Towards an eclectic framework for teaching EFL writing in a Chinese context

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Abstract: The challenges of writing itself and lack of appropriate teaching methodology demotivate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in some Chinese universities to write more, especially as the only incentive for students to write is the compulsory tests. The main objectives of this article are: (1) to discuss the background of the EFL learners in Chinese tertiary education and then to elaborate on their needs and problems for EFL writing; (2) to review the existing approaches to teaching writing; and (3) to propose and justify an integrated model on the basis of these approaches for teaching EFL writing in the Chinese context.

Key words: EFL writing; product approach; process writing; genre-based approach

1. Introduction

Writing has never been an easy job and it is doubly so for EFL learners, as writing is a productive process that learners need to utilize all the means they have, such as lexical, syntactic, discourse and rhetorical knowledge, to achieve certain writing objectives. It is, however, clear from the author's observation of many EFL classes at tertiary level in China that the teaching and learning of EFL writing has not received sufficient attention of both EFL learners and teachers in comparison to the other four aspects of language learning, which are listening, speaking, reading and vocabulary as required in College English Curriculum Requirements (2004). The author argues that this is inadequate for many learners. In this article, the author will first discuss the background of the EFL learners in Chinese tertiary education and then elaborate on their needs and problems for EFL writing. Second, the author will review the existing approaches to teaching writing. Finally, the author will propose and justify an integrated model on the basis of these approaches for teaching EFL writing in the Chinese context.

2. Leaner background and problems

2.1 EFL context

English learning is no longer the preserve of the elite group in China's society. As the door of China opens up, China is thronged with visitors and businessmen from all over the world, and increasingly more Chinese students have been sent to learn abroad. No one could ignore this trend of globalization in China, which results in a growing demand for English competence of people (Ng & TANG, 1997).

2.2 Learner profile

As China is a huge country and students are from diverse family and ethnic backgrounds, there are bound to be individual differences between learners from large and coastal cities and those from small cities and inland

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areas. In general, most Chinese college students are intermediate or advanced English learners, with a few from inland or autonomous regions like Tibet and Inner Mongolia low-intermediate or beginning learners.

2.3 Learner needs and problems in writing instruction

Some problems are identified based on the author's experience and observation, and these problems actually reflect a lack of satisfaction of learner needs. The first is the over-emphasis on writing as a product. Learners' writing process is neglected or simplified, and learners do not receive sufficient and effective teacher scaffolding during the process of construction of a piece of writing. This might be partially due to China's longstanding examination-oriented education system (HAN, 2005). Students, throughout childhood and youth, have to pass many high-stakes examinations in order to receive higher education. Once they finally matriculate at universities, "A typical English curriculum works under the guidance of the College English Syllabus and is evaluated almost exclusively by the results of students' scores on the CET" (YOU, 2004, p. 108). In other words, the major assessment for writing is solely a section of composition worth 10-15% out of a total 100% in the examinations such as semester finals and College English Tests. The purpose and process of writing are too much often neglected in classroom teaching.

Then, when writing is dealt with at all, the teaching practices usually tend to be decontextualised and the goal of teaching sometimes focuses on accuracy of form rather than meaning-making. The in-class writing activities lack meaningful contexts and often fail to deal with issues learners might be confronted with in the real world. As such, many learners feel what they have learned in class is just for scoring high on tests and cannot really help them cope with the real-life challenges, for example, writing academic papers, or writing to find a job in a multinational company, or writing to apply for admission to an overseas university. Apart from that, the provision of teacher feedback is rather limited, and where there is feedback, it is predominantly concerned about lexicogrammatical errors instead of helping students explore and discover meaning.

Thirdly, lack of self motivation to write more is another problem of some learners. Many Chinese college students feel the urgency to be able to use English to communicate with people face to face rather than writing for people they do not see or know. Direct face-to-face interactions give learners a great sense of achievement in the strenuous process of learning a foreign language. Therefore, writing is less preferred as a language skill, which may call for relatively longer time to be well-developed. In addition, the absence of communicative purposes in the design and demand of curriculum might also lead to learners' frustration and antipathy, as learners' individual needs for English are hardly acknowledged.

Currently, writing as an important component in EFL is not given enough attention by both learners and teachers in some tertiary institutions in China. These learners, however, need a more process-oriented and contextualized teaching approach to EFL writing, which should go beyond micro-level knowledge and take socio-cultural factors into account, so as to promote and enhance learners' self motivation and further improve their competence in writing.

