A Study of Improving Writing Competence through Classroom Teaching in Middle School

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A Study of Improving Writing Competence through Classroom Teaching in Middle School

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Qing Peng

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Abstract

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Qing Peng

Under the Supervision of Dr. Raymond Spoto

In the last decades, various amounts of efforts have been devoted to researches on EFL teaching method. Among them, "process and product" approaches are very popular with middle school teachers to teach writing. Writing is important for English learning and it is especially necessary and difficult for middle school students in Middle China who have relatively lower English proficiency. This literature review aims to discover the problems of the traditional teaching mode and to try to find a more suitable method to improve writing for those middle school students with relatively lower English proficiency.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I Introduction

To integrate the four skills (listen, reading, speaking, writing) in classroom teaching is currently always advocated. However, the elementary educators in Middle China put more emphasize on listening, speaking and reading while teaching writing is mostly relied on by imitating and reciting the model composition. Thus, I want to find out what are the factors that hinder the teaching of writing, and learn about some solutions.

This paper aims to find some ways for teaching writing in EFL (English as a foreign language) writing class in middle school, which may be valuable and helpful to EFL teachers and learners. My research target is my middle school students in Middle China who are mainly 13-14 years old.

Writing at this stage requires them not only to make sentences, but also to make a dialogue, or write some functional paragraph, such as a letter, a poster, or a lost and found. That is to say, the requirements are diversified, concrete and function oriented.

Statement of the Problem

Writing is an important skill for English learners, especially for middle school students. However, when we talk about EFL writing, we are used to thinking of college writing. Thus, I want to refine the topic into this middle school category, and find out the factors that hinder EFL writing in middle school class. I want to know if teachers' preparations and instruction affect students' performance, whether the teachers' methods are suitable or not and how to encourage and stimulate students to write.

Definition of Terms

Compulsory Education: the nine-year compulsory education, which the government funds, includes six years of primary education, starting at age six or seven, and three years of junior secondary education (middle school) for ages 12 to 15. Some provinces may have five years of primary school but four years for middle school. After middle school, there are three years of high school, which then completes the secondary education. The Ministry of Education reported a 99 percent attendance rate for primary school and an 80 percent rate for both primary and middle schools. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.)

Writing is a "process of discovery in which ideas are generated and not just transcribed" (Susser 1994:35)

Product and Process Approach: as for product approach, writing teachers are most concerned with the final product of writing: the rhetorical style, accurate grammar and its organization. And there is always a "model" composition for students to follow. The process approach focuses on the process of writing, and puts the emphasis on the students own intrinsic motives to learn and lets them know the techniques throughout their whole composing process. (Brown, H.D.,2007, p.391:392)

TPR (Totally Physical Responses): "The TPR classroom was one in which students did a great deal of listening and acting. The teachers was very directive in orchestrating a performance", and "students are the actors". (Brown, H.D., 2007, p.30)

Lexical Approach: Its emphasis is on "the essential building blocks of languages, words and word combinations, and that lexis therefore plays a central role in designing languages courses and classroom methodology". (Brown, H.D.,2007, p.57)

Purpose of the Study

The elementary educators in Middle China put more emphasize on listening, speaking and reading, while teaching writing mostly relies on imitating and the reciting of the model composition. Therefore, I want to find out what are the factors that hinder the teaching of writing, and learn about solutions.

My paper aims to show the International readers how middle Chinese learn English in the middle school, and explore effective ways for EFL learners with low English proficiency to learn English as well.

Significance of the Study

This paper aims to find some ways to EFL writing for middle school students and can be the reference to EFL teachers and learners.

Delimitation of the Study

This paper can be a reference for middle school teachers in EFL writing class. And the target students are mostly below the intermediate English level. Thus, the approaches and methods mentioned in this paper may be not appropriate for all EFL writing class.

Methodology

This secondary research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville using the UW-Search tool beginning Feb,2015 through Jan.2016. Searches of the literature will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, Worldcat and JSTOR as the primary sources. Key search topics included " EFL","Middle School", "writing competence.

A brief review of literature on the studies of improving writing competence through classroom teaching in middle school will be conducted. The paper will conclude with the findings, suggestions and requirements for both teachers and students.

Chapter II Review of Literature

A. The Definition of Writing

According to Brown, H.D. (2007, p.391), the nature of writing can be described as:

"How to generate ideas, how to organize them coherently, how to use discourse markers and rhetorical conventions to put them cohesively into a written text, how to revise text for clearer meaning, how to edit text for appropriate grammar, and how to produce a final product. It seems that writing comprises vocabulary, grammar, ideas, organizations, text type, form and content, a series of complex elements."

