USING PROCESS WRITING IN A WRITING COURSE FOR

ENGLISH MAJORS IN CHINA

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Yuanyuan Hu, Ph. D.

In an EFL writing course for English majors in China, teachers usually use a teacher-centered approach. This paper explores how writing teachers of English majors in China can make use of subprocesses of writing process and even cooperative learning to enhance their teaching. The advantages of using process writing are as follow: it will change the role of students from passive to active ones; every subprocess requires students to think critically about what they are doing and what they can do; and students also need to define the purpose and audience for their writing. Teachers are recommended to make some changes in accordance with China's reality.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Most English majors in China are required to take a writing course during their sophomore or junior year. A large proportion of them may feel frustrated when writing in English because they may have difficulty defining the purpose of their writing, organizing their ideas, or expressing their ideas accurately. What makes students feel so difficult to begin a sentence in a paragraph, how to teach them to write in an organized manner, and what students can learn from a writing course are always challenging questions for English teachers in China. Getting to know challenges facing students' and their needs for writing will not only allow teachers to design a practical and productive course, but also to establish a good relationship with students, which may provide flexibility in arranging their classes.

In an EFL writing course for English majors in China, teachers usually use a teacher-centered approach. Their lecture takes up most of class time, so there is no time left for students to practice writing or discuss with their classmates how to write. In order to help students get a higher score on an examination, most English teachers ask students to imitate model essays in exam reference books, neglecting real writing needs of students.

When it comes to a teacher-centered writing course for English majors in China, the teacher normally use the following steps. For example, to teach a certain type of essays (e.g., narration, description, exposition or argumentation), they very often choose a model essay from a textbook and analyze its genre and structure in class. Then they may have students practice what they have learned, for example, ask students to rearrange scrambled sentences from a paragraph, or to write a composition about an assigned topic with a given outline. Such a teaching approach may teach students a certain genre; however, it allows little flexibility and creativity because all students need to do is filling in a provided template with self-generated ideas.

One of the greatest challenges for educators in China is looking for an effective method to ease students' anxiety and cultivate their interests in writing. When it comes to writing, many educators nowadays see the importance of process writing.

Process writing emphasizes the steps in the process of writing. Many researchers found that teachers tend to neglect the pre-writing stage and only focus on written products, which does not fit in with the aim of writing. Bilton and Sivasubramaniam (2009) conclude that "Writing is not primarily a vocational skill but an educative process" (p. 318).

Statement of the Problem

To what extent does the adoption of the process writing approach in a writing course for English majors in China facilitate student learning? Do Chinese students learn more effectively in an EFL writing course with process writing? If so, what are the benefits of using the process writing approach? How can the process writing approach be applied to a writing course?

Definitions of Terms

Process writing consists of steps, such as, generating ideas, developing ideas, organizing ideas, drafting, revising and editing. It does not only focus on written products, but also on the steps leading to the products (Eric & Pearse, 2002; Nation, 2009).

Cooperative learning is an interactive way that involves students in group discussion and critical thinking (Long, 1998). It pertains to a problem-based learning rather than competitive and individualistic learning, and its emphasis is on group work (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998).

Method of Approach

The review of literature was mainly conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, the USA, as well as the library at Business College of Hubei

University of Technology, China. Primary search was conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Premier, and Education Full Text. Key search topics include "process writing", "cooperative learning", "writing course", "second language acquisition," and "English language teaching in China." Opinions of different authors were analyzed, and themes were identified. This seminar paper provides a brief review of current methods used in a writing course for English majors in China, and a review of literature on process writing and how to use cooperative learning to improve the writing course. The findings are summarized, and recommendations are made.

Chapter 2 Review of Related Literature

Methods Commonly Used in an EFL Writing Course

An EFL writing course is often taught by nonnative speakers of English (Lee & Schallert, 2008; You, 2004), and those nonnative teachers choose a methodology for their courses, taking into account the size of their class and their students' English proficiency.

