

A Study on the Cultivation of Non-English majors' Autonomous Writing

Cui Yan

Dalian Neusoft University of Information

ABSTRACT. *The autonomous learning of writing for non-English majors is far from being satisfied nationwide[4], which is hard to accept. How to enhance the writing capability or writing learning for non-English majors has been a critical and tricky issue for the frontier teachers and scholars, and a research topic as well. The present study seeks to intentionally deploy the relevant theories of autonomous learning in the four-month long English course for non-English majors. For the limitation of paper length and time, the length approach and peer evaluation, which are applied in teaching, are exemplified in the present paper. The results have shown that a clear teaching goal, practical writing topics and contents, and writing strategy have triggered students' enthusiasm in writing learning and ensure the realization of teaching goals.*

KEYWORDS: *Autonomous writing, Second language acquisition, Non-english majors*

1. Introduction

Xu Jinfen has implemented a survey made among the 1,340 sophomore non-English majors from 14 universities or colleges in Wuhan, Beijing, Nanjing, Ji'nan, Changsha, etc, which focuses on English learning autonomy, and has revealed that most of the students has a relatively low performance in English writing autonomy[4]. Xu has proposed as well that English teachers should prioritize writing autonomy as one of the teaching goals. The author of the present study also has found that non-English majors don't give enough attention to English learning, and they just don't possess a clear understanding of English writing. The realization of enhancing or ensuring the enhancement of students' writing autonomy is also challenged by the reducing of English course credits nationwide, which means the teaching periods are diminished; the large-scale teaching reforms; the test-oriented teaching mode in high school; the proposal of more activities, less teacher involvement, etc. Whether the reforms and new guidelines in English teaching will be effective in enhancing students' English proficiency, especially Writing autonomy is to be witnessed.

The English writing capability is comprehensive, and an indispensable part of the practical ability of communication of English. The outcome of enhancing writing capability could not be obvious, and is not easily seen in a short time. Nonetheless, to establish a proper and reasonable English writing concept, and the right writing strategy could be done without hesitation. By referring to the questionnaire sent to nine different types of colleges and universities in northern part of China, Zhang Xuemei's study has shown the proper attention to the cultivation of writing capability is far from satisfaction, which is found in the insufficient teaching periods, less teaching exercises, and feedback, etc[5]. In consideration to the above, the author of the present study seeks to guide students in using the proper writing strategy and enhancing their writing capability by deploying the Length Approach, and Peer Evaluation in the day-to-day classroom teaching activities to cultivate students' writing capability in the four-month-long time.

3. Research Subject

163 sophomore students, majored in computer science, micro-electronics, telecommunication, etc, whose English scores in college entrance examination are 93 on average, and classified as Level B according to the English pretest score (students are divided into A, B, and C class, three levels, in teaching with different teaching arrangement and requirements which are based upon the practical need and language proficiency in learning), take part in the present research. 4 periods per week, and 16 teaching weeks per semester, are arranged. The textbooks include two separate books, the same series, namely, reading and listening comprehension. It is worthwhile mentioning that most of the textbooks for non-English majors don't give special attention to writing, except for only a section per unit. To some extent, it is understandable since the limitation for time and space and the actual teaching syllabus is widely prevalent. However, the author in the present study proposes that special

attention should be given to writing since it is comprehensive, and an actual practice and critical thinking are quite crucial for college students as long as the teaching goal is to train students to be able to communicate effectively and efficiently. Writing, needless to say, is definitely the key to communicating effectively.

Students are rather active in class, but low in English proficiency, and their learning motivation and autonomy should be further enhanced. Some of them lack confidence, motivation, and goal in English learning. The author has done the interview before and after the class with students to know more about their actual thought in English learning and their actual needs, to further refine the research design of the present study.

4. Research Design

Tangfang has interpreted “autonomy”, pointing out that language learner should have learning autonomy, including having the autonomous learning concept; a proper meta-cognitive level; a clear understanding of writing goal, contents, materials and strategies; the pre-arranged time, place, and schedule for enhancing one’s writing learning; capable of self-monitoring and evaluating[2]. The autonomous writing capability can not only enhance the writing learning, but also facilitate the improvement of other related skills and proficiency in English learning. Wang Chuming proposes the five presuppositions in foreign learning: actual language context, communicative needs, interaction, positive views, and chances of using the language. With regard to all the above, the author has made the teaching syllabus by taking consideration of the relevant tasks guided by length approach and peer evaluation[3].