B. The Significance of Writing

One statement of Krashen (Krashen 2004), as was cited in Cory A. Buxton, Martha Allexsaht-Snider, Regina Suriel, Shakhnoza Kayumova, Youn-jeng Choi, Bobette Bouton, Melissa Baker (2012) states that: writing can "serve to clarify students' thinking", and give "teachers a rich source of information" about how well the "students are using the language." "Graham, Harris, Hebert(2011a); Langer&Applebee (2011); Klein (2000) as cited in Steve Graham, Andrea Capizzi, Karen R. Harris, Michael Hebert, Paul Morphy (2013) found that

"teaching writing improves students' reading skills" and "writing about material presented in class or text enhances students' learning, according to Steve Graham et al. (2013)

For middle school students, especially for those who are at the age of 14-15, their writing shouldn't be limited on the imitation or reciting of the sample composition. They should learn how to write basically "with ideas and organizations". (Eun-Young Kim, April,2011)

C. Process and Product Approach

The Process and Product approach is commonly used to teach writing. Traditionally, the product approach, which emphasize "the final product of writing", "the content, organization, vocabulary use, grammar use" and "spelling and punctuation" is based on imitating the sample composition. (Brown, H.D., 2007, p 391).   And the process approach, which emphasize the process of writing, focuses on cultivating students' own abilities to prewrite, draft and rewrite, and lets them be sure of the whole writing process (Brown, H.D., 2007). According to Steve Graham, Andrea Capizzi, Karen R. Harris, Michael Hebert, Paul Morphy (2013), students from five states of the US are expected to learn to write narrative, persuasive and informative writing for a certain purpose. That is the product approach. Steve Graham et al. (2013) also reminded in the paper that students have to plan, revise, edit and collaborate with others to improve their writing. This is the process approach.

D. Teachers' Preparation and Their Instruction

Apart from the teaching methods, teachers' preparation and their instructions in their writing class are very important. One statement of Tomlinson (1999), as was cited in Huong L. Pham (2012) states that the instructional content "should be challenging but manageable, otherwise students fall behind and stay discouraged. Huong L. Pham (2012) cited in the paper

that teachers should "organize" their "instruction in a logical sequence from easy to difficult, concrete to abstract, simple to complicated levels of understanding". Therefore, "effective instruction should develop students' cognitive thinking and offer them opportunities to critically explore" (Brown & Green, 2006; Gagne et al.,2005). Huong L. Pham (2012) states that "the main objective of modifying the instructional process is to make every single lesson meaningful and applicable to learners in an academically enriched context".

Graham, Harris, Hebert(2011a); Langer & Applebee (2011); Klein (2000) have cited that "the success of teaching writing depends, at least in part, on providing instruction that is responsible to students' needs." and teachers "would be more familiar with how to implement 'teaching writing', if "they were better prepared". Huong L. Pham (2012) also states in his paper that efficient instruction "requires teachers to determine what types of intervention are needed and how much support should be offered to students". Thus, "the employment of learning collaboration and autonomy" can "develop student interactions and communication skills but at the same time offer them practice of independent learning", which can help "maximize student learning for the achievement of knowledge, skills and attitudes". Likewise, Larry R. Johannessen (2016) states that "instruction involving concrete data set up with problems that engage and involve students enables them to learn thinking strategies involved in writing" and "small group work appears to be important" for students.

However, according to Graham and Perin (2007) as cited in Steve Graham et al. (2013) "very little instructions actually took place" in teaching writing; Teachers mostly teach writing "without composing", for they would use "filling in blanks, short answer responses, and copying, and they frequently applied "evidence-based writing practices".

The material below (see it in the appendix part) is part of my teaching text. To finish our teaching task, we ask students to fill in blanks, answer short questions and do some evidence-based writing practices.

Also, with the development of the teaching multimedia, the current teaching relies heavily on the Internet. Steve Graham finds in his paper that "middle school teachers frequently used the internet to locate information for writing and word processing to write a final draft."

