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Unraveling the Tapestry of Journalistic Writing Proficiency of Chinese Student

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Abstract: This research examines the journalistic writing competence of Chinese students in journalism programs highlighting correctness, clarity, conciseness, objectivity, ethical concerns, and fact-checking. It also investigates the socio-cultural, educational, and linguistic elements affective student's writing abilities and how they forecast writing ability. Data were collected using a mixed-methods approach, comprising student tests and interviews with journalism educators, to ascertain the principal hurdles students have in cultivating writing proficiency. Based on the examination of the student tests and interviews, it was discovered that students recognize deficiencies in correctness, obtaining external validation for neutrality and ethics, and achieving acknowledgment for fact-checking endeavors. Socio-cultural factors such as self-censorship and political sensitivities have the most significant impact on their writing proficiency. The study suggested there is a need for enforcing students' language skills and exposure to authentic journalism techniques, self-censorship, a test-centric educational framework, and addressing the obstacles in conforming to international media norms.

Keywords: Journalistic Writing; Proficiency; Correctness; Ethical Concerns; Fact-checking; Socio-cultural Element.

1. Introduction

Proficiency in writing is essential for academic and professional success, yet many students struggle to acquire this talent. Challenges are widespread throughout many student groups worldwide (Graham & Perin, 2007), including issues with spelling, punctuation, organization, and difficulties in improving their writing skills (Troia, Shanahan, & Fitzgerald, 2016). Socio-cultural issues, such as diverse cultural origins (Song & Kanuka, 2019) and lack of access to educational materials and instructional approaches among disadvantaged groups, might worsen writing challenges (Cummin & Riazi, 2018). Furthermore, linguistic variables also play a role in students' difficulties with writing skills, especially for those studying English as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL). Chinese students face complex writing problems shaped by language and socio-cultural influences. These include memorization and conventional teaching techniques in Chinese education (Zhang, 2017), as well as language anxiety and lack of confidence due to the growing need for high levels of writing skills in English in academic and professional environments (Zhang & Cheng, 2020). However, most previous studies have focused only on analyzing common writing issues among Chinese students and the overall journalism education system in China. There is no detailed study concerning the intricate elements that impact Chinese students' skills in journalistic writing (Zhang & Zhu, 2019), highlighting the need for targeted interventions and curricular improvements (Yin & Zhang, 2021). By conducting this study, the gap in journalistic writing proficiency among Chinese students, which exists due to the absence of detailed investigation into the specific challenges and experiences in journalism education, will be addressed.

2. Methodology

To investigate the various factors influencing journalistic writing proficiency among Chinese students, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What is the assessment of journalism students about their journalistic writing proficiency in terms of accuracy, clarity, conciseness, objectivity, ethical considerations, and fact checking and verification?
2. What are the key factors influencing the journalistic writing proficiency of Chinese students enrolled in journalism programs in terms of socio-cultural, educational, and linguistic?
3. From the perspective of journalism teachers, what are the difficulties and challenges do students encounter in their pursuit of achieving journalistic writing proficiency?

This study is anchored in the Zone of Proximal Development, which posits that students perceived journalistic writing skills are within their zone or level of competence, and that educators can provide instructional interventions and support to improve their current abilities. This research utilized a mixed-method methodology, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the factors affecting the writing skills of Chinese students in a selected journalism school. The quantitative method involved using questionnaires to gather students' self-assessments of their journalistic writing skills and to analyze the influence of socio-cultural, educational, and linguistic variables on their writing abilities. Meanwhile, qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews with selected journalism professors who teach journalistic writing courses, were utilized to understand their perceptions of the students' challenges and to identify what instructional support and interventions can be implemented to help students improve their journalistic writing skills. Stratified sampling was used to choose participants from the researcher's university, dividing the population into specific subgroups or strata. Meanwhile, purposive sampling was utilized to identify journalism professors to be interviewed. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, multiple regression

analysis, and qualitative data analysis.

