

# **An Investigation of Topic Sentences in Chinese Students' Argumentative Essays: A Multidimensional Probe**



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## Abstract

Topic sentence writing is an important component of academic writing. Through studying topic sentences in Chinese students' English essays, this research aims to find out the frequency and the placement of topic sentences, the wording within topic sentences and the relationship between topic sentences and paragraph unity. In this research, 45 English essays written by Chinese students were collected from WECCL corpus and targeted topic sentences were selected out afterwards. Depending on Wordsmith 3.0, results related to topic sentences were generated including the frequency, the placement, the wording of topic sentences and the unity between topic sentences and supporting sentences. Results show that Chinese students have a good awareness of writing topic sentences and placing them at the beginning of paragraphs. However, Chinese students are not good at applying transitional phrases and expressing ideas objectively as academic writing requires. Moreover, paragraph unity in some Chinese students' essays is poor. In addition, as a part of this empirical study, an interview about how to write topic sentences was conducted among ten Chinese students majoring in English in order to verify the results. Based on the responses from the interview and previous research, this research suggests that Chinese rhetoric convention and school instruction on writing are two major factors leading to the present results.

**Key Words:** topic sentences; Chinese rhetoric convention; school instruction

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## **1. Introduction**

English as a second language writing is considered to be one of the most challenging aspects in ESL learning (Hyland, 2003, p.xiii). With the increase in research on process-approached ESL writing, researchers are beginning to show an interest in paragraph organization. Topic sentence writing as the basic component of a paragraph catches researchers' attention because many textbooks for guiding ESL writing say a good topic sentence is a pre-requisite for a good paragraph and a good paragraph then ensures a good essay (Zemach & Rumisek, 2003; Flower & Aaron, 2007).

The primal concept of a topic sentence was raised in 1866 by Alexander Bain as "a collection of sentences with unity of purpose" (D'Angelo, 1986, p.432). Since then, the definition of a topic sentence has been amended and perfected by other researchers such as Cohan (1976), Popken (1987) and McClain & Roth (1998). Concerning topic sentence writing, many textbooks provide some theoretical instructions about how to define a topic sentence and where to place them. However, empirical research which only focuses on topic sentence writing is rare. Three empirical studies are worth mentioning because they are the most influential ones in this area. The first one is Richard Braddock (1974) who studies the frequency and placement of topic sentences in expository prose and the second is D'Angelo (1986) who reviews the controversy on topic sentence writing. The last one is Popken (1987) who makes another research to check the validity of Braddock's result. Though these studies provide some knowledge of topic sentence writing, they are either limited to one aspect of topic sentence writing or too general. The researcher of the present study believes that conducting a systematic and comprehensive research on topic sentence writing on a multidimensional scale is necessary.

Research on topic sentence writing by Chinese students can be divided into two main groups. One group believes indirectness is a typical feature of Chinese ESL essays and so Chinese writers tend to use a topic sentence at the end of a paragraph. This camp is represented by Kaplan's pioneering research in 1966, addressed by Connor (1996, pp.30-34), while the other camp believes Chinese writers are capable of direct writing, which means writing a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph. For example, Mohan & Lo (1985) and Yang & Cahill (2008) both

conducted empirical research to demonstrate that Chinese students normally use a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph. At the same time, researchers in China also mention problems in topic sentence writing in Chinese students' essays. More specifically, topic sentences are not clearly identifiable in paragraphs (Li, 2000, p.86) or topic sentence writing is stereotyped in its form because of exam-oriented instruction on ESL writing (Zhu, 2005, p.47).

In summary, there are two reasons for conducting the present research on Chinese students' topic sentence writing. Firstly, existing studies on topic sentence writing are not systematic and comprehensive enough. In addition, more suggestions on how to improve topic sentence writing is needed in the near future because there are many problems in topic sentences written by Chinese students.

### ***1.1 Aim***

Through studying topic sentence writing in Chinese college students' argumentative essays, this research aims to establish the frequency and the placement of topic sentences, the wording within topic sentences and the relationship between topic sentences and paragraph unity in Chinese college students' essays. Hopefully, this research can provide some hints for teachers on how to improve Chinese students' topic sentence writing in English composition.

### ***1.2 Material***

The primary material for this research is based on Spoken and Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners (Wen Qiufang, Wang Lifei & Liang Maocheng, 2005), hereafter abbreviated as Sweccl Corpus. Sweccl Corpus contains two sub-corpora: one is Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners (SECCL) and the other is Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners (WECCL). In the present study, all the sample Chinese argumentative essays are collected from WECCL Corpus. WECCL Corpus is mainly made up of essays written by Chinese students from nine different universities. These students are all majoring in English ranging from grade one to grade four. In total, the WECCL Corpus contains 1, 186, 215 words with 3, 059 argumentative essays, 529 narrative essays, and 90 expository essays. All these essays can be divided into timed essays and untimed essays (no fixed period for completing essays) within various topics like English teaching, environmental protection, etc. Timed essays refer to essays that need to be completed in

an allotted time (e.g.45 minutes for an exam) and untimed essays refer to essays that can be finished in spare time (e.g. after class). Compared with untimed essays, timed essays are more suitable for comparison because many influential factors such as time, writing environment are in control. It is why the present research chose timed essays for investigation.

### **1.3 Method**

This chapter focuses on the process of data collection and analytic techniques involved. The first part is about argumentative essays collecting , the second is about topic sentences screening and the last part focuses on discourse-based interviews designing. All the data used in this study comes from two sources: WECCL corpus and discourse-based interviews. During the analysis of data from WECCL corpus, Wordsmith 3.0 (Scott, 1998) will be applied.

#### **1.3.1 Collection of student essays**

There are four grades in Chinese colleges. However, grade four students focused on their graduate thesis and did not practice essay writing in that year. Thus, the researcher collected argumentative essays from grade one to grade four. Though various topics were written by students, three common topics including mobile phone, degree and certificate and environmental pollution were shared by all three grades. Five essays on the same topic were selected from each grade. That is to say, there were 15 essays from three grades for one topic, i.e. 45 essays in total. In addition, all these selected essays were timed, which meant students finished essays in a fixed period. The following table give information about the classification, the quantity and the source of these selected essays.

Table 1. Information of Selected Essays

Topic Grade	Mobile phone	Degree and certificate	Environmental pollution
Grade 1	5	5	5
Grade 2	5	5	5
Grade 3	5	5	5

### 1.3.2 Topic sentence selection

After collecting 45 essays, the next step was to screen topic sentences in paragraphs of each essay. A topic sentence is claimed to be the most important sentence in a paragraph, stating the main idea of the whole paragraph and controlling the paragraph development (Kolin, 2010, p.693). However, if topic sentences appear in the introduction paragraphs, they are called thesis statements or macropropositions which “more frequently organize chunks or sections of a discourse” and are “high level of propositions than topic sentences” (D’Angelo, 1986, p.437). If topic sentences appear in the conclusion paragraphs, they always restate thesis statements and summarize the whole essay (Flower and Aaron, 2007, p.106). The present research decided to select topic sentences that cover the main idea of single particular paragraphs. Thus, the research scope is within body paragraphs (except introduction paragraphs and conclusion paragraphs). The examples for target topic sentences are displayed in figure 2 in section 3.2. About the placement of a topic sentence, most researchers think a good topic sentence usually appears at the beginning of a paragraph and this placement meets readers’ expectation (Lacie, 2008; Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Stout, 1998). Nevertheless, topic sentences can appear at the end for particular reasons. For example, a topic sentence is designed to be put at the end if the author wants readers to think about the reasoning before claiming the main idea (Gocsik, 2004)<sup>1</sup>. In conclusion, topic sentences can be placed at beginning, in the middle or end of a paragraph for different purposes. Based on the above information, this research supplied the three following criteria for topic sentence selection:

- 1) A topic sentence is a statement or argument that summarizes the main idea of a paragraph that is to be developed in the following part
- 2) A topic sentence can appear at beginning, in the middle or at the end of a paragraph depending on different purposes.
- 3) All the topic sentences should be only selected from body paragraphs in essays.

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<sup>1</sup> All of Gocsik’s claims are from a website  
[http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac\\_paper/write.shtml](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/write.shtml)

### 1.3.3 Related statistic collection by wordsmith tool

The statistics related to topic sentences were generated by Wordsmith 3.0 tool. In order to facilitate Wordsmith 3.0 to make related statistics on topic sentence, all the topic sentences were tagged with <topic> at the beginning and </topic> at the end of the sentence.

Wordsmith Tool is an integrated suite of programs for looking at how words behave in texts. It concludes sub-tools like word list, concord tool and key words. In this research, concord tool would be applied for searching transitional words and personal pronouns in topic sentences. Here is a screenshot for reference to show how concord tool accounted and listed personal pronoun *you* within topic sentences.

N	Concordance	Set	Tag	rd No.	File	%
1	they're not only care about your gramatic mistakes when you speak, but your influence of speaking skill may impr			74	e027.txt	75
2	<topic> First o fall, high education is necessary for you to get a good job. </topic>			25	e012.txt	32
3	pic> Books, music, movies, whatever you find interesting you can find on Internet. </topic>			25	e020.txt	59
4	<topic> Secondly, high education can make you well-prepared for your future. </topic>			38	e012.txt	49
5	don't need to be painful of go shopping far <topic> Third, you don't need to be painful of go shopping far from your			28	e023.txt	81
6	<topic> Books, music, movies, whatever you find interesting you can find on Internet. </topic>			22	e020.txt	58
7	and hear them at any time. <topic> Wherever they are, you can talk to them and hear them at any time. </topic>			17	e009.txt	38
8	<topic> On the other hand, You should know the objection. </topic>			17	e015.txt	56
9	<topic> Second, you can have s<topic> Second, you can have study or working on internet. </topic>			17	e023.txt	65
10	le phone also interferes with people's private lives. Maybe you are enjoying yourself very much in a make-up party,			130	e005.txt	82

Figure 1. The frequency of personal deixis *you* in topic sentences from Grade 1

### 1.3.4 Interviews with students

The main purpose of these interview was to verify the findings resulting from this corpus-based research. All together there were eight independent interviews whose participants were ten Chinese University students majoring in English with four years' experience in English writing experience. The interview questions were all specifically designed and closely connected with the research domain of topic sentences. Moreover, no directive questions were raised or subjective comments given during the interviews. The whole interview was carried out in English through online chatting tools QQ and careful notes were taken by the researcher throughout the interviews. In addition, all the interview responses are available if anyone wants to check these responses personally.