Graham et al. (2013). We usually find a sample composition with the similar topic online, and present the sample on the whiteboard, and analyze the grammar, sentence structures, phrases and even word choice. Then ask students to do imitative writing by following the format. The outcomes are usually good in that class. However, students complain that they don't know what to write and how to write even if they face the same topic.
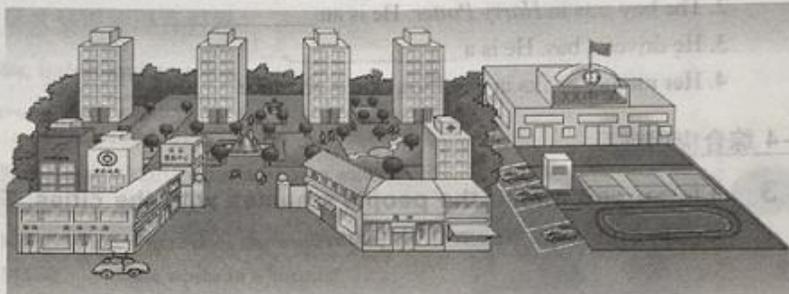
Section C 听、说、读、写综合能力的训练,特别是读、写的训练;语音拼读练习。
1a 阅读材料及读前活动

1a　**Read and understand.**
Work in pairs and complete the following tasks before reading.

1. Look at the picture and say the following places in English, such as shops, school ...
   Then read the passage and underline them.
2. Do you like living there? Why?

1b – 1c 各种不同形式的阅读理解练习

1b　**Read 1a and fill in the blanks.**

What's in the community?

1. Many people live there. They are 1) Linda;

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　2) _____;

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　3) _____.

2. There are a lot of tall buildings.

3. There are a lot of small gardens.

4. There are two centers: _____ and a community service center.

5. There are 1) many_____and_____;

　　　　　　　　2) a supermarket;

　　　　　　　　3) a _____;

　　　　　　　　4) a hospital;

　　　　　　　　5) a _____.

1c　**Read 1a again and circle True or False.**

1. Linda lives in a quiet community.	True	False
2. People in Yushancun are very kind to each other.	True	False
3. In front of the building there is a sports center.	True	False
4. Behind the supermarket there is a hospital.	True	False
5. People can call the community service center for help.	True	False

E. Students' Writing Habit and Motivation

Carolyn L. Plazza and Carl F. Siebert (2008) state in their paper that interest and motivations are two key factors of writing. That is to say, teachers should arouse students' interest in writing, and motivate students to write.

For low-proficient-English-level learners, they always lack motivation and hate writing because they are not confident about their English, and think English is boring. Thus they dare not write in English. Usually, primary school teachers form their habit of learning English, including arousing their interest and building their confidence in English. Teachers are used to applying TPR (Totally Physic Responses) method in their teaching. That is, when teaching a word or a phrase, teachers should ask the students to take actions under the direction. They use variable techniques to teach. For example, they use games, chants or riddles. However, these techniques can seldom be used as a motivation to arouse the interest of the students in middle school. They are too easy.

Moreover, due to their low proficiency in English, they have limited vocabulary, vague grammar that are not enough for generating ideas. Just as what Eun-Young Kim says in the paper that "low-level students were unable to detect flaws in their writing either in form or in content". (2010). My students often make mistakes by using wrong tenses, numbers, genders, and even worse, some of them can hardly tell the differences between an adjective and an adverb. For example, if I present them two sentences as follows:

a. I don't like this season because it often _____(rains/rainy) so hard.

b. I don't like the weather today because it is _____(rain/rainy).

When they want to describe a man's appearance, they would probably write a sentence like "He has big nose." "He has in black." They can hardly find the errors in the sentence like "There has a beautiful garden in my yard." To some extent, the errors they make can be attributed to the interference of their mother tough, Chinese. But at this stage, the errors just stubbornly exist. The condition is just like what Eun-Young Kim(April,2011) states that "at the formal level, grammatical errors such as wrong tenses, numbers, and awkward sentences largely reoccurred" in the revision process of the low English proficiency lever students, and "at the content level, their revision was mostly confined only to lexical choices at best." And only a few students could think of "deleting or adding one sentence or two".

It's noteworthy that "Low achievers, children of the poor, and second language learners often receive instruction that places a premium on the 'transmission of information, providing very little room for the exploration of ideas, which is necessary for the development of deeper understanding." (Applebee, Langer,Nystrand, & Gamoran,2003, p.689) as cited in Carol Booth Olson, James S. Kim, Jason Kramer, Matthew Pearson, David A. Van Dyk, Penny Collins, Robert E. Land (2012).

