On Writing Strategies of Enhancing Students' Writing Skills

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Abstract

This thesis, by means of contrastive analysis, conducts a discussion of the factors that affect students' English writing. The perspective of language transfer, small vocabulary, insufficient writing skills, culture differences, and different writing styles are mentioned in the next section. Under the guidance of constructivism theory, this paper proposes some effective teaching strategies to improve students' writing level and some writing strategies to enhance students' writing skills. By this detailed probe into students' writing situation, the author aims to give some useful suggestions to contribute to English writing.

Key words: Writing skills; Constructivism; Writing style; Writing strategies

INTRODUCTION

Writing is probably the linguistic skill that is least used by most people in their native language. Even in the most 'advanced' societies a significant percentage of the adult population writes with difficulty. Good writing skills usually develop from extensive reading, some specific training, and a good deal of practice (Davies & Pearse, 2002). Writing seems simple at the surface level, but is actually among the most difficult of cognitive tasks. Many people can make up sentences with words, and string them together into a piece of grammatical text, but very few people can make their text moving, convincing, or thought-provoking. In other words, a piece of text does not only mean something; it does something as well in order to achieve a particular social purpose. In this perspective writing as a significant requirement for EFL learners is regarded as one of the most important communicative skills in English language learning. Researchers have found that foreign language learners find it painstaking to write the target language, producing less fluent sentences and encountering difficulties in the revisions of their written work (Hyland, 2003). However, these difficulties are not only attributed to their linguistic abilities but they mostly lay in the nature of writing process itself (Chih, 2008). This is particularly true for Chinese students who don't have a good command of English. Influenced by interlanguage, Chinese students find it really hard to write well. The negative language transfer often confuses them a lot. Students are inclined to make a variety of errors in their writing. They lack in sufficient writing skills to finish a good composition.

1. CONSTRUCTIVISM LEARNING THEORY

Constructivism learning theory is a philosophy which enhances students' logical and conceptual growth. The underlying concept within the constructivism learning theory is the role which experiences-or connections with the adjoining atmosphere-play in student education. The constructivism learning theory argues that people produce knowledge and form meaning based upon their experiences. Two of the key concepts within

the constructivism learning theory which creates the construction of an individual's new knowledge are accommodation and assimilation. Assimilating causes an individual to incorporate new experiences into the old experiences. This causes the individual to develop new outlooks, rethink what were once misunderstandings, and evaluate what is important, ultimately altering their perceptions. Accommodation, on the other hand, is reframing the world and new experiences into the mental capacity already present. Individuals conceive a particular fashion in which the world operates. When things do not operate within that context, they must accommodate and reframing the expectations with the outcomes. The role of teachers is very important within the constructivism learning theory. Instead of giving a lecture the teachers in this theory function as facilitators whose role is to aid the student when it comes to their own understanding. This takes away focus from the teacher and lecture and puts it upon the student and their learning. The resources and lesson plans that must be initiated for this learning theory take a very different approach toward traditional learning as well. Instead of having the students relying on someone else's information and accepting it as truth, the constructivism learning theory supports that students should be exposed to data, primary sources, and the ability to interact with other students so that they can learn from the incorporation of their experiences.(http://www.teach-nology.com/currenttrends/constructivism/)

2. FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH WRITING

2.1 The Effect of Language Transfer to Writing

"Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that have been previously acquired (and perhaps imperfectly acquired)" (Odlin, 1989). As for Mongolian students they are usually affected by the transfer of two languages, and these are their mother tongue Mongolian language and Chinese. Even a few students have difficulties in learning their native language Chinese, let alone a foreign language. The bad language transfer such as "Misplaced Modifiers", "Sentence Fragments" and "Troubles in Diction" often occurs in students' writing samples. Chinglish expressions are very common in their written work. Some students insist on employing Chinese thinking patterns to express English and sometimes some ridiculous mistakes are made. The following examples are Chinglish expressions.

a) Low carbon life cover ours life many hand, such as: traveling , transportations and home-heating. In order to a low carbon life, we should carry out as follows.

b) Begin from me, starts from the side, the low carbon life do.

c) We as the owner of the earth, you should have a good to protect the earth.

d) His writing and translating level are very high.

e) The price is too expensive.

2.2 Small Vocabulary

By the data offered in corpus, small vocabulary is major concern in students' writing. Some students use too often some words in their compositions. Overuse of High-frequency Words is a common scene in students' writing. There is a declining tendency with the improvement of the students' English proficiency. Students are likely to use words that they perceive to be simple, no matter phonologically, grammatically or semantically and that learners preferr to use general and high-frequency words rather than low-frequency and specific ones. For example, the expressions such as "I think", "now", "with the development of China's economy" are the most frequently used vocabulary. Therefore, it is very necessary for students to enlarge their vocabulary.

