertations, I found that Chinese graduate students have increased and expanded their knowledge of SLW with theses and dissertations on different topics, dealing with various populations. Although problems exist in both content and construction of the abstracts, I am
positive about the future direction of EFL writing development in China. This study identified
the trends and patterns in Chinese graduate students’ theses and dissertations on SLW. It is
important to survey these emerging voices of Chinese graduate students because their studies
and perspectives are significant and valuable in the field of SLW. Added to the existing reviews
of the published research on SLW, this study helps provide a comprehensive picture of SLW
research in China and point out the future directions for China’s SLW development.
Furthermore, the insights into SLW from an EFL perspective will enrich the knowledge basis of
SLW studies in general.

Current and previous graduate students, together with their mentors, will lead to a
development of SLW studies in China. Chinese graduate students have included SLW issues in
their theses and dissertations, and their works demonstrate trends that are consistent with the
ones identified in the existing literature. With the support of increasing literature on SLW and
the opportunity to present their studies at SLW conferences, an increasing number of graduate
students will join the field of SLW/EFL writing and make contribution to the field by adding
findings and perspectives from their own studies.

The findings from this study have implications for both SLW researchers in China and
overseas. Domestically, this study provides a review of how SLW has been researched by
graduate students in the past ten years and offers suggestions on how to facilitate the
development of SLW in China. The future of SLW studies in China depends largely on the
works by current and/or newly graduated graduate students. These graduate students, working
in different levels of institutions and investigating different populations, contribute their knowledge to the field and lead the directions for the future of SLW in China.

For SLW scholars from other countries and the field of SLW and TESOL, this study offers a unique insider’s perspective on how graduate students in China have investigated this expanding field and what topics and populations have been investigated most frequently in their theses and dissertations. Although China has the largest EFL population in the world, Chinese scholars’ contributions to the field of SLW have been limited because most journal articles on SLW in China are published exclusively in Chinese—not in English, which is the medium of a majority of the EFL writing publications in the world. Given that a small proportion of SLW scholars to date have been bilingual in Chinese and English, few have been able to read the Chinese EFL scholarship. My work opens up this possibility for SLW scholars in western countries to learn about the emerging voices of SLW in China. By introducing what and how Chinese graduate students investigated the field of SLW in their theses and dissertations, I provided an insider’s perspective on the development of SLW in China.
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