The author found in his daily teaching that most students do not know much about English writing strategies and methods in English composition writing. It can also be seen that a large number of basic vocabulary, simple sentence patterns, sets, etc., are in university students’ writing. 95% of the students in the interview said that they did not understand the requirements of college English writing, and they lack awareness of the application of writing strategy, which also directly led to the fact that students are writing without guidance and goals. Therefore, the outcome of learning is substantially reduced. Hence, in the first week of writing period in the new semester, the author clarifies the basic requirements of college English writing to students in order to enable students to understand intuitively. In addition, the author summarizes the basic requirements: the structure of English essay; using more advanced vocabulary to replace basic vocabulary; enriching sentence patterns, including noun clauses, emphasis sentences, passive sentences, etc.; comparisons of differences in English and Chinese. What’s more, one questionnaire was designed to investigate the actual situation and learning effect of students before and after the course respectively.

4.1 Teaching Arrangement

In the writing section every Monday, the teacher guides the students through the first period by evaluating and appreciating the essays written by some of them. The teacher should classify the essays into A, B, and C, by referring to the structure, content, grammar, vocabulary, etc. By making comparison repeatedly, the students are guided consciously or subconsciously to realize the difference between the top ones and the ones which are not that good. This period may take two or three lectures.

After building up the basic concept of writing, the teacher assigns the students into several groups which is done according to students’ English language proficiency and daily performance. In this way, each learning group is averagely divided to make sure the relevant after-class and in-class activities could be carried out smoothly, timely, and effectively. At this time, students are required to do cross-group essay grading by providing project outcomes including comments on essay structure, grammar, word, and content relevance. Students are also advised and encouraged to exchange their comments before class and after class repeatedly. They have to work together to fill in the designated evaluation form as in table 1 below.

| | | | |
|----------------------|---------|--------|-------------------|
| Group: | | Topic: | |
| Evaluation Dimension | | | |
| structure | Grammar | Word | Content relevance |
| | | | |
| Comments | | | |
| | | | |

Table 1 Evaluation Form

Finally, the students in groups showed up by coming to the front of classroom to comment on each others' essay. To encourage their motivation and involvement, the group would be given scores by picking out errors, error correction, sentence rewriting, etc., all the activities are organized to motivate students' involvement further and trigger the students' enthusiasm for learning. The students are encouraged to engage fully in the class, and the teachers try to be "invisible" and only get involved when necessary like correcting the common misunderstanding, etc.

4.2 Length Approach

The Length Approach aims to enhance students' language proficiency by encouraging them to write longer compositions, increasing the language learning output and overcoming the frustration from language barriers and unbalanced language proficiency. Many English learners in China may have frustration in oral English, translation, and writing, and the reasons behind are comprehensive and hard to explain in one single article. But the key to solving the frustrations is through building up the confidence and ensuring the motivation, writing autonomy and learning autonomy finally.

In the interviews, 86% students have mentioned the writing topics are far from the actual life, or too abstract to understand and hard to explain in consideration of the language proficiency. The length approach, proposed by Wang Chuming, suggests that the writing tasks should be practical, reasonable and most importantly reachable for students in different stages in learning and from different language proficiency[3]. The length approach encourages students to write longer increasing language output and therefore elicits input in the long run. Only the minimum of word number is required, and no limit is set in the maximum. This proposal is based upon the idea that language proficiency is enhanced by the actual use of language and actual understanding and thinking of the language itself rather than catering. The performance score is given in consideration to the language appropriateness, content and most importantly the number of words which should be given priority.

The precondition for carrying out the length approach is the interesting and reachable topics. For this, the author had sent out questionnaire to students, and required them to brainstorm the topics, which means all the topics are chosen by students themselves. This promises that the topics are not far from students, and reachable for them to express their views based on the given topics. It has found that the topics are practical and most of them are the heatedly discussed ones which reflect the social phenomenon, like "whether it is acceptable to spend the spring festival overseas", "donations to the needed people", "whether parents should pay the debts for their children", etc. Students vote for topics to select the top ten, which are proofread for the appropriateness, and preciseness, and classified the topics by teachers, according to the difficulty and topic relevance.