2.3 Insufficient Writing Skills

The most typical problem in students' writing is that the content is a little vacuous. Students can't express their ideas in a deep sense because they are not able to develop the topic sentence using detailed description. Students have only a little writing experience and they will find they can get nowhere around a topic. Students are short of the necessary writing skills and relative writing knowledge, which reveals the deficiency of college English writing. In most colleges and universities, more attention is paid to reading and speaking skills of students rather than their writing abilities.

2.4 Cultural Differences

Language neither drives culture nor is driven by it; the old question about which determines which can be set aside as irrelevant, because the relation is not one of cause and effect but rather (as Firth saw it, though not in these words) one of realization: that is, culture and language co-evolve in the same relationship as that in which, within language, meaning and expression co-evolve (Halliday, 1993). According to the definition of culture given by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), culture is the knowledge acquainted by social life, while language is the knowledge system, which is acquainted by the inspiration of human's acquired social language environment. Language is the main part of culture, and it reflects its culture. It is nowadays a commonplace in language pedagogy to stress the importance of culture teaching and to say that language and culture are intertwined. It is impossible to teach a language without culture, and culture is the necessary context for language use. Cultural awareness requires learners to have the skills of "empathy" and "cultural integration". Therefore, it is very essential for students to cultivate their cultural awareness and be critical in their thinking patterns. Some

expressions and proverbs reveal the culture difference. In Chinese, we say "疾风知劲草", while in English the sentence "A good pilot is not known when the sea is calm and the water is fair" conveys the same meaning. In addition, many English proverbs and idioms don't have corresponding expressions in Chinese. For instance, the idiom 'Set the Thames on fire' carries the meaning that one can do unbelievable things and achieve greatness, but we can hardly find a coordinate expression in Chinese. The English saying "A cat may look at a king" holds the concept that everyone has equal rights in society. However, because of cultural differences, seldom will Chinese people use animals to present their equal ideas (Zhao, 2014). Similarly, we may translate "Greenhouse" into Chinese "绿色的房子"，but it does not carry the same meaning. It is a building with roofs and walls of glass, often heated, and used for growing flowers and plants that need warmth, or for bringing on early produce. Its counterpart in Chinese is "温室" (Wang, 1999)..

2.5 Different Writing Styles

If one compares with writing texts of English and Chinese, he will find that Chinese ones are very often more flowery or ornate than the English ones. English texts are usually plain. It is a general rule to write with nouns and verbs in English writing, because they are regarded as more forceful and descriptive than other words. English people preferred to use adjectives and adverbs only when it is necessary. Rhetorical devices are not frequently used in English texts. In contrast, it is an outstanding feature of many Chinese texts to use too often the rhetorical devices. English people use less frequently similes and metaphor than the Chinese people, because they would like to come to the point .Chinese people are good at artistic thinking. Compared with Chinese people, English speakers prefer plain language representing fresh ideas.

3. EFFECTIVE WRITING SKILLS

Effective writing skills are central in both higher education and in the world of work that follows. One's ability to compose an extended text is the single best predictor of success in course work during the freshman year (Geiser, 2001). Gains in informative and analytical writing ability are, moreover, taken as a good indicator of the value added by higher education (Benjamin & Chun, 2003).

Just as Davies & Pearse mentions writing involves the following basic skills:

—handwriting and typing

—spelling

—constructing grammatical sentences

—punctuating

At high levels, writing involves cognitive skills such as:

—gathering information and ideas relevant to the topic, and discarding what is not relevant

—organizing the information and ideas into a logical sequence

—structuring the sequence into sections and paragraphs

—expressing the information and ideas in a written draft

—editing the draft and writing out a final text

Scarcella and Oxford (1992) maintain that writers draw on four types of competencies:

a) Grammatical competence: Use of grammar rules, morphology, syntax, spelling, and punctuation;

b) Sociolinguistic competence: rules that enable writers to vary their writing according to their purpose, topic, and audience;

c) Discourse competence: ability to organize texts cohesively and coherently through the use of devices such as pronoun reference and ellipses or deletion of repetitive words;

d) Strategic competence: use of strategies such as brainstorming writing ideas, writing drafts, and revising.

When students are assigned a writing task, they should follow some writing principles. Jim Scrivener (2002) recommends some ways in which guided writing exercises can help students prepare for a writing task:

● Students think about the topic before they write

● Students brainstorm ideas and approaches

● Students discuss the topic with other students, getting new ideas and clarifying their own thoughts

● Students see example writing that deals with similar issues

● The class works on a piece of similar writing together

● Students do some preliminary writing exercises – making notes, answering questions, ordering ideas, linking sentences, etc.

● Students work through some language exercises containing language that may be useful in their writing

● Students prepare a rough draft of writing for discussion, correction and amendment.