Chapter III: Strategies for Teaching Writing

In a student-centered classroom, the role of a good teacher should be played largely as a guider who tries hard to guide the students to learn by themselves. And in the writing class, a teacher should know how to instruct students to write. A writing class includes five disposable steps, namely, a warming-up step, a prewriting step, a drafting step, a revising step and an evaluating step.

A. At the warming-up stage, it's important to arouse students' interest and motivate them to write.

The Lexical Approach, which puts emphasis on the language buildings and blocks, and focuses on the words and word combinations (Brown, H.D.,2007, p57) can be appropriately used to begin in a writing class. Larry R. Johannessen (2016) indicates that "teaching students to write is most effective when instruction focuses on inquiry. If students have such a writing topic—*My Community* whose text is shown in the appendix, I would use the lexical approach. For example, I would choose a lexical game to warm up the students. First, I would ask students to write down as many words as possible according to the picture of the material, such as a community, a school, a hospital, a bank, a store or a supermarket. Then, I would raise a question like: "What can we do there?" and then ask students to write down the verb phrases, like "go to study, see the doctor,

keep money, buy some food".

To stimulate all the students, small group work is available if needed. (Larry R. Johannessen, 2016). And "students should be encouraged to generate and organize ideas both in their first and second languages." (Akyel, 1994) cited as in Eun-Young Kim (2010). For example, if students dare not to write, teachers should encourage them to work in groups and let them compete in groups.

B. **At prewriting stage, it's important for students to make clear of their writing purpose.**

1.Make clear the purpose of writing and text type

The writing topic is obviously about the community, which is fictitiously shown in the picture. Teachers had better not start with such a statement: "We are going to write about the community." Instead, "if we begin with a purpose for writing, we are much more likely to encourage our students." (Louise Dempsey, 2013). That is to say, students are more willing to write if they know exactly what they are going to write. For example, if we apply the writing into the real practice, such as answering an e-mail, keeping a diary, taking a telephone message and so on. Students' performance will get inspired. Thus, if teachers ask students to write by providing the conditions like this: It's the first time that your primary school classmate came to visit you, and you want to show your classmate around your community, so write a paragraph with 60-80 words to introduce your community. The students will be more sure about what are they going to write.

2. Write down your ideas of the picture.

As students have already gotten some words like: community, school, hospital, bank, store,

supermarket, and some phrases like: go to study, see the doctor, keep money, buy some food, they can easily write some sentences. Then I'd add some more phrases like "near, be far from, beautiful, on the left, on the right, in the center of or across from." for student to choose to use if needed. As students have already learned the prepositional phrase in Grade Seven, this is not difficult for them. For example, "The school is far from the bank." "The school is not far from the bank." "The store is across from the supermarket." "The playground is in the center of the school."

Students should be encouraged to write more sentences at this step.

C. At the drafting and revising stage, teachers' instruction should adapt to their students' needs.

"The drafting and revising stages are the core of process writing", which need a set of strategies. (Brown, H.D., 2007, p.404). So the teachers' instructions in this stage is especially important. Before the drafting stage, the teacher should make clear the writing standards, such as tense, words, expressions, logic meaning, format or punctuation usage, which are also the criterion at the revising stage. For the students who are not sure about the standards, teachers should help them know the requirements, and for those who cannot write even one passage, the teacher should guide and inspire them to write. In a word, teachers should adapt their instructions "that is responsive to students' needs". (Steve Graham et al., 2013)

Collaborative learning, autonomous learning and independent learning can promote students' "achievement of knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Huong L. Pham.,2012). Moreover, Eun-Young Kim (2010) indicates that: "collaborative activity would help" students "discover the grammatical errors". That is to say, collaborative activity can be used in revising the writing. Teachers can ask students to work in pairs or groups to do the revising to help them discover the

grammatical errors. Moreover, Eun-Young Kim (2010) indicates that "low-proficiency students produced higher quality compositions through translation." Students will recognize how well they convey their ideas and whether they express them fully or not when they translate their English writing into their mother tongue. Thus, for those students with low English proficiency, independent and collaborated translation exercises will help students know the deficit of their writing content, expressions and even the usage of grammar.

Brandon W. Monroe, Gary A.Troia. (2006) indicates that teachers should instruct students "how to make revisions that have a meaningful effect on their writing and to do so more often".

Therefore, how do teachers institute different adaptations to guide students with different levels to write the draft, and conduct them to do self-reviewing and peer-reviewing. These are the questions that all the teachers need to work on.