4.3 Peer Evaluation

Storch surveyed 23 adult ESL learners about their collaborative writing in class and in class. They, of their own willingness, write in pairs or individually[1]. The whole process was recorded and all the articles were collected. After class, all the co-writers were interviewed, which were found that the co-authors wrote shorter articles than the individual authors, but the quality of the grammar, the overall, etc., was much higher. This is because collaboration gives learners the opportunity to share ideas and give feedback to each other. Therefore, the majority of learners have a positive attitude towards cooperative writing. In the field of cooperative writing, there are more researches abroad, and their functions and significance are discussed. It is found that in cooperative writing, writers consider not only grammatical correctness, accuracy, lexical choice, and appropriateness, but also the structure of the text.

Peer evaluation are carried out through in-group and cross-group evaluations, which are also intended to motivate students to actually get engaged and think critically about the views, the relevant vocabulary, sentence pattern, grammars, the slang, etc. They can work together to do the assignment and encourage each other to actually think about and make the comparisons between their composition and others. The learning time for English writing is guaranteed in this way. The author has found in college English course that most students don't consciously think about the appropriate or native-like words and expressions. They seem to never know what is difference between their composition and the native-speakers'. To some extent, it is because that the test-oriented teaching mode in high school has made English learning, especially composition writing a task, not a natural flow of one's mind or the actual express of views. Students don't know from the very beginning of English learning about how to write a composition.

Cognitive Psychology stresses that the acquisition of knowledge is primarily discovered by the Learner, while humanistic psychology values the learner's needs, emotions, and intentions in the learning process. It is known that constructivist psychology emphasizes that students are the subjects in the learning process. Students are encouraged to learn from each other, and make comparisons repeatedly. The error analysis could be done by students themselves consciously or unconsciously, which is quite common in the author's observation. Kinds of errors can be found in students' writing assignments before, and it is a hard and time-consuming task for teachers, which is also not efficient and effective since the error correction is always in the teacher side. Students may find it hard to truly understand the difference. Students in groups can acquire together just like they learn their mother tongue, and a large amounts of interaction and practice is quite crucial and critical for language acquisition, which is quite obvious and understandable.

Groups are encouraged to share and compare their assignments, and give comments and suggestions each other. Every student has to actually get engaged in learning, which can help cultivate their habit in learning since some of them lack the sense of critical thinking. Students are gradually familiar with the requirements of college English writing and can apply certain writing strategies to improve their writing level. We know from the interviews that most of the students have gained a new understanding of English writing after four weeks of training. The method of length approach leads the students to overcome the frustration in writing, and strengthens the students' learning enthusiasm. More writing, proper and moderate teacher comments, peer review, and evaluation can all devote to eliminating language errors and gradually building up students' confidence. Students get a sense of achievement and self-confidence from writing to autonomous writing, and finally enhance language proficiency.

5. Conclusion

This paper is an empirical study on the cultivation of non-English majors' English writing autonomy, and it is also an exploration of teaching practice. By applying length approach, and peer evaluation, students are motivated fully in daily acquisition of English, especially writing. This is a challenge for teacher since it involves in not only teacher's language proficiency, but also profound understanding in psychology, and pedagogy. Due to the limitation of space and time, this paper can not deal with more experimental data, and can not make a comparative study between experimental class and control class. Meanwhile, the related questions arise, including, how to quantify and qualify the peer evaluation to make the process more accessible and open to popularize; what's the feature of autonomy writing for non-English learners?; What's the relationship between English test score and learning autonomy? The author will be involved in more empirical research in the future.

References

- [1] Storch N (2002). Patterns of interaction in ESL pair work[J]. *Language Learning*, pp.119-158.
- [2] Tangfang, Xu Jinfen (2008). A review of researches on English autonomous writing at home and abroad[J]. *Foreign Language World*, no.4, pp.78-79.
- [3] Wang Chuming (2006). Caveats for implementing the Length Approach[J]. *Foreign Language World*, no.5, pp.89-90.
- [4] Xu Jinfen, Peng Renzhong, Wu Weiping (2004). An investigation and analysis of autonomous English learning of non-English majors[J]. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, no.1, pp.6-7.
- [5] Zhang Xuemei (2006). A survey of the current situation of college English writing teaching[J]. *Foreign Language World*, no.5, pp.12-13.