Writing skills can be trained through the way of integrating writing practice into teaching intensive reading. The focus is laid on cultivating students' ability of conception and composing paragraphs and texts. The main teaching mode is to let students find the topic sentence and the main idea, analyze the paragraph coherence and make an outline of the passage. The teacher guides their students to conduct writing by asking questions. By means of explanation and evaluation, the teacher intends to enlighten students to write well.

4. EFFECTIVE WRITING STRATEGIES

In order to achieve better writing results, effective writing strategies are in desperate need.

The following parts serve as an introduction of writing strategies to improve students' writing competencies.

(a) The teacher should change their teaching concept and pay attention to cultivate students' critical thinking ideas. There is an example of selective courses for university students in Finland. This writing course is open for all the students, who are in different grades and have different linguistic competencies. This concept is conducted by process writing method and students should write a composition in the following steps: make an outline of a composition, write a composition, edit the composition, and evaluate the composition. Writers get feedback from their teacher and peers in order to revise their compositions and make it more effective.

(b) Because of the variety of tasks which must be performed, together with the advisability of bringing in various skills, talents, and points of view, writing is frequently a team effort or a co-authored venture. It goes without saying that all members of a materials writing team will have professional qualifications for the assignment. A good team should have a balance of interests with at least one grammatical expert along with people who have strong backgrounds in language learning theory and sociolinguistics. At the same time, when it comes to organizing the writing, members' particular talents need to be heeded. Some will work more effectively as originators or conceptualizers, some will be effective finishers, while others would be best assigned as polishers or re-write specialists. Team members will complement each other (Dubin & Olshtain, 2002).

(c) Writing involves a different kind of mental process. There is more time to think, to reflect, to prepare, to rehearse, to make mistakes and find alterative and better solutions. Guided writing is a very important classroom tool for helping students to become better writers. Help is given in thinking through ideas, ordering them, considering vocabulary and grammar, co-operatively preparing notes and draft copies, and in other ways of making preparations to write. A student can learn to become a better writer by (i) being actively encouraged to follow through a series of preparatory steps before the final text is produced, and (ii) becoming more aware of that preparation process, so that it can be done more independently and transparently in future (Scrivener, 2002).

(d) The writing activities should be chosen according to students' interests and level. The teacher should take many factors into consideration. He should make sure if the writing tasks are appropriate for the students to complete. It is a question of what language the students have at their command and what can be achieved with this language. A little real composition work can be started at lower levels with activities such as parallel compositions, parallel letters, and picture compositions. Composition work at higher levels can involve the whole class, or working in pairs or groups, as well as working individually. The design of writing assignments depends on how much language the students know and what their interests are. Only in this way, can students achieve creative writing and be highly motivated.

(e) With the rapid development of information technology, more and more universities are integrating new emerging technologies into language teaching. As for the writing aspect, the corpus and a variety of automated scoring systems are put into use. The corpus can provide the teacher and students with rich and various language resources. The automated scoring system is a good assistant for the teacher because it can grade students' compositions automatically and points out the errors and shortcomings in students' wrong samples. Under the background of curriculum integration, a well-designed course is to be arranged and more learning tools that are useful for students are to be offered. Students' information literacy is enhanced since they have to grasp the basic information and technologies so as to take advantage of advanced information technologies to promote their learning effects. In addition, blog, QQ, MSN and email are good communication tools for students to learn cooperatively.

(f) The evaluation of written work weighs heavily on students' writing abilities. It is really frustrating for the students to find their written work filled with red lines and bad comments. There is a problem of over-correction. The teacher needs to achieve a balance between being accurate and truthful on the one hand and treating students sensitively and sympathetically on the other. It is a good way for the teacher to make correction of some important aspects, and let the students evaluate their peer's work in some trial and minor respects. The teacher ought to rethink their teaching behaviors and adjust their teaching methods to meet students' real needs.

(g) Reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. They are complimentary to each other. They can be both input and output. Therefore, they should be treated as an interactive and integrated whole. One can not play its full role without the other. Writers can get ideas by reading what others have written about a topic. A good written work may throw light on readers and they may learn how others compose a composition. Good writers are likely to write down what they think are good words, sentences and expressions. Therefore, it is beneficial for the teacher to raise students' awareness of getting ideas by reading a large amount of relevant materials.

CONCLUSION

Writing is as important a skill as speaking, listening, and reading. For many learners, the time to think things through, to produce language in a slower way, is invaluable. In present English teaching, listening and speaking seem to play more important roles than writing. However, writing is the most comprehensive skill above

all. With the integration of information technology into curriculum teaching, the traditional teaching methods of writing should be abandoned. More attention should be paid to the interaction between teachers and students as well as students themselves. In addition to this, the way of evaluation should be changed as well. Writing is a complicated process. It is concerned with culture, thinking way and linguistic knowledge. There are many aspects in English writing worthy of being explored and further research need to be done to improve students' writing skills.

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