### **Samples questions the interview was based on**

- 1) What is a topic sentence? Please define
- 2) Do you think it is necessary to write a topic sentence in each paragraph of an essay? Please explain your answer.
- 3) Do you write topic sentences in your essays, and if so, how often do you write topic sentences?
- 4) Where do you prefer to place topic sentences: at the beginning, in the middle or at the end? Please explain your answer.
- 5) Do you revise your topic sentence as your paragraph develops?
- 6) How often do you use transitional phrases, e.g. firstly, secondly, finally, however, on the contrary, etc. to bridge two paragraphs? Please give some examples of transitional phrases you often use in paragraphs.
- 7) In your writing classes, does your teacher advocate free writing, i.e. no restriction on the way you write, or model writing, e.g. conforming to the five-paragraph essay model? Do you prefer free writing or model writing? Please explain your answer.
- 8) When your writing teacher marks your work, does he/she focus on language accuracy, e.g. spelling, grammar, punctuation, or does he/she put greater emphasis on the organization of the discourse? Which kind of information or comments do you expect from your teacher in the way of feedback, i.e. focus on grammar or organization? Please explain your answer.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Previous Research**

The theoretical background and relevant previous research are two parts of this section. In the first part, the definition, classification and functions of topic sentences are provided. In the second part, the empirical research on topic sentences and particular research on Chinese students' topic sentence writing are discussed respectively.

### ***2.1 Theoretical background***

In this section, related knowledge about the definition, classification and function of a topic sentence are provided.

### 2.1.1 Conceptualization of a topic sentence

“Historically considered, the concept of a topic sentence seems to be related to the concept of the *topoi* in classical rhetoric”(D’Angelo, 1986, p.431). *Topoi* or *topic* is referred to *subject matter* or *heading* of a discourse from which arguments are drawn and many 19<sup>th</sup>-century textbooks advocate that the main idea of a paragraph should be embodied in *topoi*, *subject* or *heading* (D’Angelo, 1986, p.431). *Topoi* is the predecessor of topic sentence. It indicates that there was a vague idea about topic sentences in people’s minds at that time and they had noticed the important functions of topic sentences.

The independent concept of topic sentences was first raised in 1866 by Alexander Bain as “a collection of sentences with unity of purpose” (D’Angelo, 1986, p.432). Since then, a great number of definitions of topic sentences have been put forward. For example, in *Writing effective paragraph*, Cohan writes “the topic sentence is that sentence which implies a question to be answered by the rest of the paragraph” (Cohan, 1976, p.364). Cohan’s definition is simple but only shows one aspect of functions that topic sentences obtain. While Popken argues that “a topic sentence is the surface manifestation of an element at the ‘top’(or ‘macro’) level in the semantic hierarchy of a paragraph or group of paragraphs; this element ‘covers’ the other contents of paragraph(s) in one way or another”(Popken, 1987, p.211). Compared with Cohan’s claim, Popken’s definition of topic sentences is more general. However, Poken’s definition is abstract and a little bit vague. More recently, McClain & Roth claim that “topic sentence is a general statement, or argument, that you intend to prove in the body of the paragraph; it is always the first sentence of the paragraph” (McClain & Roth, 1998, p. 38). Compared with Cohan and Popken’s definitions of topic sentences, McClain & Roth’s definition is better. It is clearer, more concise and comprehensive.

Throughout the history of conceptualizing a topic sentence, many progresses have been achieved. Conceptions become more specific and accurate. From the initial hazy notion of a topic sentence to the recent comprehensive description of a topic sentence including its status, placement and function, people have a better understanding of topic sentences. Based on those previous definitions, a topic sentence can be defined as a sentence, which obtains the main idea of a paragraph (or a longer unity discourse) and guides the development of the whole paragraph (or a

longer discourse); it is always placed at the beginning. However, the present research only focuses on topic sentences in separate paragraphs, which means those topic sentences in a longer unity of discourse are not within our research scope.

### 2.1.2 Types of topic sentences

Though the definitions of a topic sentence are quite similar, the criteria for identifying different kinds of topic sentences is various. For example, topic sentence can be divided into explicit topic sentences and implied topic sentences<sup>2</sup> according to the degree of distinctness of a topic sentence in discourse. In addition, there are *major topic sentences* (MTSs) named by Braddock (1974) and *minor topic sentences* named by Popken (1987). This section minutely introduces different kinds of classifications for topic sentences based on previous researchers' work.

First of all, topic sentences can be grouped as major topic sentences and minor topic sentences. This kind of classification depends on the extension of domain a topic sentence can cover. In another word, a topic sentence can command a paragraph or a bloc (several paragraphs). The name of major topic sentence (MTSs) was first introduced by Braddock. According to him, a major topic sentence refers to a topic sentence which not only covers the main idea but also guides the development of the following paragraphs (p.290). In a word, a major topic sentence is at higher level than a topic sentence in a single paragraph. Such a pattern is illustrated in passage number [1], which is taken from an essay collected within SWELL corpus (Wen et al. 2005).

Passage [1] major topic sentence

Frankly speaking, I think electronic cards are better than paper cards.

As we know, the felling of trees has made the world's environment worse than before. Paper cards are made from trees. If we use electronic cards instead, a lot of trees can be saved.

After the first computer in the world was invented, the computer is developing very fast as well as the Internet<sp-internet>. Now, there are many web sites, which have many e-cards, on the Internet<sp-internet>. These e-cards have flash, music and they are very beautiful, too. You can also make an<gr-a> electronic card with computer by yourself. I think it can display your expressions to your friends as well. (Wen et al. 2005)

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<sup>2</sup> Implied topic sentences are not stated in paragraphs and readers should conjecture topic sentences themselves based on the paragraphs contents (Braddock, 1974).

*Note: this paragraph came from a target essay in corpus and the grammatical errors in the text are from original text (similarly hereafter)*

In this passage [1], the major topic sentence is underlined and the following paragraphs are supporting evidence of the claim addressed in the major topic sentence, which is that electronic cards are better than paper cards. Furthermore, major topic sentences are also called thesis statements or macropropositions which “more frequently organize chunks or sections of a discourse” and are “high level of propositions than topic sentences” (D’Angelo, 1986, p.437). In conclusion, major topic sentences, thesis statements and macropropositions all refer to the same type of topic sentences.

Compared with a major topic sentence, a minor topic sentence is the subordinate one, which carries the main idea of a single paragraph. To a certain extent, a minor topic sentence is a sub-branch of a major topic sentence and a minor topic sentence can be treated as one aspect of the supporting evidence for a major topic sentence. In passage [2], a sample minor topic sentence is underlined for reference. In this case, the topic sentence only controls the idea of a single paragraph and no other extended domain.

Passage[2] Minor topic sentence

But the mobile telephone is not perfect, he also has defects, for example, sometimes he makes some noise in public place, and lots of boring message will affect our life and work. Some expert said the radiation send from mobile telephone is bad for people’s cerebrum. So the mobile telephone need improvement. (Wen et al. 2005)
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Popken regards the minor topic sentence type as head-body pattern, which means the minor topic sentence is the head of the paragraph and the remaining sentences are the body of the paragraph. In this kind of head-body pattern, Popken classifies minor topic sentence into three types according to the different functions they play. The first type is where “a topic sentence carries one or more propositions that the remaining contents prove, explain, illustrate, elaborate upon, or carry out in some way” (p.211). This type of topic sentences will be displayed through passage [3] (see appendix 1) in which the underlined sentence is the target topic sentence. The second type is “a topic sentence that establishes a domain through a topic rather than a full proposition” (p. 212). It means the author just mentions the topic in the topic sentence and does not give any comments. In passage [4] (see appendix1), the underlined sentence is the target topic sentence. The topic

sentence limits the topic domain but does not indicate the author's standpoint. This third type of topic sentences is quite distinct. Popken defines it as “‘metadiscursive’, stating the direction or intention for a paragraph or group of paragraphs to follow” (p.212). That is to say, this passage gives the direction of bloc development and it anticipates the following content in advance. Passage [5] (see appendix 1) is an example of this kind of topic sentence.

These two kinds of classifications for topic sentence are the most popular ones. The target topic sentences in the present study are minor topic sentences in body paragraphs. However, the researcher of the present study does not classify minor topic sentences as Popken suggests because the classification of topic sentences are not within the research aim.

### **2.1.3 Functions of the topic sentence**

Textbooks for academic writing or English as a second language writing invariably contain a section on topic sentences. It seems that the importance of topic sentences is widely acknowledged. However, topic sentences were criticised in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by many scholars. Brooks & Warren argue that implied topic sentences are meaningless (p.220). Martin & Ohmann (1961) claim that topic sentences are fictitious entities imagined by readers (p.207). In addition, Christensen (1965) criticizes the fuzzy definitions of topic sentences (p.144).

Though the debates over the efficacy of topic sentences continue, it must be acknowledged that a topic sentence is an important feature of students' writing. Basically, topic sentences have two major functions: to enhance paragraph unity and facilitate reading. The following sections will elaborate these two functions separately.

Topic sentences are always connected with paragraph unity. According to Johns (1986), the unity of a paragraph is briefly defined as “stick to the point” (p.248), which means all the supporting sentences in the paragraph should illustrate, explain or elaborate the topic sentence so that the whole paragraph has only one core to develop. In *Bridges to Better Writing* (Nazario, Borchers & Lewis, 2010), unity is defined as a principle which directs a topic sentence to tie the whole paragraph together (p.85). In addition, Waddy (1889) also stresses the importance of constructing a topic sentence to achieve paragraph unity and provides some tips for developing a coherent paragraph at the same time:

In order that a paragraph shall possess the quality of unity, it is requisite that the sentence composing it shall relate, each and all, to the one definite division of the subject which they illustrate and explain. A paragraph should have but a single theme-*one central thought*, and all digressions from this principal thought should be excluded. No sentence has any right to a position in connection with others, unless it is closely related to the preceding sentence or to the one following (p.256)

Overall, a topic sentence functions as a guide in paragraph construction and reminds the author of the central idea now and then so that the supporting details will not diverge to other areas. As soon as a topic sentence exists in a paragraph, the writer can use it to check the unity of the paragraph. If there is any point demonstrated in the body paragraph but not within topic sentence, it is wise to either delete that point or add that point into a topic sentence to ensure the paragraph unity.

The other function of a topic sentence is to facilitate comprehension of the main idea and memorize the details of a paragraph. Eden & Mitchell (1986) advocate reader-oriented theory and argue good paragraph development should meet readers' expectations. One of these expectations is to find a topic sentence at the initial (top-down pattern) to orient them. Thus, Eden & Mitchell declare that "a top-down presentation meshes with the readers' pattern of comprehension, allowing them to read quickly and easily" (p.422).