According to Silva (1990), teachers who, use the traditional individual writing methodology, usually urge students to manipulate their previously learned language knowledge to produce a writing product which is a collection of sentence patterns and vocabulary items; teachers, serving as editors or proofreaders, are not interested in the quality of ideas, but caring for formal linguistic features in students' papers. A similar writing method adopted in an EFL classroom is a product-based approach or product writing, which started from late last century (Jo & Christopher, 2004; Luo, 2007). The product-based approach gives priority to students' writing products but overlook the writing process; in addition, students receive topics for their assignments from their teachers but with little feedback from them (Jo & Christopher, 2004; Luo, 2007).

Luo (2007) demonstrates explicitly that the traditional English writing method in China is teacher-centered, with which teachers give a topic, explain related requirements in class, and then ask students to finish their writing within a given time or after class; teachers grade papers with little feedback. In addition, he points out that the teacher-centered approach is a one-way direction. Teachers pay much more attention to languages forms, for example, spelling or grammar, but not to content or organization. As a result, students may overlook the importance of revision and focus on their grades.

Apart from methods above, Pattern-Product Approach was popular over last 20 years in an

EFL writing course (Bilton & Sivasubramaniam, 2009). Bilton and Sivasubramaniam (2009) state that with this approach, teachers provide students with scrambled sentences originally form a paragraph either with or without a topic sentence, and require them to identify the topic sentence or come up with a topic sentence for the paragraph. They also mention that Cambridge Examination Board spoke highly of it, because it was based on problem-solving, and it was a product step by step.

The examination-centered approach is also commonly used in EFL writing courses but has been criticized by researchers because it cannot motivate students to learn or it will lead to mechanical learning without any edification; in addition, students recite some small passages before exams in order to get higher scores with little engagement or involvement (Bilton & Sivasubramanism, 2009; You, 2006).

Bilton and Sivasubramaniam (2009) advocate expressive writing, which encourages students to expand their knowledge about topics of their choice through writing and to be creative with their writing. Students are allowed to write about what they want to say or what they know instead of teacher-assigned topics, with no grade pressure or concern about critical comments from others.

Process Writing Used in an EFL Writing Course

Writing usually cannot be completed in one step, and it is a process involving steps such as generating ideas, drafting, revision and editing. Each step of the writing process has its own function, which influences the quality of a written product. Many researchers have examined each step to identify effective ways to teach writing.

Writing process. Eric and Pearse (2002) found that writing involves cognitive skills at higher levels, 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 (p. 96)

Nation (2009) asserts that a writing process consists of seven sub-processes: setting up goals, defining intended audience, generating ideas, organizing ideas, ideas to text, reviewing and editing. He concludes that it is not enough to look at what has been produced, but to see how the product was produced.

Implementation of process writing. Writing courses are focusing on students now, and process writing as a pedagogical approach attains much attention from many researchers (Macaro, 2008). According to Li (2009), teachers now pay much more attention to process writing using writing strategies in class, including prewriting, drafting, revising and editing.

Teachers can provide suitable topics for students to easily express what they have experienced according to their own experiences, and teachers also need to provide ample materials to arouse students' interest (Luo, 2007). Many students often lose their interest in a traditional writing course because they are required to write about teachers-assigned topics to fulfil course requirements or prepare for exams, and those topics usually are unrelated to students' own lives. You (2006) suggests that a writing course should prepare students for real-life writing tasks, and if a writing course exclusively focuses on preparing students for a test, or students expect a teacher to predict the topic for a test so that they can be prepared for the topic and succeed in the test, it is unlikely that students will improve their writing skills.

Pre-writing stage is perceived as a very important step in the writing process. During this stage, students are recommended to generate ideas independently, or develop ideas through reading or discussing with their classmates or teachers. With generated ideas, a follow-up step would be recommending students to identify ideas that are relevant to the focus of their writing (Luo, 2007).

Rao (2007) recommends brainstorming as one of effective ways to generate ideas in that it can activate students' thinking and creativity, it allows teachers to act as facilitators, and students show their willingness and 'positiveness' toward brainstorming. Eric and Pearse (2002) believe that brainstorming can be used throughout the whole writing process.

Macaro (2008) believes that planning and formulating ideas is the core of process writing. He points out that in the process of planning and formulating ideas, students in an EFL classroom should be given clear directions regarding the use of their native language to generate ideas. He believes that having students recombine their sentences or restructure their papers may contribute to planning and formulating ideas.