3. Results

Table 1. Assessment of Journalism Students about their Journalistic Writing Proficiency

	N	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Accuracy	486	3.32	0.64	Proficient
Clarity	486	3.17	0.61	Proficient
Conciseness	486	3.26	0.61	Proficient
Objectivity	486	3.32	0.62	Proficient
Ethical Consideration	486	3.45	0.68	Proficient
Fact checking and Verification	486	3.32	0.70	Proficient

Legend: 1.00-1.50: Strongly Disagree (Not Proficient at All); 1.51-2.50: Disagree (Questionably Proficient); 2.51-3.50; Agree (Proficient); 3.51-4.00: Strongly Agree (Very Proficient)

Table 1 presents the assessment of journalism students regarding their journalistic writing proficiency. Ethical considerations received the highest mean score of 3.45. Objectivity, fact-checking and verification, and accuracy all had an equal mean score of 3.32. Conciseness followed with a mean score of 3.26, and clarity had the lowest mean score of 3.17.

In terms of accuracy, meticulous verification of source truthfulness has the highest mean score while lack of confidence of the accuracy in their writing and reporting has the lowest mean score. For clarity, logical and compelling expression of ideas is the top-scoring element with a mean score of 3.17. While the lowest mean score (2.98) was linked to students who received commendations for the clarity of their writing from peers or professors. For conciseness, the highest mean score (3.32) was the significance of conciseness in maintaining audience engagement and the lowest mean score (3.11) was linked to receiving praise for concise and straightforward writing. In terms of objectivity, the highest mean scores (M = 3.43) were seen for maintaining fairness and neutrality in journalistic endeavors and acknowledging that objectivity is crucial for journalism's credibility. The lowest mean score (M = 3.15) was linked to obtaining external input, indicating that their job is unbiased and equal. For ethical consideration, the data shows that students acknowledge the significance of ethics in journalism, evidenced by the highest mean score (M = 3.45). The lowest mean score (M = 2.88) was linked to criticism over ethical difficulties in their work. In terms of fact checking and verification, meticulous fact-checking had the highest mean score (3.43) and obtaining external input had the lowest mean score (3.15).

Table 2. Assessment of the Key Factors Influencing the Journalistic Writing Proficiency

	N	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Socio-cultural	486	3.29	0.60	Proficient
Educational Influences	486	3.36	0.64	Proficient
Linguistic Factors	486	3.36	0.62	Proficient
Overall	486	3.34	0.60	Proficient

Legend: 1.00-1.50: Strongly Disagree (Not Proficient At All); 1.51-2.50: Disagree (Questionably Proficient); 2.51-3.50; Agree (Proficient); 3.51-4.00: Strongly Agree (Very Proficient)

Table 2 presents the respondents' assessment of the key factors influencing journalistic writing proficiency. Both educational influences and linguistic factors received the highest mean score of 3.36, followed by socio-cultural factors with a mean score of 3.29. For socio-cultural factors, the respondents acknowledged the significance of comprehending cultural subtleties for effective communication which had the highest mean score (M=3.37). The lowest mean score (M = 3.10) corresponded to the assertion that adherence to cultural standards inhibits students' individuality and self-expression. For educational influences, the students recognize the need for lifetime learning in improving their writing skills in journalism with the highest mean score of 3.42. For factors related to linguistic fact, students predominantly concur on the significance of cultural sensitivity and linguistic proficiency for efficient cross-cultural communication in journalism, as seen by the highest mean score (M = 3.42).