In conclusion, though some kinds of topic sentences like implied topic sentences remain controversial, the advantages of writing a topic sentence clearly outweigh the disadvantages. A topic sentence manifests its value in ensuring the paragraph unity and facilitating reading. What is more, an explicit topic sentence at the initial place seems the most popular one advocated by scholars based on previous studies' results. The reason for this claim is an implied topic sentence is difficult to identify and judge; a topic sentence at beginning meets most readers' expectations and has positive effects.

## ***2.2 Previous Research***

This section is made up of three parts. The first part is about the empirical research on the frequency and placement of topic sentence writing. The second part introduces the research on Chinese students' topic sentence writing. In addition, Chinese rhetoric convention and school instruction as two contributory factors are also discussed in the second part. The third part introduces one of the most recent researches on topic sentences.

### 2.2.1 The frequency of topic sentences

The main functions of topic sentences have been illuminated above. It is no wonder that many textbooks and schoolteachers follow “Bain’s (1866) derived theory” (Duncan, 2007, p. 471) which advocates writing a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph and then support that topic sentence with related evidence. It seems that containing a good topic sentence is the marker of a good paragraph. However, whether a good paragraph should contain a topic sentence is a matter of debate among researchers. Two researchers including Braddock and Popken make great contribution on this issue.

The pioneering article *The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose* written by Braddock in 1974 is the foremost piece of empirical research on topic sentence writing. Braddock chose 25 professional articles from the following five publications: *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Reporter*, *The Harper’s Weekly* and *The Saturday Evening Review* as primary data; a total of 889 paragraphs. He concludes that 37% of those paragraphs begin with an explicit topic sentence and warns schoolteachers that they should not tell their students all the professional articles must contain topic sentences. However, Braddock’s study was misinterpreted by other researchers at that time. Popken says many scholars began to doubt the importance of topic sentences in essay writing and those schoolteachers who teach ESL writing wondered whether they should advocate topic sentence writing in classroom (P. 210). In fact, Braddock does not deny the value of topic sentences according to his conclusion for the research: “In my opinion, often the writing in the 25 essays would have been clearer and more comfortable to read if the paragraphs had presented more explicit topic sentences” (p.301).

Based on Braddock’s study, Popken conducted the other work named *A Study of Topic Sentence Use in Academic Writing*. It is a corrective study by which Popken wants to check whether topic sentences is a kind of standard feature in academic articles. Popken thinks the corpus of Braddock’s study is too limited for the result to be convincing (p.210). In his research, Popken chose academic articles from various genres including literature, history, biochemistry, civil engineering, physics, psychology and sociology. Then Popken imitated Braddock’s method to record topic sentences and found out that “for the most part, topic sentences are alive and well in academic articles” (P.215). According to Popken, minor topic sentences take up 54%, which is a

lot more than Braddock's 37%. In addition, the frequency of topic sentences varies within different text genres. For example, topic sentences appear in 71% of literature texts, 62% in psychology texts while only 34% in both natural science and civil engineering. With respect to the low frequency in engineering articles, Popken argues that such articles may contain many short paragraphs that do not need topic sentences, or the authors use headings to replace topic sentences in many situations (p.217). In conclusion, Popken thinks that the frequency of topic sentences may vary according to the specific context (p.224). However, topic sentences still occupy the dominating position in academic articles.

Generally speaking, Popken's research is more advanced than Braddock's because the genre of articles in Popken's research is more extensive, making the result more convincing. However, Braddock's contribution to topic sentence research area needs to be recognized because he lays a good foundation for topic sentence research thereafter.

### **2.2.2 The placement of topic sentences**

With respect to the placement of topic sentences, A.D.Hepburn was the first scholar to address the issue (D'Angelo, 1986, p.432). According to Hepburn (1875), a topic sentence can be placed either at the beginning of a paragraph or at the end; or can be stated at the beginning and repeated at the end (p.153). However, the debate as to where to place a topic sentence is ongoing. There are two main camps: the first camp believes topic sentences should be placed at the beginning of a paragraph, the second camp maintains that topic sentences can be placed anywhere in a paragraph depending on what the different purpose is.

The first camp receives most support from scholars who advocate putting topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs. In 1966, Alexander Bain raised the independent concept of a topic sentence and advocated to place it at the beginning of a paragraph (D'Angelo,1986,p.432). Afterwards, many textbooks and teachers follow Bain's theory and stick to the principle of topic sentences at the beginning to ensure an explicit structure. Eden & Mitchell (1986) also believe that good paragraphs should contain topic sentences at the initial place, especially in expository prose because readers want to grab information as soon as possible (p.425). If topic sentences are placed in other places, they violate readers' expectations and impede readers' comprehension. In addition, Braddock (1974) also investigates the placement of topic sentences besides frequency

and finds out a small section of paragraphs have topic sentences at the beginning. Many people misinterpreted Braddock and regarded his study as a criticism of topic sentences. However, Braddock also admits the importance of topic sentences and indicates that professional articles can be improved if they all contain explicit topic sentences at the beginning (p.301). This argument proves that Braddock also agree topic sentences should be written and put at the initial place at the same time.

The second camp believes that topic sentences can be placed anywhere within paragraphs depending on their purposes. For example, Duncan (2007) advocates functionally oriented writing and does not agree that every paragraph should begin with a topic sentence as Bain suggests. What is more, Gocsik discusses reasons for putting a topic sentence in different parts of a paragraph. A topic sentence at the beginning is the most common strategy because it meets readers' expectations; a topic sentence in the middle of a paragraph is justified because you need to provide some background knowledge first for readers; a topic sentence at the end indicates the author wants readers to reason the development of this argument by themselves first and get the main point finally (Gocsik, 2004). Flower & Aaron are also supportive of topic sentences at the end. They think topic sentences at the end can "prove effective in argument" and believe "this model can be dramatic in exposition" (Flower & Aaron, 2007, p.74).

In conclusion, there are more adherents to the opinion of the first camp. The majority of people acknowledge topic sentences at the beginning place and related empirical research has proved the value of this pattern while the second camp only has some theories without empirical research. However, other patterns (topic sentences in the middle and topic sentences at the end) are also important because Hyland claims writing is creative and fixed writing models impede writers' creativity (p.9).

### **2.2.3 Research on topic sentence writing in China**

English as a Second language (ESL) writing has a relatively short history of development in China and recently ESL writing in China is beginning to shift its focus from language accuracy to discourse organization (Zhang, 2005, p.45). The role of topic sentence writing as a strategy for constructing a logical and unified paragraph has been given increasing attention in past years.

This section is divided into three parts. The first part presents previous research on topic sentence writing among Chinese students and exposes some problems encountered by Chinese students when writing topic sentences. The second part introduces the influence of Chinese culture on ESL writing and the third part talks about Chinese writing instruction. In fact, parts 2 and 3 are presented as two aspects of the attempts to explain the condition of Chinese students' topic sentence writing.

### ***2.2.3.1 Research on Chinese students' topic sentence writing***

The earliest research on Chinese students' topic sentence writing was made by Kaplan (1966), a landmark in contrastive rhetoric research but can also be criticised. Kaplan identifies five types of paragraph development in five groups and found that Anglo-European expository essays follow a linear development while essays written in oriental languages, including Chinese, follow an indirect approach and gets to the main point at the end of a paragraph (Connor, 1996, pp15-16). The organisation of a Chinese paragraph does not follow the top-down pattern and the main idea (topic sentence) always appears at the end of a paragraph. In addition, Kaplan also attributes the indirectness of Chinese essays to negative transfer<sup>3</sup> from the first language. Other researchers do not agree with him for the following reasons: Chinese, Japanese, Thai should not be classified into the same oriental group because of cultural differences; the negative transfer of L1 is over exaggerated, etc (p.16).

After Kaplan's work, many other researchers have refuted the claim of indirectness in Chinese essays and demonstrated that Chinese writers are capable of writing direct paragraphs. Through investigating classical and modern Chinese prose, Mohan & Lo conclude that the organization of Chinese proeses seems similar to the organization of English prose, which means Chinese proeses also advocate directness in writing (p.520). In this case, L1 transfer plays a positive role in L2 writing. What is more, Mohan & Lo explain the remaining differences between Chinese students' organization patterns in ESL writing and English-speaking natives' organization patterns with the theory of developmental factors. Mohan & Lo interviewed both students and teachers from Hong Kong and British Columbia in Canada about the writing process of English composition and discovered that writing teachers pay more attention to the accuracy of the language than

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<sup>3</sup> The negative transfer refers to the interference from the first language in academic writing (Mohan & Lo, 1985:515).

paragraph organization which is developed later in ESL classes. In addition to Mohan & Lo's research, Yang & Cahill also make an empirical study to compare the level of directness of Chinese students' English essays and American students' essays. The result shows that there is no major difference on the paragraph organization since both Chinese students and American students like to place topic sentences at the beginning. In other words, the directness of paragraph organization is also embodied in Chinese students' essays (p.124).

In addition, Chinese researchers have conducted empirical research on Chinese students' topic sentence writing and have identified some problems. For example, in Li's research, he stresses the importance of topic sentences firstly and then points out three major defects in Chinese students' topic sentence writing: no explicit topic sentences in paragraphs; supporting sentences diverge from a topic sentence; inappropriateness of the placement of topic sentences. Li suggests writing teachers to remind students of the value of topic sentences and encourage students to practice topic sentence writing in daily essays in order to enhance the coherence and unity of paragraphs (p.87).

Another more systematic study, which was conducted by Wu (2003), presents the use of topic sentences by Chinese college students in English essays. In Wu's study, the participants were made up of two groups: 31 non-English major students (low proficiency level) and 37 English major students (high proficiency level). The purpose of this study is to establish the completeness, explicitness, frequency and placement of topic sentences in the essays of two groups of students. The result shows that the frequency of explicit major topic sentences (thesis statement) is 83.8% in all essays. In addition, high-level essays (94.6%) contains more explicit major topic sentences than low-level essays (71.0%). However, the frequency of major topic sentences at the initial place takes up only less than half (45.6%), which is attributed to traditional Chinese thinking model <sup>4</sup>by Wu. What is more, Wu's study also demonstrates that minor topic sentences are seldom used by Chinese students in paragraphs because of the short length of some paragraphs and the Chinese holistic thinking model. In summary, Wu's research demonstrates that Chinese students get used to constructing major topic sentences in essays and can compose explicit major

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<sup>4</sup> Chinese people think over a thing from surface to core and draw a conclusion after analysing the detailed evidence. This is the general thinking logic for Chinese people (Wu, 2003).

topic sentences. However, Chinese students are not proficient in constructing a unified paragraph by adding a minor topic sentence.