Li (2009) introduces four kinds of feedback; teacher-written feedback, peer feedback, self-monitoring and computer-mediated feedback. He states that teachers may give feedback in direct or indirect ways. An example of direct ways would be grammatical error correction; an example of indirect ways would be asking questions about the content of a student's paper. Teachers may also provide feedback through one-to-one communication with students. Li (2009) also indicates that teachers, even critical to writing courses, should avoid correcting all errors in students' writing. Those corrections may not be valued by students, and they may continue making same errors. In most recent literature, many scholars recommend teachers to give feedback in different ways (Huang, 2010; Li, 2009).

Li (2009) also found that peer feedback is useful in providing students with ideas for revision (e.g., the content and organization of their writing), but students may not receive good feedback for editing from their group members because of different language levels of group members.

According to Li (2009), self-monitoring feedback promotes students' autonomy in writing; students need to check all the information they provide in their papers. Self-monitoring feedback requires relatively high language proficiency, which cannot be effective when students have a lower language level.

As for computer-mediated feedback, students are encouraged to use computers as a tool to mediate with their teachers or group members. However, students have to have access to a computer to provide such kind of feedback.

In order to improve the effectiveness of feedback, Huang (2010) suggests that teachers record and make charts of errors to find the causes of student errors. Li (2009) draws the same conclusion that it is very important for teachers to adopt varied feedback modes to address different types of errors, such as treatable errors like spelling, grammar and mechanical errors and untreatable errors like word order or word collocation.

Nation (2009) mentions that there is no fixed time to revise written products in the process of writing, and students need to periodically review their papers. He also indicates that it would be better for students to use a feedback sheet with several categories such as content, organization, grammar, and so on.

Limitations of process writing. There are constraints on using process writing in an EFL writing course. Ample time is needed in the writing process, which should be enough for teachers to design the whole writing process and enough for students to revise and edit their papers. The application of process writing is also depending on the attitude of students, and it

will be difficult for teachers to carry it out if students are not willing to be highly involved in process writing.

Using Cooperative Learning in Process Writing

Krych-Appelbaum and Musial (2007) point out that writers, as encoders, cannot communicate with readers or decoders face-to-face, but writers can discuss with other people about what they want to say, and how to say it.

Long (1998) defines that cooperative learning is an interactive way that involves students in group discussion and critical thinking. It is pertaining to a problem-based learning, and the emphasis is on group work (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). Silva (1990) asserts that "this approach calls for providing a positive, encouraging, and collaborative workshop environment within which students, with ample time and minimal interference, can work through their composing processes" (p. 15).

Cooperative learning can be used to help students brainstorm ideas. Researchers such as Noël and Robert (2004) found that whole class or group brainstorming improves students' motivation and students can obtain good feedback through it. Collaboration will make it easier for students to finish their writing and revise what they have written in a shorter time. Luo (2007) argues that group work allows students to break writer's block through sharing information in a relaxing atmosphere.

Peer feedback is another example of using cooperative learning in writing courses. Li (2009) claims that peer feedback requires group members to work together in class to discuss, revise or edit their drafts. It enhances students' awareness of active thinking and all-round progress. Group work may help students gain confidence and reduce apprehension toward writing. Moreover, group work may help students with sentence coherence, organization or layout of writing; they

may no longer concentrate on grammar accuracy only (Wen, 2007). "(C)ooperative team peer tutoring resulted in the highest rate of correct responding" (Madrid, Canas, & Ortega-Medina, 2007, p.155), and can help students with their writing (Eberly & Yrand, 2009).

Badger (2010) agrees that peer mentorship including peer teaching and peer review is a good way to improve students' writing skills. He believes that it can build an anti-oppressive and egalitarian classroom environment, breaking one-sided control distribution. In group work, students can develop critical thinking and evaluation skills and learn better through teaching group members; they also receive cohort input, which could prevent plagiarism.

Although cooperative learning will ease the process of writing to some extent, some researchers find some limitations of cooperative learning. Noël and Robert (2004) point out that there may be conflicts and different abilities among group members. Badger (2010) concludes that how to put students into groups presents a challenge to teachers because students tend to have different personalities, which may affect dynamics of group work. He argues that the value of peer work depends on how much students are involved in discussing their own and group members' papers.