Perspective of Journalism Teachers on the Difficulties and Challenges Encountered by Students in their Pursuit of Achieving Journalistic Writing Proficiency

Chinese news teachers think about the problems and issues their students face when they try to improve their writing skills. Difficulties with language skills and translation, needing more experience with real-life journalism, cultural sensitivity, self-censorship, a heavy focus on test-oriented

learning, and hard adapting to global media standards are the five main themes that make up these problems. Teachers affirm that poor language skills and translation are two of the biggest problems they see. Another challenge is that there needs to be more hands-on training. Teachers said that the course material is mostly about theory, so students have few chances to do real-life new activities like jobs or fieldwork. Another central theme that came up was cultural sensitivity and self-censorship. Many students, especially in China, are afraid to talk about touchy political or cultural issues for fear of what might happen. Because they self-censor, they can't build a critical voice or do in-depth independent reporting. The Chinese school system's focus on tests could have been much better regarding writing skills. Teachers have noticed that students focus more on studying facts to pass tests than on learning to think critically and do research, which are essential skills for journalists. Lastly, it takes a lot of work for students to get used to the rules of global media, especially when it comes to being objective, independent, and fact-checking. Chinese media practices are sometimes different from those stressed in foreign journalism.

Students' Perception of the Importance of Journalistic Writing Proficiency in Achieving their Career Aspirations

One big theme that came up is that students think being able to write well is essential for job success in journalism. They know that writing is integral to everything they do, regardless of their job. Another essential idea is that writing gives students an edge in the job market. A lot of students said that being able to write well helps them stand out when they are applying for jobs. Students also know that being able to write well is essential for earning the trust and trustworthiness of their audience. Students also agree that being able to write well is essential for adapting to new media formats. As journalism goes online, students know how important it is to be able to write in a variety of styles, such as for social media, blogs, and podcasts. Lastly, students see being good at writing as a way to move up in their careers. They think that good writing is the key to getting ahead in journalism, whether that means becoming an editor or taking on more important jobs.

4. Discussion

The assessment results of journalism students' writing proficiency revealed the following implications: First, students are keenly aware of the importance of source verification, a critical component of journalistic writing. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) highlight that believability is the foundation of responsible journalism. However, students lack confidence in ensuring accuracy in their work. Shaw et al. (2022) found that journalism students often struggle with confidence, especially in high-pressure situations requiring accuracy and quick decision-making. Second, students recognize the necessity of using logical and compelling expressions to avoid miscommunication or disinformation. Friend and Challenger (2021) emphasize that effective communication requires appropriate language and clarity. However, students lack external validation from peers or instructors. Martindale and Wiley (2020) indicate that feedback is essential for developing writing abilities, and journalism programs should prioritize environments where clear and effective writing is regularly assessed. Third, students understand the need for conciseness to maintain reader interest. Cutler and Brown (2021) note that audiences prefer brief news stories that provide quick, easily understandable information, especially in digital journalism. However, students receive little practical experience and affirmation regarding conciseness from peers and instructors. Rhodes and Hamilton (2022) suggest that feedback and workshops emphasizing brevity can improve students' writing effectiveness. Fourth, students recognize the necessity of delivering balanced and unbiased viewpoints. Ward (2020) asserts that objectivity and impartiality are essential for maintaining public trust in the media. However, students receive little external input confirming their work's objectivity. Fifth, students understand the critical role of ethical conduct in preserving journalism's trust and credibility. Ward (2020) contends that ethical journalism is crucial in an era of disinformation and biased reporting. However, students do not receive regular acknowledgment and evaluation of ethical conformity. Brennen and Davis (2021) argue that journalism educators must engage students in ethical discussions and provide comprehensive critiques. Sixth, students unanimously recognize the importance of meticulous fact-checking. Silverman (2021) emphasizes that fact-checking is vital to counter disinformation in today's media landscape. However, students receive little feedback on their fact-checking skills. Garrison and Giampietro (2022) assert that fact-checking requires ongoing practice and feedback, particularly in educational settings where students must balance speed with accuracy.