With respect to the problems faced by Chinese students when writing topic sentences, other researchers have different opinions. Zhu (2005), for example, argues that product writing and model-essay instruction are responsible for the problems in Chinese students' topic sentence writing in that Chinese students' topic sentences function as no more than labels. In other words, Chinese students write topic sentences for examination purposes so that a topic sentence does not contain the functions as it supposed to have. For example, a topic sentence should control the development of the whole paragraph and orient readers to the main idea of a paragraph. Zhu criticizes teachers who emphasize the importance of writing topic sentences but overlook the process of revising topic sentences so that topic sentences in Chinese students' essays are incomplete or inexplicit or not general (p.47). All in all, teachers should encourage process-oriented writing and advocate self revision on topic sentences and also paragraph organization because writing is not linear and more revision should be carried out before getting close to the approximate meaning a discourse plans to express (Hyland, 2003, p.11).

Research on topic sentence writing, particularly with respect to Chinese students, was neglected for a long period and previous claims on Chinese students' topic sentence writing were tentative and immature. Foreign researchers have less advantages in studying topic sentence writing in Chinese students' ESL essays because of two reasons: first, it is difficult for foreign teachers to get access to Chinese students' English essays. Second, foreign teachers have little experience in teaching Chinese students to write English essays in reality. However, Chinese researchers mainly focus on theory construction so that empirical research in this area is rare.

Generally speaking, there are two factors influencing Chinese students' topic sentence writing: the Chinese rhetoric convention and the Chinese system of instruction. Both aspects are discussed separately in the following sections.

### ***2.2.3.2 The influence of the Chinese rhetoric convention on ESL writing***

Classical rhetoric refers to presenting a coherent argument to support the main point and persuade readers (Connor, 1996, p.6). Thus, Chinese rhetoric convention means the rhetoric

strategies frequently used by Chinese people to enhance the persuasiveness during argument. The present research introduces three aspects of Chinese rhetoric conventions in the following paragraphs and explains the related reasons at the same time.

As Connor demonstrates, writing is an activity embedded in culture; deep-rooted cultural conventions have a great effect on ESL writing (p.100). Kaplan in his contrastive rhetoric study found out that Chinese paragraphs develop in circles and then infers that writing pattern is influence by thinking pattern. On the one hand, this claim is criticized by many researchers. For example, Mohan & Lo argue that Chinese writers also have advocated direct and concise writing throughout history. Connor points out that Kaplan's conclusion only examined the L2 products and ignored educational and developmental variables. On the other hand, Kaplan's conclusion makes sense according to several researchers' claims. For example, Chun & Cai (2005) claim that the traditional Chinese way of thinking is holistic and Chinese people always describe things by moving from the general to the specific, from the whole to the part (p.97). Xing, Wang & Spencer (2008) claim "the essential structural rule for Chinese composition is to proceed from the surface to the core" (p.74). It means Chinese writers are not accustomed to giving explicit topic sentence at the very beginning of a paragraph. On the contrary, they usually provide some background knowledge to guide readers into the central topic of the text.

In addition, Xing, Wang & Spencer also declare Chinese writers seldom use transitional markers because they focus more on content unity than form unity, believing that readers can follow the development of a paragraph on the basis of content (p.75). Transitional expressions are specific words or phrases that help connect sentences or paragraphs when the topic changes, thereby providing coherence and unity. According to *The Little Brown Handbook* (2007), transitional expressions can be divided into several categories such as transitional expressions showing sequence, by comparing, giving examples or summarizing, etc (pp86-87). Unity and coherence are important in traditional English compositions and it is the writer's responsibility to add transitional phrases to help readers connect pieces of information (Hind, 1987, p.148). In contrast, transitional markers are not distinct features in classical Chinese texts because Chinese writers believe it is the readers' responsibility to find out the hidden meaning of a paragraph and this

kind of exploring process is full of pleasure (p.146). In conclusion, Chinese texts are reader responsible while English texts are writer responsible.

Furthermore, “cultural values are reflected in and carried through language” (Hyland, 2003, p. 36). In Asian countries such as China, old wisdom and authorities are highly respected and Chinese writers seldom question previous sayings in texts. Hyland describes how Asian people such as the Chinese conserve or reproduce existing knowledge while Westerners usually criticize and update existing knowledge (p.38). In Chinese essay writing, teachers encourage students to quote proverbs or idioms to polish essays and regard it as a vital criterion for grading while westerners regard it as a cliché (Xing et al, 2008, p.74). In fact, the major difference between Chinese and Western cultures in writing is collectivism versus individualism. Connor claims that Chinese people advocate old wisdom and the collective common good due to the influence of Confucian thoughts (p.102). The use of personal references is a case in point. Scollon (1991) explain the different sense of *self* in Chinese culture and western culture and points out that “in the Confucian sense of *self*, one is more a self in human relationship and less a self in isolation” (p.7). As a result, it is not an easy job for Chinese people to express their inner feelings. To some extent, they think presenting the self too obviously will give a bad impression of imposing one’s opinion to others and ignoring readers’ feelings. So in China, *I* is always subordinated to *we*. Chinese people find it safer and confident to express ideas in a voice of a community. As a result, the frequent *we know* clause appearing in English essays written by Chinese students goes against the requirement of academic writing, which does not favour informal word pattern such as *we know* (Wiberg, 2000, P.74). On the contrary, in western countries, *self* and *I* are something glorious and appreciated (Shen, 1989, p.460). Political elections in west countries have a long history and demand candidates to demonstrate their advantages thoroughly so that personal eloquence is an important skill a candidate must acquire. Because of this political convention, declaring personal arguments is appreciated in western countries.

### **2.2.3.3 Chinese school instruction in ESL writing**

Though Kaplan attributes the organization problems in Chinese students’ essays to the negative transfer factor, many other researchers argue that school instruction also plays an important role in ESL writing because people learn many of the conventions and uses of writing through schools

or some kind of instruction (Connor, 1996; Mohan & Lo, 1985). Carson (1992) describes the situation of school instruction in China:

Schools reflect the traditional function of Chinese education, which is to teach moral principles reflecting basic societal values: patriotism, the collective good, group loyalty, and respect for authority. In this context, schools are controlled and regimented, with a focus on maintaining order and authority (p.44).

In Carson's words, this kind of instruction pattern in Chinese schools impedes students' creativity because teachers will not allow students to break existing writing models, however poor they might be. It also reminds us of the model-essay instruction in China. Hyland shows that English essay writing follows a set form that includes introduction, body and conclusion both in paragraph construction and essay construction (pp.6-7). On the one hand, it shows strength in allowing students to imitate model essays at the beginning stage because imitation can strengthen students' awareness of particular writing patterns in target language and its effect is positive (Eden & Mitchell, 1986, p.429). On the other hand, this rigid, fixed model leads to product writing<sup>5</sup> in Chinese students' essays (Zhu, 2005, p.47). The request to place a topic sentence at the beginning is one example of product writing. Chinese teachers over emphasize the placement of topic sentences but ignore the process of topic sentence construction. In fact, a topic sentence should be revised many times as the paragraph develops and a good topic sentence can be formulated only if the whole paragraph is completed (Eden & Mitchell, 1986, p.422). In addition, Mohan & Lo claim that English essay writing in China focuses on sentence-level accuracy and textbooks seldom address paragraph organization (p.525). The Chinese teachers interviewed said the most serious problems in students' essays are incorrect English, and they usually give feedback on spelling and grammar. Nold (1981) argues skilled writers pay more attention to the organization on discourse level because there are no serious grammatical mistakes in their essays, while unskilled writers are bothered about accuracy of words and grammars, neglecting the organization on discourse level (quoted in Mohan & Lo, 1985, p.523). Thus, it is reasonable that teachers should focus on accuracy in students' essays in the primary stage of ESL writing and do not neglect students' organization problems at the same time. However, when students become experienced writers, teachers should shift more attention to the discourse level of essays to facilitate improvement in the writing ability of advanced students.

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<sup>5</sup> Product writing "encourages a focus on the formal text units or grammatical features of texts" (Hyland, 2003, p3).

#### **2.2.4 A new trend in research on topic sentences**

Research on topic sentences has a long history. Some researchers have reviewed theories concerning topic sentences while others have conducted empirical studies on the frequency and placement of topic sentences. One of the most recent studies conducted by McCarthy and his colleagues (2008) focuses on topic sentencehood. This is a brand new direction related to behavioural science. The result of the study has shown that people depend more on the features of topic sentences than on context when identifying topic sentencehood. In addition, there is also a corpus-based study that takes a collection of authentic texts representative in a particular language domain as the primary material (Hyland, 2003, p.167). Corpus based studies have many advantages compared with those based on no corpus which use less controlled primary material. Svartvik et al (1982, p.11) summaries the advantages of corpus-based studies as follows:

A corpus study makes it possible to

- state a wide repertoire of uses to which a language is put;
- make more objective statements than introspective analysis permits;
- achieve total accountability of linguistic features;
- state frequencies of occurrence in different use of the language;
- share with other researchers a common basis for analyses of similar or related phenomena.

As there are so many advantages of corpus-based studies, it was decided in the present study to use a corpus as the primary material and systematically study topic sentences in Chinese students' essays from a multidimensional probe, including the frequency, the placement of topic sentences, the wording within topic sentences and the unity between topic sentences and the supporting sentences.

### **3. Results and Analysis**

This section integrates the results and analysis sections. Detailed analysis is presented after the main results and no separate discussion section will be provided. This section attempts to present findings concerning topic sentences from five aspects: the frequency, the placement of topic sentences, the wording within topic sentences, the unity between a topic sentence and supporting sentences, and the responses from interview. As the responses from the interview will be used as

empirical supporting evidence when analyzing other aspects of results, a short summary of results from the interview is presented at the very beginning of this section. The details of the interview results, on the other hand, are presented and analyzed in section 3.6. Moreover, implications for teaching topic sentence writing are given as the concluding part of section 3.