D. At the evaluating stage, students' reflections about themselves and their peers are very important.

Huong L. Pham states in his paper regarding the evaluation of what learners have learned, the teachers should evaluate "what learners understand and how well they can understand a concept", students' learning can be assessed by some tasks. For example, "students can reflect what they have learned and how they can apply a theoretical concept to practical situations" (2012). Thus, when students reflect on their writing, teachers can instruct them to do the following:

1. What do you think are the good and bad writing parts in your own writing?

2. What kind of errors can be easily made?

3. What factors can contribute to a good writing?

14

4. What techniques have you learned in this writing?

5. What have you learned from your peers' writing?

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Similar to the revising stage, students should not only evaluate independently, but also do it collaboratively. They can evaluate in different forms. For example, self-evaluating, partner-evaluating, group-evaluating and class-evaluating. Teachers can ask students to write down their reflections and to keep them as a learning diary. The evaluating stage can help students know about their weakness, and make avoidance and thus develop their cognitive thinking. Just as Xianze Wu and Hui Chen (2011) conclude in their paper, evaluation can promote students' learning.

Xianze Wu and Hui Chen (2011) also state in their paper that teachers in a remote region can "improve themselves together with their students" by using some methods, such as "reading students' learning diaries". And they conclude that evaluation can promote students' learning.

Chapter IV: Conclusions and Implications

Teaching writing in middle school is still a tough question in some small cities and towns in Middle China. The reasons are diversified and teachers, students, evaluation systems are all responsible for it. EFL writing to us is more likely to be like display writing. We care more about the writing product, and we usually ignore the importance of the process, because we see writing as a tool for passing the exam. However, the importance of teaching writing relies not on the scores, but on communicative thinking, the process of generating ideas and learning from experience.

In a writing class, teachers should pay attention to students' writing process by making sure that students know the purpose of writing and the strategies of writing. And most importantly, teachers' instruction and effort should contribute to successfully expressing ideas and

communicative needs. Moreover, the need to narrow the gap between teaching and practice is currently imperative when more and more students have expressed concern about to what extent the knowledge they learn can be practically used in their future jobs. The authentic usage of writing can be never ignored. What's more, we should teach students to write with a purpose, to write with their critical thinking and cognitive thoughts.

However, classroom writing is not always the real writing, as some writing is not for authentic usage. Thus, teachers should incorporate more real writing in the classroom teaching. Moreover, as the source is limited, some writing problems mentioned above is only the tip of the iceberg. But the problems I state in the paper are very common in the EFL writing class in Middle School. I hope my analysis and strategies can be helpful to EFL teachers in middle school or in the remote areas of China, and can thus be a reference for them in their teaching practice.

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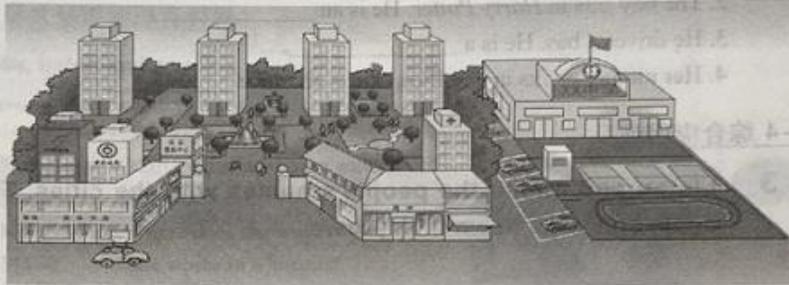
Appendix

Section C 听、说、读、写综合能力的训练，特别是读、写的训练；语音拼读练习。
1a 阅读材料及读前活动

1a **Read and understand.**

Work in pairs and complete the following tasks before reading.

1. Look at the picture and say the following places in English, such as shops, school ...
   Then read the passage and underline them.
2. Do you like living there? Why?

1b – 1c 各种不同形式的阅读理解练习

1b **Read 1a and fill in the blanks.**

What's in the community?

1. Many people live there. They are 1) Linda;

           2) _____;

           3) _____.

2. There are a lot of tall buildings.

3. There are a lot of small gardens.

4. There are two centers: _____ and a community service center.

5. There are 1) many _____ and _____;

           2) a supermarket;

           3) a _____;

           4) a hospital;

           5) a _____.

1c **Read 1a again and circle True or False.**

1. Linda lives in a quiet community.	True	False
2. People in Yushancun are very kind to each other.	True	False
3. In front of the building there is a sports center.	True	False
4. Behind the supermarket there is a hospital.	True	False
5. People can call the community service center for help.	True	False

· 14 ·