3. Review on major approaches to composition instruction

3.1 Earlier approaches to writing

In the 1970s controlled approach to L2 writing was in its heyday. ESL writing classes adopted the audio-lingual method, through which students copied pattern drills and made changes solely in person and tense, and teachers constantly correct grammar mistakes made by students (Reid, 2001). In the early 1980s, the guided

structural approach emerged in composition instruction. Writing was still language-based, structuring and combining sentences to produce a short piece of discourse (Reid, 2001). Prototypical activities of such approaches are coping and dictation, question and answer, reordering, expansion and contraction, omission and so on. In both approaches, accuracy was given primacy and learners' own voice was never heard. Later, the current-traditional approach became prominent in L2 writing and "accuracy became secondary to communication" (Reid, 2001, p. 28). In this still widely used approach, writing modes are introduced to learners and the importance of a final product is emphasized. In general the approaches mentioned above are monotonous, form-based and reader-oriented.

3.2 Process writing

During the 1980s, there was a shift from the product approach to the process approach in L2 writing. The process approach may consist of the following procedures: (1) prewriting brainstorming; (2) first draft; (3) conferencing; (4) second draft; (5) editing; (6) third draft; and (7) sharing/feedback (Chew, 2006). These procedures are recursive and learners can interact with each other throughout the writing process. The process approach brings meaningfulness to learners and allows them to understand the steps involved in writing. In another words, this approach focuses on personal writing, student creativity and fluency (Zamel, 1982). Accuracy of spelling and punctuation is no longer a central concern, and writing is writer-oriented self-discovery.

3.3 Genre-based writing

Developed by the Australian circle the genre-based approach to L2 writing became prominent along with the notion that learners benefit from studying genres used in different socio-cultural contexts and communities for different purposes (Hyland, 2003). By teaching different genres explicitly, teachers could offer students related cultural and linguistic resources (Hasan, 1996). This approach to writing can be identified with three stages: (1) modeling of the target genre for the learners; (2) joint construction of a text by the teacher and learners; and (3) independent construction by individual learner (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). In this approach, writing activities become meaningful and purposeful social interactions, which may enhances learner involvement and autonomy in the entire writing process.

4. Integration of writing approaches

Each above-mentioned approach has its merits. Many practitioners and researchers have advocated flexible incorporation of some approaches to meet various learners' needs in disparate contexts (ZHANG, 2005). In the light of the Chinese university students' needs and problems mentioned in the previous section, an eclectic framework is proposed to meet their needs and to further transcend current limitations in EFL writing instruction. This approach may integrate some advantages of the product and process approaches into the genre approach in order for learners to study the relationship between form and meaning in pertinence to a specific genre as they take the steps of prewriting, drafting, conferencing, editing and sharing. In the integrated approach, the following steps might be included in the writing class, and the teacher and students need to play multiple roles during different phases.

(1) Step 1: Sampling and modeling

During this start-up phase, the teacher designs a situation where students may meet in real life. For example, to write an application letter for a job and to let students in groups discuss freely the context, purpose and potential readers of such a writing task. Subsequently, the teacher provides a sample and places it in a particular

genre.

(2) Step 2: Analyzing and brainstorming

In this phase, the teacher and students go through the sample in details and afterwards let students analyze and find out the rhetorical principles and lexico-grammatical patterns. The teacher needs to offer more samples to broaden students' horizon for such a genre.

(3) Step 3: Joint constructing

The teacher and students work together to finish a piece of writing in class with students' contribution of ideas. The teacher plays a role of facilitator and stenographer who may offer polishing and error correction at times. The result of joint constructing functions as a model which students can refer to later.

(4) Step 4: First independent drafting

Due to time constraint in class, students could be asked to finish their own draft independently after class and bring it to next writing class.

(5) Step 5: Conferencing with focus on macro-aspects of draft

During this phase, students work in pairs to review each other's drafts and give feedback to the macro-aspects of the draft, such as the development of main ideas and discourse structure, so that the draft accords with the corresponding context and readers in certain culture or society. The teacher may circle and answer questions of students.

(6) Step 6: Second independent drafting

Students, given the feedback in class, could revise the first draft after class.

(7) Step 7: Conferencing with focus on micro-aspects of draft

Having brought their second draft to class, students in pairs correct the grammar and spelling mistakes, and also weigh the words and expressions in each other's drafts. The teacher may circle and answer questions of students.

(8) Step 8: Last independent drafting

Students finish their final drafts on their own after class.

(9) Step 9: Sharing and teacher feedback

In class students are encouraged to share their final drafts with the whole class. The teacher gives feedback concerning both the macro-aspects and the micro-aspects of students' writing.

5. Conclusion

The challenges of writing itself and lack of appropriate teaching methodology demotivate EFL learners in some Chinese universities to write more, especially as the only incentive for students to write is the compulsory tests. However, the flexible incorporation of existing writing approaches may infuse writing instruction with renewed vigour, because this integration allows students to look at writing beyond form and accuracy, and then to find meaning and purpose in interactive writing activities with peer review and teacher guidance. Moreover, this integration still takes the quality of the writing product into account and does not neglect accuracy and form in the least. This integration is eclectic, and the teacher should make sensible choice on which phase of writing to mainly focus on in light of learners' specific needs in the real classroom.

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