### ***3.1 Summary of responses from the interview***

Based on the sample interview questions (see section 1.3.4), the researcher conducted an interview about topic sentence writing among ten English-major students in grade 4. According to the responses, students have a good knowledge of what a topic sentence is because 90% of interviewees can give a correct definition of topic sentences. In addition, eight students think it is necessary to write a topic sentence and ten admit they write topic sentences in essays on a daily basis and prefer to place topic sentences at the beginning in order to maintain a clear structure and clarify the main idea of a paragraph. However, the majority of the students (80%) interviewed say they do not usually revise topic sentences as the paragraph develops. As for transitional phrases, seven students agree that they frequently use certain fixed phrases to show sequence and contrast, i.e. with the aid of *firstly*, *secondly*, *however*. It was surprising to discover that most students (80%) prefer model writing, which is also advocated by their writing teacher. Students think model writing helps them focus on the topic and facilitates the formation of a clear and logical structure. When asked about teachers' feedback, 80% students say their teachers give a good balance in terms of grammar and organization. Though most students (80%) are satisfied with the teachers' feedback, the remaining 20% students say they would like to receive more suggestions on organization level instead of on grammar level.

### ***3.2 The frequency of topic sentences***

As the present research focuses on topic sentences appearing in body paragraphs, introductory and concluding paragraphs in target students' essays are not taken into account (see figure2). The frequency of topic sentences indicates how often topic sentences appear in body paragraphs. Table 2 demonstrates the frequency of topic sentences in body paragraphs.

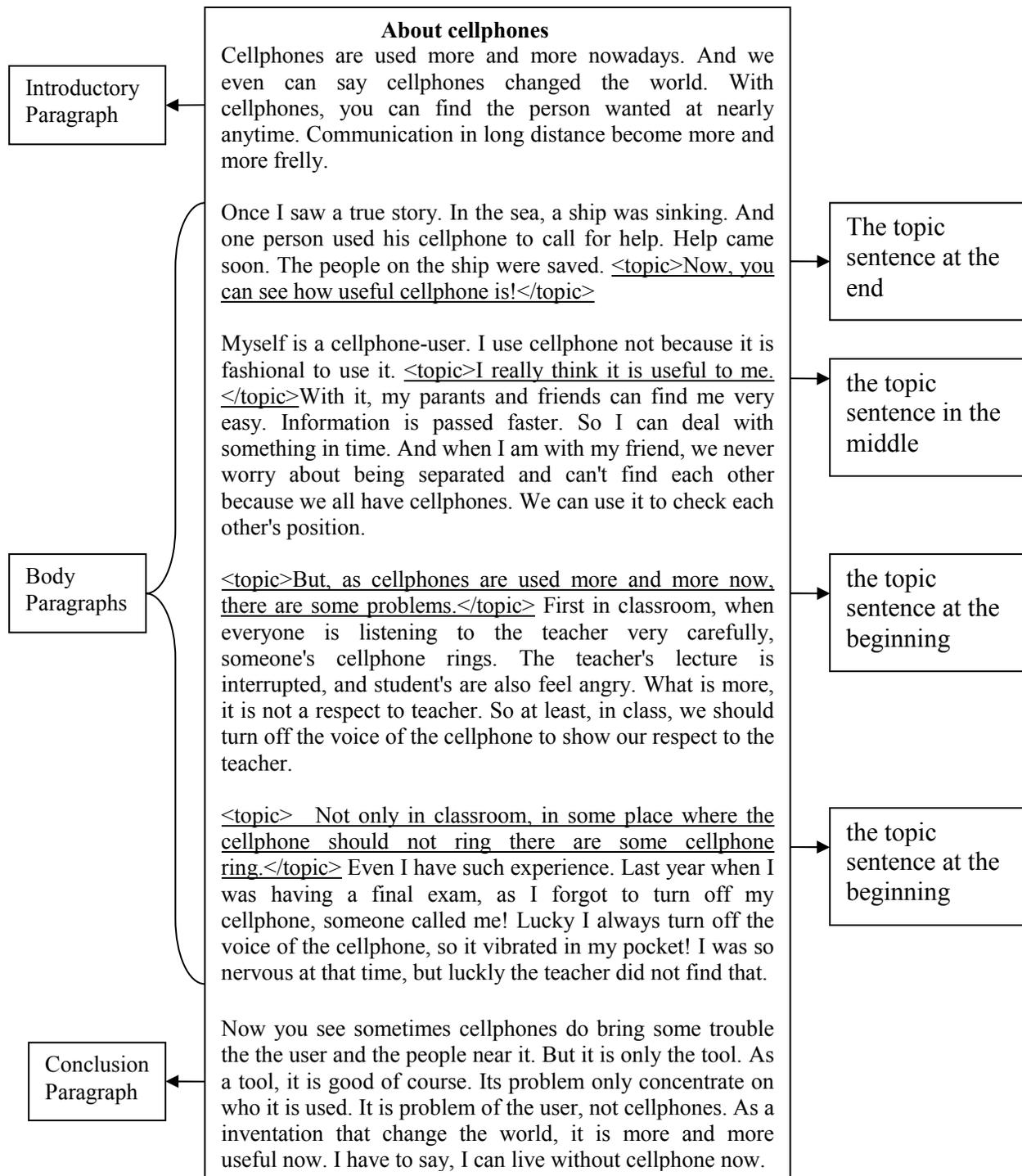


Figure 2. A sample argumentative essay from the Grade 2 group

Figure 2 is a sample argumentative essay taken from the WECCL corpus. Three placements of topic sentences are marked out in this essay: at the beginning, in the middle and at the end (see note on the right side of figure 2). Thus, readers can clearly see the real samples for these three

placements of topic sentences. In addition, figure 2 is divided into introduction paragraph, body paragraphs and conclusion paragraph so that readers can have a better understanding of what does “body paragraphs” mean.

Table 2. The frequency of topic sentences

Group	Total Topic Sentences	Paragraphs	Ratio(%)
Grade 1	26	33	78.79
Grade 2	30	39	76.92
Grade 3	32	38	84.21
Total	88	110	80.00

Table 2 shows the frequency of topic sentences in body paragraphs. 110 body paragraphs and 88 topic sentences have been studied in 45 Chinese argumentative essays. The frequency of topic sentences in body paragraphs is 80%. The same frequency, i.e. approximately 80%, is observed in all three grades, which means the difference between three grades is negligible. The high frequency of topic sentences indicates that writing a topic sentence in a body paragraph is a distinct feature of Chinese college students’ academic writing.

This result does not comply with Braddock’s assertion that most paragraphs in professional essays do not contain topic sentences. Popken declares that Braddock’s corpus is so limited that this may have influenced the results. According to Popken’s research, topic sentences appear frequently in academic articles (p.215). The results of the present research support Popken’s claim. Based on the responses from the interview, most students think it is necessary to write a topic sentence in a paragraph either to provide a clear structure or to direct readers to the central idea of the paragraph. In other words, students recognise the importance of topic sentences. What is more, all the students who took part in the interview admit that they frequently use topic sentences in their essays.

It is worth noting that although Braddock argues that many professional articles do not contain topic sentences, he still admits that all the professional articles can be considerably improved if

they contain topic sentences. Based on table 2, all the students from grade1 to grade 3 seem to have a strong awareness of writing a topic sentence. This kind of result suggests that the awareness of writing a topic sentence does not form with the growth of writing experience and so it may be assumed it is the result of model writing instruction. In model writing, teachers will provide a sample essay that contains topic sentences in every body paragraph and then request students to imitate the form of the sample essay. Irrespective of whether the writer has a low proficiency level or high proficiency level, she/he will stick to the form of the sample essay and write a topic sentence in each body paragraph as requested. In this way, topic sentences appear frequently in Chinese students' essays regardless of proficiency level. Based on the responses from the interview, students acknowledge that they receive model-writing instruction in classroom and they like it at the same time. It just verifies the researcher's hypothesis to some extent.

### ***3.3 The placement of topic sentences***

The present research focuses on three placements of topic sentences in body paragraphs: at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. A topic sentence at the beginning means the first sentence of a paragraph and a topic sentence at the end means the last sentence of a paragraph. If a topic sentence is neither the first sentence nor the last sentence of a paragraph, it belongs to the group of topic sentences in the middle of a paragraph. The distinctions among the three placements of topic sentences are clearly displayed in figure 2 (see section 3.2). Table 3 presents the results of placements of target topic sentences from three groups of Chinese students.

Table 3. The frequency and placement of topic sentences

Group	Placement Type			Total Topic Sentences
	INIT	MED	FIN	
Grade 1	19(73.08)	3 (11.54)	4(15.38)	26
Grade 2	23(76.67)	6(20.00)	1(3.33)	30
Grade 3	29(90.63)	2(6.25)	1(3.13)	32
Total	71(80.68)	11(12.50)	6(6.82)	88

*Notes.* The figures in round brackets represent percentage. INIT = initial placement of the topic sentence, MED = medial position, FIN = final position

Concerning the placement of topic sentences, 80.68% of topic sentences are located at the beginning of paragraphs, 12.50% in the middle and 6.82 % at the end. This result does not comply with Kaplan's conclusion that Chinese writers come up with the main idea of a paragraph at the end. On the contrary, it suggests that Chinese students appreciate and are capable of direct writing (Mohan & Lo, 1985, p.520). In addition, topic sentences in the middle also take up a certain proportion (12.50%). In fact, all these so-called topic sentences in the middle are very close to the beginning of a paragraph. In most cases, topic sentences in the middle appear just after the first sentences. This phenomenon supports Xing et al's assertion that Chinese writers always argue from the surface to the core (p.74). In other words, Chinese writers will introduce background information that leads readers to the main idea. It is no wonder that a certain amount of topic sentences appear in the middle instead of at the beginning. The Chinese way of thinking and writing still influence ESL writing. However, the third pattern, which is topic sentences at the end, only comprises 6.82%. Topic sentences at the end of the paragraph can be regarded as concluding sentences summarising the main idea of the whole paragraph. Topic sentences at the end do not guide readers through the whole paragraph; readers must rely on their own understanding to interpret the core of a paragraph. This pattern of topic sentences reflects the reader-responsible characteristic of traditional Chinese discourse that requires readers to explore and interpret hints themselves (Hind, 1987, pp.47-48). The shift from topic sentences at the end to topic sentences close to or at the beginning demonstrates the successful adaptation of Chinese students to the top-down pattern of English paragraph organization.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that the placement of topic sentences differs among three groups. Shown in table 3, the frequency of topic sentences at the beginning rise from grade1 to grade3. Though there is no big difference between grade 1 and grade 2, the frequency of topic sentences at the beginning in grade 3 rise remarkably. This phenomenon can be attributed to two reasons.

First of all, students from grades 1 and 2 belong to the same low level, while students from grade3 can be regarded as advanced since they have practiced much ESL writing and gained a lot

of useful experience. Nold (quoted in Mohan & Lo, 1985, p.523) thinks that the more skilled the writers are, the more attention they pay on discourse level, such as organization, logic instead of sentence level such like grammar, dictation. Thus, it is no wonder students from grade 3 make more effort in paragraph organization and place topic sentences at the beginning.