The assessment results on the key factors influencing journalistic writing, such as socio-cultural, educational, and linguistic influences, revealed the following implications:

First, regarding socio-cultural factors, the data indicates that respondents acknowledge the importance of understanding cultural nuances for effective communication in journalism. This recognition aligns with Hanitzsch's (2020) study, which posits that cultural settings fundamentally influence journalism and that recognizing these contexts is vital for ethical reporting. However, some students perceived this as restrictive, hindering their ability to articulate distinct perspectives in their writing. This conclusion aligns with the research of Lee and Wang (2021), who found that journalism students in China often struggle to reconcile cultural conformity with the need for personal expression. Second, concerning educational influences, the data suggests that students recognize the need for lifelong learning and continuous professional growth to enhance their writing skills in journalism. This is evidenced by the highest mean score. Furthermore, students understand the significance of practical experience and internships or industry partnerships as vital elements for refining their writing abilities through engagement with authentic media practices. This focus on continuous education and career development corresponds with contemporary trends in journalism education. Reese and Cohen (2021) assert that journalism is an evolving discipline that requires ongoing education to stay abreast of emerging media methodologies, technology, and ethical dilemmas. However, the data also indicates that although students acknowledge the importance of collaborative learning, they may perceive it as less influential than other educational experiences, such as internships or direct professional involvement. Shoemaker and Reese (2022) assert that peer cooperation is a beneficial learning tool; however, its efficacy is significantly influenced by the organization of group tasks and the feedback provided to students during the process.

Third, regarding linguistic factors, the data shows that students predominantly agree on the importance of cultural sensitivity and linguistic proficiency for effective cross-cultural communication in journalism. This outcome underscores the importance of linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness in creating journalism that effectively engages diverse audiences and prevents misinterpretation. This focus on cultural sensitivity and linguistic proficiency aligns with the conclusions of Goddard and Carey (2020), who assert that journalists require robust language abilities and an awareness of cultural nuances to navigate globalized media environments successfully. However, the data indicates that although students often see themselves as strong in language abilities, some may struggle with vocabulary acquisition, impeding their writing efforts. This conclusion aligns with the research conducted by Yu and Li (2022), which emphasizes that language competency and vocabulary present significant challenges for journalism students, especially when writing in a second language.

The data on the perspectives of journalism teachers regarding the difficulties and challenges students face in achieving journalistic writing proficiency has the following implications: First, Chinese journalism schools should prioritize language development. To help students become proficient English speakers, they should provide tools for vocabulary building and offer more training in translation skills. Second, journalism schools need to offer more hands-on learning opportunities, such as internships, group projects with media companies, and practical tasks like working in a real newsroom. These experiences will better prepare students for the demands of the industry. Third, teachers should create a classroom environment that promotes critical thinking and allows students to explore challenging topics without fear. This approach will foster a fairer view of personal freedom and journalistic integrity. Journalism schools should move away from rote learning and focus on assessments that emphasize creativity, problem-solving, and independent reporting. These changes will help students prepare for the fast-paced and ever-changing media landscape. Lastly, Chinese journalism schools need to educate students about the global media landscape. This will help students understand international reporting standards and enable them to work in diverse media environments.

In conclusion, although Chinese journalism students evaluated their writing skills satisfactorily in terms of accuracy, clarity, conciseness, objectivity, ethics, and fact-checking, it is evident that educational programs need to focus on building students' confidence and skills in ensuring accuracy, providing more external validation in areas like objectivity and ethics, and consistently recognizing their fact-checking efforts. Moreover, socio-cultural, educational, and linguistic factors together explain 86% of the differences in writing skills, so schools should develop a comprehensive approach that addresses all three areas. Teachers have identified issues such as language barriers, a lack of hands-on experience, self-censorship, test-focused learning, and difficulty adapting to global media standards, indicating that China's journalism programs require significant changes. Lastly, the importance students place on writing proficiency for career success underscores the need for journalism schools to emphasize writing as a key component for advancement in the field.

It is recommended to introduce a structured feedback system where students receive regular, detailed comments on their accuracy, objectivity, ethics, and fact-checking efforts. Additionally, integrating culturally-sensitive training while encouraging critical thinking and self-expression is essential. Developing a balanced curriculum that addresses the interplay between socio-cultural, educational, and linguistic challenges by fostering a comprehensive learning environment is crucial. Finally, redesigning the journalism curriculum to be less exam-oriented will better prepare students for the dynamic media landscape.

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