Analysis of Chinese Learners’ Writing Process:
Effects of writing modes on Chinese writing
As the number of advanced-level Chinese learners keeps increasing, more and more students are attending Chinese writing classes. Many Chinese learners utilize computer technology such as online dictionary and word processing software to write Chinese composition. The study of their Chinese writing, however, has not received due attention. For example, only 3% of articles (21 out of 677 articles since 1966) in the Journal of Chinese Teachers Association are related to Chinese learning and writing on topics such as Chinese character recognition skills (Hayes 1987; Sergent & Eversion 1992) and learning strategies and character acquisition (Ke 1998; Shen 2009). Recently, there are only a few studies on computer-based Chinese writing (Xu & Jen 2005). To the best of my knowledge, no scholars have investigated the process of Chinese writing. Understanding the entire process Chinese writing is essential as it helps us answer important questions such as how learners interact with paper-based and computer-based writing modes, why learners produce some common error patterns, and how their writing is influenced by the use of references such as online dictionary.
To respond, this study investigates the Chinese learners’ writing process. In contrast to existing approaches which normally focus on the end writing results instead of the process of writing, this study leverages a state-of-the-art pencil movement tracking pen (called Smartpen) and a computer screen capture program (Camtasia Studio) to analyze the Chinese writing process. The data include initial and exit surveys, writing samples, and interviews of 65 Chinese learners (53 first-year, seven second-year, and five third-year learners), which were collected throughout one academic year. The participants completed four individual writing sessions (two paper-based and two computer-based sessions). They were asked to write Chinese as they would in their daily lives. In addition, they were also allowed to use the references if needed.
The results of this survey show that Chinese learners tend to think Chinese writing as computer typing rather than handwriting of Chinese characters. The analysis of interviews and writings indicates that first-year Chinese learners tend to favor paper- and pencil-based writing while second- and third-year students prefer computer-based writing. This paper also reports how these two different modes of writing interact with each other while students perform their writing.