The other reason is probably that students in grade 3 are preparing for TEM 8 (Test for English Majors Band 8) and they are instructed by writing teachers to construct top-down pattern for paragraphs in order to gain marks on essay format. This kind of exam-oriented instruction leads to a high frequency of topic sentences at the beginning in grade 3 group.

The results discussed in this section indicate that cross-cultural differences are diminishing in some areas. Kaplan declares that essay written in oriental languages is featured by spiral development while Anglo-European essays follow a linear development. In this study, in fact, most Chinese students have placed topic sentences in the initial position instead of at the end. As time goes by, the limitation of Kaplan's pioneering study is more evident. Because of the globalization of the world economy, cultures from different countries interact and blend. A language like Chinese has experienced great changes in syntax and rhetoric because of western influence since the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hu, 1999, p.322). So Chinese students are getting used to culture convention of Westerners in education and apply these conventions and modes to essay writing. In addition, Connor claims that people learn many of the conventions and uses of writing through schools or some kind of instruction (p.100). This factor helps remove the culture barriers. Based on the responses from the interview, ten students claim that they place topic sentences at the beginning. Beside the advantages of topic sentences at the beginning, students also confess that placing topic sentences at the beginning is a requirement that is emphasized by their teachers. It proves writing instruction does affect students' choice of placements of topic sentences and sometimes it surpasses the negative transfer from L1. As through instructions, students are frequently reminded to write topic sentences and place them at beginning.

### ***3.4 Wording within topic sentences***

This section is divided into two parts. The first part addresses transitional phrases functioning as bridges to connect sentences and paragraphs such as *firstly*, *secondly*, *however*, etc. The second

part discusses personal pronouns such as *we, you, I*, etc. The present study focuses on these two kinds of wording within topic sentences because Chinese students are not proficient at applying them appropriately (Shen, 1989, p.460; Xing et al, 2008, p.75). Thus, the following sections present and analyze the main results of the two groups of wording respectively.

### 3.4.1 Transitional phrases within topic sentences

Within the corpus, the present study has taken advantage of Wordsmith 3.0 to show the number of several typical transitional phrases in sample essays. Figure 3 provides sample transitional phrases that are underlined and in bold for reference. Related statistics concerning the frequency of major kinds of transitional phrases in essays written by three group students ( students from grade 1, grade2 and grade 3) are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Major transitional phrases in topic sentences

Group	Major transitional Words					Total sentence	Ratio (%)
	<i>To show sequence</i>			<i>To contrast</i>			
	<i>Firstly</i>	<i>secondly</i>	<i>thirdly</i>	<i>however</i>	<i>but</i>		
Grade1	3	0	1	0	5	26	34.62
Grade2	2	1	0	1	2	30	20.00
Grade3	2	1	1	2	3	32	28.13
Total	7	2	2	3	10	88	27.27

### **The importance of high education**

I think high education is very important, it is a part of self-perfection. Although some people say that they only get a degree certificate through the high education, actually if they make good use of it, they will get many benefits from it.

<topic>Firstly, I think the most important aspect that one person can establish his own world perspective and life perspective.</topic> Everyone has his own development, but he doesn't know which direction he should choose...

<topic>Secondly, I think we can learn how to deal with the affairs that happened to us.</topic> By reading books, we learn to get along well with others, and learn to finish tasks by ourselves...

<topic>Thirdly, we get knowledge by high education.</topic> There is a phrase: "Knowledge is power." Indeed, the competition in the future is no longer the strength but the knowledge...

Anyone who wants to have a happy life, and be successful in his career, it is indispensable for him to accept high education. And through high education, one can be a useful person for the society.

Figure 3. Sample transitional phrases in a sample Chinese student's essay

Transitional expressions are specific words or phrases that help to connect sentences or paragraphs when the topic changes in order to achieve the coherence and unity of a discourse (Xing et al, 2008, p.75). In figure 3, the underlined words *firstly*, *secondly* and *thirdly* all belong to transitional phrases which are used to show sequence. In addition, words such as *however* and *but* belong to transitional phrases which are used to contrast. The classification of these transitional phrases is based on *The Little Brown Handbook* (Flower & Aaron, 2007). In the sample essays used in the present study, transitional phrases, which are used to show sequence and to contrast, are two major kinds of transitional phrases in corpus. Other types of transitional phrases are so rare that they are not included in the present study.

As demonstrated in table 3, there is no major difference in the frequency of transitional phrases in essays from the three grades. Neither the skilled writers (grade 3) nor relatively unskilled writers (grades 1 and 2) use transitional phrases frequently. The statistic 27.27% is a low frequency, which indicates that Chinese students do not have the habit of writing transitional phrases. Xing et al claim that it is mainly because Chinese writers focus more on content than on form and Chinese writers believe readers can realize the change of topic based on the development of content (p.75), while westerners focus more on form coherence and believe it is the writers' responsibility to add transitional phrases to help readers to connect pieces of information together

(Hind, 1987, p.146). Thus, Chinese cultural conventions in writing can be one of the reasons for the low frequency of transitional phrases in sample essays.

In addition, the small vocabulary and inaccurate use of words and grammar are related to the relatively poor language proficiency of Chinese students. The proper definition of “language proficiency” would be "present identifiable standards against which to describe language skills of users in different contexts" (Bialystok, 1998, p. 504). Learners vary in their ultimate level of proficiency, with many failing to reach target-language competence (Myles, 2002). Based on table 3, two groups of transitional phrases (to show sequence and to contrast) are basic and simple. For example, *However* is much more formal than *but*. Students use many more *but* than *however* in essay writing. What is more, the variety of transitional phrases is poor as shown in table 3. In the group of transitional phrases to show sequence, there are only *firstly*, *secondly* and *thirdly*, which are supposed to appear together in many cases. In other words, there is only one kind of transitional phrases in the group showing sequence. The variety of transitional phrases to contrast in the other group is also small. The little variety of transitional phrases and simple wording reflect the poor language proficiency of Chinese students. It seems that because Chinese students have few alternative transitional phrases stored in mind or because they cannot flexibly apply transitional phrases so that Chinese students only stick to the frequently used ones such as *firstly*, *secondly*, *but* and *however*, etc. No matter which is the real case, they both suggest the poor language ability of Chinese students. In other words, Chinese students take writing transitional phrases as a requested form and overlook their real functions. The result is that Chinese students tend to use clichés such as *firstly*, *secondly* and *thirdly* repeatedly instead of considering alternatives and thinking about their appropriateness.

Further, based on the responses from the interview, most students argue they usually use transitional phrases in essays and the frequently used ones are fixed. This response contradicts the results presented in table 3. It demonstrates that students do have the awareness of using transitional phrases to add coherence but in fact, they normally omit transitional phrases in real essay writing. In conclusion, poor language proficiency and traditional Chinese way of writing are two main factors influencing the appliance of transitional phrases.

### 3.4.2 Personal pronouns within topic sentences

Personal pronouns are seldom mentioned by researchers in relation to topic sentences. However, it is an important feature of topic sentence because it indicates how a writer's opinions are delivered to readers and more importantly, it is the mirror of culture. In another word, the choice on personal pronouns can reflect the writer's way of thinking and expressing. After all, writing is an activity embedded in culture (Connor, 1996 p.100). Table 4 presents the use of personal pronouns by Chinese students, followed by several sample personal pronouns in target topic sentences.

Table 4. Personal pronouns within topic sentences

Group	Personal Pronouns			It	Total Topic Sentences
	<i>We</i>	<i>You</i>	<i>I</i>		
Grade 1	3	0	4	3	26
Grade 2	5	1	5	3	30
Grade 3	1	1	1	7	32
Total	9	2	9	13	88

<topic>First, **I** think the most important aspect that one person can establish his own world perspective and life perspective.</topic> Everyone has his won development,...

<topic>Secondly, **I** think we can learn how to deal with the affairs that happened to us.</topic> By reading books,...

<topic>Finally, **we** get knowledge by high education.</topic> There is a phrase: "Knowledge is power." Indeed, the competition in the future...

Figure 4. Sample personal pronouns in a sample Chinese essay

There are four main kinds of personal pronouns in the sample essays: *we*, *you*, *I* and *it*. It is necessary to clarify that all the personal pronouns in table 4 bring out a sentence, for example, "we should do..." or "I think that..." or "It should be pointed out that..."etc (see figure 4.). In the sentence pattern "It should be pointed out that ...", *it* does not refer to real person but is a formal subject which brings out a sentence. Table 4 shows that Chinese students use more sentence patterns preceded by personal pronouns *we*, *you*, *I* than of *it* clause pattern. In addition, students from grade 3 prefer to use the *it* clause pattern while students from grades 1 and 2 favour sentence patterns preceded by personal pronouns *we*, *you* and *I*.

Connor argues that the influence of Confucian thoughts make Chinese people advocate the collective common good and think it rude to impose personal ideas on others. Thus, Chinese people get used to expressing personal standpoints in a voice of a community (p.102). It is no wonder that many personal pronouns *we* are found in the corpus. In addition, Scollon points out that “in the Confucian sense of *self*, one is more a self in human relationship and less a self in isolation” (p.7). In other word, *I* is always subordinated to *we*. The personal pronouns *I* found in the corpus equal *we* to certain extent. The *I* in this corpus is different from *self* or *I* in westerners’ eyes because western culture advocates individualism and speaking one’s opinion is encouraged (p.7).

Though personal pronouns such as *you* and *we* do enhance readers’ involvement in essays, they deteriorate the objectivity of essays at the same time (Wiberg, 2000, p.74). It is inappropriate to use personal pronouns in academic writing and Chinese students’ preference for personal pronouns exposes the negative transfer of L1. It is the cultural convention and not the writing ability that causes Chinese students to use personal pronouns unconsciously. They may focus on language-related errors or development skills but simply overlook the cross-culture difference. Achieving success in a new culture does not result solely from learning the grammar and lexicon of the language. Ability to negotiate cultural barriers and develop new ways of learning is also essential (Xing et al, 2008, p.72). Thus, raising student’s awareness of cross-culture differences is important for improving the readability of Chinese students’ English writing. In addition, personal pronouns such as *we*, *I* and *you* appear more frequently in grades 1 and grade 2 than grade 3. The present study demonstrates that students in grade 3 tend to use *it* clause more instead. This is probably because students in grade 3 are experienced writers who have adapted to expressing ideas objectively as academic writing demands.<sup>6</sup> Connor also claims people learn many of the conventions and uses of writing through schools or some kind of instruction (p.100). It is no wonder that grade 3 students use the *it* clause more often because negative transfer from L1 has been gradually eliminated by school instruction.