Summary

Most traditional writing methodologies such as the teacher-centered approach, Pattern-Product Approach and product-based approach are popular in an EFL writing course for English majors, but there are many controversies about the role of teachers and students or the goal of writing practice and so on.

Writing is a process consisting of at least four steps including generating ideas, drafting, revising, and editing. Many researchers expand their ideas on these steps, and suggest that teachers and students should make efforts to change their traditional roles in EFL writing

courses. Teachers should find suitable topics and give feedback to students to generate ideas or revise drafts.

Cooperative learning can be used in an EFL writing course to improve teaching effectiveness. It can arouse students' interests in writing and stimulate their active thinking. Students will play central roles in writing. However, there are some challenges in relation to the use of cooperative learning in an EFL writing course, for example, how to use group work to teach a big size class and how to manage group members?

Chapter 3 Conclusions and Recommendations

Most teachers of writing course for English majors in China are nonnative English speakers. They will decide to adopt a certain method for their writing courses according to their educational background, their teaching experience and their teaching objectives. In addition, English majors in China are supposed to practice or write more than non-English majors in China. However, the teacher-centered approach is popular in China. Teachers take up most of class time, and students act as listeners not practicers in an EFL writing course.

Process writing will change the role of students from passive to active ones. Every subprocess requires students to think critically about what they are doing and what they can do. Students also need to define the purpose and audience for their writing. So how can writing teachers of English majors in China make use of subprocesses of writing process and even cooperative learning to enhance their teaching?

Recommendations for Teachers

Writing teachers of English majors in China can learn advanced methods in the world and make some changes in accordance with the reality of writing courses in China, such as students' language proficiency, their motivation, the size of class, and so on.

Teachers in China can give reading assignments to students, which are expected to be completed prior to class. This will allow teachers to have time to engage students in writing activities during class.

Teachers in China should change their roles in an EFL writing course. Instead of taking up most of class time lecturing, they can take on multiple roles including instructors, facilitators, and coordinators. Students should be the center of instruction because they need ample time to discuss and practice writing.

Teachers can build an active atmosphere to stimulate students' interest in writing, which may be achieved through giving students freedom in selecting topics and incorporating a variety of writing activities into their class, for example, group discussion and peer feedback. In a relaxing atmosphere, students may find it easier to brainstorm or come up with ideas, and be more willing to communicate with their teacher.

It would be helpful if teachers could provide detailed rubrics in the course of peer teaching or peer review. Teachers can act as facilitators in the process of evaluation, explaining the meaning of rubrics and making comments on the pieces of rubrics, in order to help students improve their writing skills.

The size of an EFL writing course in China tends to be large, so there is little chance for students to communicate with their teacher one-to-one or receive detailed comments or feedback from their teacher. A possible way to manage a large size class is to divide students into several groups, with every group having no more than four people, which will enable group members to share ideas and receive feedback from each other. To ensure effective group work, it is necessary to develop good group work guidelines. It would be helpful that each group has a leader, who can serve as a coordinator of the group.

Constraints on Using Process Writing

As we know, process writing values subprocess of writing as well as written products. That is to say, teachers and students will spend much more time on each step if this approach is adopted. This may be challenging to writing teachers in China given that the total amount of time is limited in one writing course, and teaching all modes of writing will need a great deal of time. It remains to be explored how to cover all subprocesses and give students practice opportunities within one course.

Process writing sometimes involves group work, and the difficulty of monitoring group work in a large class cannot be underestimated. Although there are many studies exploring ways and methods to solve this problem, suggestions from those studies may not be applicable to an EFL writing course for English majors in China.

Summary

There are many measures we can take to promote the effectiveness of an EFL writing course for English majors in China. With regard to teachers, what they can do is to learn modern methods in the world, to build a relaxing and active atmosphere in class, to assign preparation work to students and even to use cooperative learning in class, and so on. As to students, they need to change their roles in an EFL writing course, and give feedback to their group members actively and responsibly. Time arrangement and size of class are challenges for teachers using process writing in class, so it requires more efforts from teachers to make good preparation before an EFL writing course.

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