Everyone has the own way of expressing ideas. It is not appropriate to interview students whether they use “*I think...*” “*we believe...*” or *it* clause to express their ideas because students’ responses

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<sup>6</sup> It is not possible to interview the writers so that this claim is conjectured here.

may not correspond with the actual performance in practice. After all, it is a kind of unconscious habit that is deeply rooted in culture. However, as the students' ways of expressing ideas are embodied in the responses they give during the interview, we see that most students use the "I think..." clause to answer questions during the interview. On the one hand, this phenomenon indicates that Chinese students got used to using personal pronouns such as *I* to lead out their argumentation(see in the result presented in table 4). On the other hand, an interview is a kind of oral communication that differs from formal writing activity. In other words, the informal phrases like *I think* in the interview will not be applied in formal writing by students probably. Thus, the researcher thinks the expression "I think..." used by most students in the interview can only be regarded as tentative evidence for the results displayed in table 4.

### 3.5 Unity between topic sentences and supporting sentences

This section studies the unity of paragraphs in Chinese students' essays and considers whether the unity of a paragraph can be strengthened by the construction of a topic sentence. The following two sample paragraphs with topic sentences are taken from the corpus for reference purposes. The first paragraph represents a paragraph with a high degree of unity; the second paragraph is an example of a paragraph with a low level of unity.

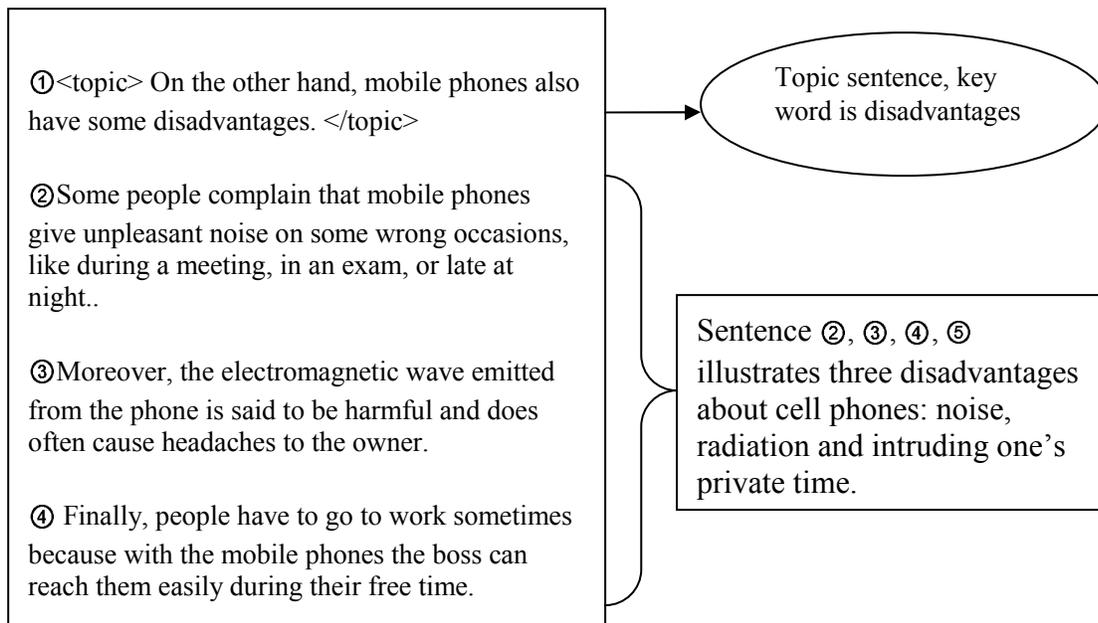


Figure 5. A sample paragraph with good unity

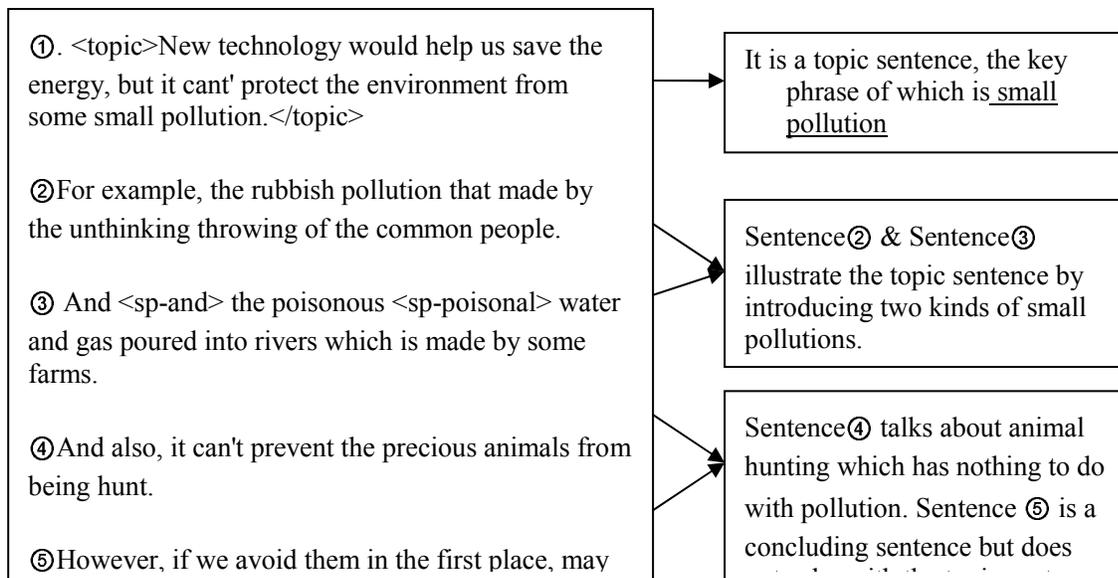


Figure 6. A sample paragraph with poor unity

The unity of a paragraph can be briefly defined as “stick[ing] to the point” (Johns, 1986, p.248). Topic sentences are regarded as positive factors that enhance paragraph unity because as long as a topic sentence exists in a paragraph, there is a core for readers to stick to so that the main idea of the paragraph remains constant and obvious. The present research demonstrates that unity is strengthened in the majority of paragraphs by the presence of topic sentences. However, poor unity may also occur even when the paragraph has a topic sentence. This indicates that a paragraph with a high level of unity is supposed to contain a topic sentence. Conversely, a paragraph’s unity cannot be enhanced if the topic sentence functions as a label, which means the writer does not refer back to the topic sentence when writing the supporting sentences.

The paragraph in figure 5 is an example of a paragraph with good unity. The structure of the paragraph is quite clear: the topic sentence is at the beginning and several supporting sentences follow. Sentence ① functions as a topic sentence and indicates the main idea of the paragraph about the disadvantages of mobile phones. Sentence ② exposes the first disadvantage of mobile phones as causing noise and sentence ③ discloses the second disadvantage of mobile phones, namely discharging radiation. Sentences ④ and ⑤ discuss the third disadvantage of mobile

phones, i.e. intruding on one's private time. In conclusion, the whole paragraph develops as the topic sentence indicates and all the supporting sentences illustrate disadvantages mentioned in the topic sentence. All the sentences in the sample paragraph are tied tightly together by the topic sentence so that the unity is enhanced without doubt.

On the other hand, the sample paragraph in figure 6 illustrates a low level of unity even when a topic sentence is present. Sentence ① is the topic sentence which suggests that the main task of the paragraph is to illustrate the minor pollutions that cannot be prevented by new technology. Sentences ② and ③ illustrate several kinds of small pollutions such like water pollution, rubbish pollution and gas pollution. However, sentence ④ shifts the topic to animal hunting and argues that new technology cannot protect animals from being hunted, which has nothing to do with small-scale pollution. It is clear that there is a divergence from the main topic, which reduces the unity of whole paragraph. What is worse, sentence ⑤ is supposed to function as a concluding sentence to repeat or reiterate the topic sentence but is actually rather vague and irrelevant. Waddy (1889) argues that a paragraph can only have one central idea and any digressive sentences should be deleted (p.256). According to Waddy's principle, sentence ④ and ⑤ should be deleted in order to achieve unity of the paragraph. In a word, the sudden shift of the topic destroys the unity of the paragraph.

There are many explanations for the poor unity in some Chinese students' essays. Zhu, for example, criticizes the product writing that constrains students' independent thinking and the mechanical writing leads to poor unity of paragraphs (p.47). In addition, Mohan and Lo (1985) address other influential factors, mentioned to be the students' language abilities and writing topics:

For one thing, we have shown that there is no evidence that Chinese paragraph development is in fact indirect. For another, there are a number of alternative explanations for errors at the organizational level in composition: A student's English may be inadequate for expressing complex ideas; a student who is unfamiliar with a topic may be unable to write a well-organized essay about it in any language. (p.521)

The present research focuses on the analysis of the poor unity in Chinese students' essays from two aspects: developmental factor and writing process. When students are beginners in ESL writing, Chinese teachers usually pay attention to students' language accuracy including grammar, punctuation, etc and it indirectly misleads students to believe that correct writing equals good writing. Only if students are experienced in ESL writing and there are no major mistakes in students' essays, do Chinese teachers begin to instruct students to pay attention to paragraph organization. Mohan & Lo also agree that the delayed instruction on organization level to Chinese students is the main reason for poor organization of paragraphs written by Chinese students. Actually, instruction about paragraph organization and language accuracy should be considered equally important from the very beginning. In this way, students can be aware of the value of discourse organization and practice to organize better paragraphs at early stage.

The second reason for the poor unity in Chinese students' essays is that both teachers and students pay more attention to the product of writing instead of the process of writing. In Chinese students' ESL writing classes, teachers always provide model essays for students to imitate. On the one hand, it is good for students to imitate model essays at the beginning stage because imitation can strengthen students' awareness of a particular writing pattern in a target language and its effect is positive (Eden & Mitchell, 1986). On the other hand, this rigid, fixed model leads to product writing in Chinese students' essays (Zhu, 2005, p.47). Because most essays are written for exam purposes, both teachers and students only care about the product of essays but neglect the writing process of essays. Based on responses from the interview, most students admit that they write down a topic sentence first and seldom revise it as the paragraph develops. It is no wonder that the topic diverges later in a paragraph and unrelated sentences are added unconsciously. In conclusion, teachers should encourage process-oriented writing and advocate self-revision on topic sentences and paragraph organization because writing is not linear and more revision should be carried out before coming close to the approximate meaning we plan to express (Hyland, 2003, p.11).

### ***3.6 The analysis of responses from the interview***

The results of the interview have been briefly discussed in section 3.1 in order to provide related information for analyzing other aspects of results about topic sentences. In this section, students'

responses from the interview are presented and analyzed at length in order to verify the other findings about topic sentences. In addition, related sample responses from the interview are provided for reference.

Altogether, there are eight questions concerning different aspect of topic sentence writing and ten English major students take part in the interview. The students in the interview were first asked to define a topic sentence according to their own understanding. Eight students think a topic sentence is the main point of a paragraph and the remaining two students think a topic sentence can also be the main point of an article besides that of a paragraph. Based on the students' responses, this research demonstrates that Chinese students are familiar with topic sentences and have a good understanding of a topic sentence. This result lays a good foundation for the following interview questions. (Initials of informants' names are used to protect their privacy. similarly hereinafter)

Interview. 1

*A sentence summarizes the main idea/theme of the paragraphh.* (BYN)

Interview. 2

*In my opinion, topic sentence is the begining and highly summary of a paragraph.* (ZY)

In addition, most students think it is necessary to write a topic sentence and they frequently use topic sentences in paragraphs because topic sentences can quickly lead readers to the main idea of paragraphs and make the structure of them clearer. This response corresponds with the high frequency rate of topic sentences in target essays and demonstrates that Chinese students have a good awareness of writing a topic sentence in paragraphs. Of the ten students, one student thinks it is not necessary to construct a topic sentence in every single paragraph because some paragraphs are written for transitional purposes or some paragraphs are too short to have a topic sentence (see interview 3). This answer is interesting and justifies why some paragraphs do not obtain topic sentences. Popken also argues that short paragraphs are one of the important reasons to explain the low frequency of topic sentences in engineering articles in his research.

Interview.3

*no, because some paragraphs are so short to have a topic sentence, it's unnecessary* (YQY)

Concerning the placement of topic sentences, all ten students claim that they prefer to place the topic sentences at the beginning for several reasons. Someone says topic sentences at the beginning can attract readers' attention; someone asserts topic sentences at the beginning help the writer to develop the sentences that follow; someone argues that it is the teacher's request to write a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph. Though students place topic sentences at the beginning for different purposes, they do conduct the top-down pattern. It also corresponds with the findings regarding the placement of topic sentences (see section 3.3), which suggests that Chinese students appreciate and are capable of direct writing. Here direct writing means providing an explicit topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph. In addition, according to the students' responses, writing instruction also plays an important role in influencing the way Chinese students organize paragraphs (see interview 4.).

#### Interview.4

*We are taught to write topic sentences at the beginning.* (LXJ)

As for transitional phrases, most respondents claimed that they often use transitional phrases to connect paragraphs and illustrate some frequently used ones like *in addition*, *moreover*, *on the one hand*, *on the other hand*. When asked whether they use transitional phrases such as *firstly*, *secondly*, *but*, some students admit they use them sometimes but not that frequently because they think these transitional phrases are too simple. This result goes against the finding of transitional phrases in table 3 from two aspects. First of all, this research finds out the frequency of transitional phrases in target essays is really low. In contrast to this result, students in the interview declared that they frequently use transitional phrases. In addition, there is little variety of transitional phrases in target essays and most of those transitional phrases are simple, while students in the interview claim they prefer to use more complicated ones such as *in addition*, *moreover*, etc. It is probably because the language proficiency of students in the corpus is lower than that of the students in the interview. That is why students in the interview surpass students in the corpus on the appliance of transitional phrases no matter the quantity or the quality. As students in the interview are English majors in grade 4, which is higher than the three groups in the present study, it is not surprising that the results of the interview do not comply with those

displayed in table 3. In summary, language proficiency is an important factor in the use of transitional phrases.

Moreover, in the interview, most students declared that their writing teachers advocate model writing in classroom and students themselves prefer model writing to free writing because they think model writing is easier to control and meets teachers' taste. (see interviews 5 and 6).

#### Interview.5

*model writing, I am ok with that, because it's to taste of most teachers who mark your essays.*  
(YQY)

#### Interview.6

*I prefer model writing, because this model can help arrange our train of thought, and also such essay can get high points.* (ZWJ)

On the one hand, it is good for students to imitate model essays in the initial stages because imitation can strengthen students' awareness of a particular writing pattern in a target language and its effect is positive (Eden & Mitchell, 1986, p.429). On the other hand, this rigid, fixed model leads to product writing in Chinese students' essays (Zhu, 2005, p.47). Examination-oriented model writing makes students only follow the fixed pattern without thinking about its appropriateness. For example, students are required to write a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph as the model essay does. Thus, as the present research demonstrates, most students studied do place topic sentences at the beginning. However, according to the responses from the interview, students say they seldom revise topic sentences as a paragraph develops, which explains the poor unity in many paragraphs written by Chinese students. It is no wonder that the supporting sentences diverge from the central topic later and the unity of the paragraph is destroyed. In fact, a topic sentence should be revised many times as the body paragraph develops and a good topic sentence can be formulated only if the whole paragraph is completed (Eden & Mitchell, 1986, p.422).

Finally, the interview also includes questions about teachers' written feedback on Chinese students' essays. All the students in the interview said that their teachers pay more attention to feedback on organization level than grammar level and most students themselves want to receive feedback on organization level also. This kind of response contradicts with the finding in section 3.5 and also goes against Mohan & Lo's claims that English essay writing in China focuses on sentence-level accuracy, which may be the cause of poor unity in paragraphs written by some Chinese students. However, it is a kind of progress that writing teachers pay more attention to paragraph organization. There is no doubt that the unity of paragraphs in Chinese students' essays will be largely enhanced when both teachers and students pay more attention to paragraph organization.

### ***3.7 Implications for teaching topic sentence writing***

As Connor suggests that people learn many writing conventions through schooling or instructions (p.100), ESL writing teachers bear a great responsibility in guiding students to construct good topic sentences in essays. In the following, some hints for teaching topic sentences are suggested based on the previous results and discussion.

First of all, teachers should advocate model-essay writing for students at the lower proficiency levels because imitation can strengthen their awareness of particular writing patterns in the target language (Eden & Mitchell, 1986, p.429). However, rigid imitation of model essays will lead to product writing purely for examination purposes. Students take writing topic sentences as a required task without considering their real significance and put them aside as soon as topic sentences are written down at the very beginning. A topic sentence should be revised many times as the body develops and a good topic sentence can be formulated only once the whole paragraph is complete (Eden & Mitchell, 1986, p.422). In this case, teachers should encourage students to revise topic sentences as the paragraph develops in order to enhance the paragraph unity.

As for feedback, section 3.5 suggests that late instruction on organization level to Chinese students is the main reason for poor organization in paragraphs written by Chinese students (Mohan & Lo, 1985, p.522). Though students in the interview say their teachers focus more on organization in essays, this is probably because the students who were interviewed are at the

higher proficiency level. It may be recommended that teachers give feedback on organization level also to students at the lower proficiency level so that the overall writing ability of students can be improved.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Topic sentence writing is an important component of academic writing. However, Chinese students do have problems in this area, to which research bears ample evidence. Thus, it is sufficiently conclusive to conduct the present research that aims to study topic sentence writing in Chinese college students' argumentative essays from a multidimensional probe, including the frequency and the placement of topic sentences, the wording within topic sentences and the unity between topic sentences and supporting sentences.

The results of the present study show that the frequency of topic sentences in Chinese students' essays is high (around 80%) and that the majority of topic sentences (80.68%) are placed at the beginning of the paragraphs. It therefore suggests that Chinese students have a good awareness of writing topic sentences and are capable of direct writing. Based on the interview responses, students claim they are taught to write a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph as the model essay does. Thus, model essays instruction is seen to play an important role in influencing students' topic sentence writing.

In addition, the low frequency and poor variety of transitional phrases in target essays suggest that Chinese students are not proficient at applying transitional phrases. The present research suggests two reasons for this: Chinese writing convention and poor language proficiency. Chinese writers focus more on content than on form and they believe readers can realize the change of topic as the paragraph develops (Xing et al, 2008, p.75). Thus, Chinese writers do not always rely on transitional phrases to achieve coherence. In addition, poor language proficiency directly leads to an inadequate range of transitional phrases among Chinese students.

With regard to personal pronouns, Chinese student prefer to use *I think* or *we know* clauses to express their personal views instead of *it* clause. Personal pronouns such as *we* and *you* are not desirable in academic writing and they will reduce the objectivity of essays at the same time

(Wiberg, 2000, p.74). Because of cross-cultural differences, Chinese students are used to expressing ideas in a voice of community, e.g *we know*. However, students from grade 3 use more *it* clauses than grade 1 and grade 2, which also indicates that negative transfer from L1 is gradually disappearing by means of school instruction.

Further results suggest that the unity between topic sentences and supporting sentences in some paragraphs is poor among Chinese students. This phenomenon is attributed to product writing, which focuses on external coherence rather than internal unity. Therefore, it may be suggested that writing teachers advocate process writing, which pays more attention to the writing and revision processes.

In conclusion, research on topic sentence writing is in the initial stages. There is a lot of work to be done. In the present study, a multidimensional probe on topic sentence writing in Chinese students' essays has been studied and some hints for ESL teaching have been given. This is not to suggest, however, that other research is not equally meaningful. Further research, like contrastive studies on topic sentence writing between westerners and Chinese, or research focusing on one aspect of topic sentence writing, is quite meaningful as well.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### Passage [3] topic sentence carries one or more propositions

On the other had, the wide use of mobile phone also prevents people from seeing each other quite often. Nowadays instead of writing letters and sending postcards, people simply send short messages with mobile phone. In some sense, people are becoming mechanic. Some young people are indulged in sending such kind of short messages. Most of the messages they send are nonsense. They spend enormous time on that even during classes. They just take it as a tool for entertainment rather than communicating tool. (Wen et al. 2005)

#### Passage [4] topic sentence limits a domain

First, I'd like to mention some good points. We can find all kinds of news from Internet, so we needn't buy newspaper. For example, I like reading sports news, but I won't read enough sports news from the newspaper while I can read sports news from the Internet. Sometimes we need some material, but we can't find them in the books. We can find the material from the Internet. In fact, the Internet itself is a book. Second, I'd like to mention some bad points. Some people are so absorbed in the Internet that they even forget to eat, to drink, it is not good for their health. There are many bad things in the Internet, it is not proper for students to watch them. But there are many students who like to watch things from the Internet.

#### Passage [5] topic sentence states the direction or intention

In the following discussions we will focus on the three most important text linguistic schools of thought, which help establish a context for the growth of discourse theories. (Connor,1996:81)