

A Practical Study on English Writing Problems and Teaching Strategies in Junior Middle School

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Abstract: In junior middle school English teaching, writing instruction is one of the main tasks running through the curriculum. The emergence of English writing errors in junior middle school will profoundly impact students' future English learning and can even become habitual mistakes. Therefore, it is essential to address these issues, identify common error patterns, and adopt targeted and feasible measures to improve students' English writing proficiency. In this study, two ninth-grade classes from Beidou Middle School in Zhangzhou City were selected for investigation and experimentation over one semester using investigative and experimental research methods. This empirical study found that students' main problems in writing are a fear of writing and a lack of vocabulary. The experimental results show that contemporary teaching strategies and personalized instruction significantly improve students' interest in English learning, learning attitudes, and writing levels.

Keywords: idiom; comparison; English; Chinese

1. Introduction

With the deepening of the new curriculum reform, writing instruction plays an increasingly important role in junior middle school English classes. The English Curriculum Standards have reiterated the importance of writing ability, which reflects students' comprehensive English skills, including solid basic language skills and logical thinking. At the beginning of junior middle school, teachers should prioritize cultivating students' writing abilities, developing their basic writing skills, and achieving effective improvement through specially designed writing instruction courses. This paper analyzes the current situation and problems in junior middle school students' English writing and discusses effective teaching strategies based on practical experience.

The tasks of the English Curriculum in the basic education stage are to develop autonomous learning abilities and a spirit of cooperation. Students are expected to master basic English knowledge and skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, thereby forming comprehensive language abilities. The new curriculum advocates replacing complicated, complex, outdated teaching methods with independent, cooperative, and inquiry-based learning approaches. It emphasizes the diversity of teaching methods and strategies and fosters a supportive and developmental student evaluation orientation. Under the new curriculum reform, the focus of foreign language teaching in our country has shifted to a student-centered approach. This approach organizes and implements teaching with the students at the center, allowing them to develop by exploring, solving, and identifying problems. Consequently, addressing mistakes has become a key concern.

2. The present situation of Junior Middle School In English

The present situation of junior middle school English writing is mainly discussed from three aspects: nonstandard writing, unclear subject matter, and language expression errors.

2.1. Nonstandard writing

The phenomenon of nonstandard writing often occurs when revising compositions.

2.1.1. The writing of English letters and words is not standardized.

For example, the spacing between words should be the width of one letter. However, some students neglect the training of basic writing skills in the initial stage of learning, leading to errors in their

compositions. These problems include incorrect word spacing, improper word inclination, and other writing errors.

2.1.2. Sentence and paragraph writing are not standard.

These issues are mainly reflected in the following aspects: the first letter of the sentence is not capitalized, the space at the beginning of the paragraph is not appropriate, word movement, and punctuation errors. Regarding the capitalization of the first letter of a sentence and the three-letter indentation at the beginning of a paragraph, it is believed that with repeated emphasis by the teacher, students can easily grasp these two aspects. Most of their writing problems are related to word movement and punctuation.

If students lack a solid understanding of phonetic syllables, they tend to move words around haphazardly. Punctuation errors are also common, often manifesting as a mix of English and Chinese punctuation. For example, in letter writing, a colon (":") is used after a Chinese name, whereas a comma (",") should be used in English. Similarly, a Chinese sentence ends with ("."), while an English sentence ends with a period ("."). These mixed uses can be attributed to differences in English and Chinese conventions.

To address these issues, teachers should regularly compare and summarize these differences to guide students in overcoming nonstandard writing caused by language differences.

2.2. Not clear on the subject

If you have regular class writing training, it's not difficult to find that many students in the class always rush through the topic and start writing immediately, often after writing two or three sentences or stopping to think or reread the subject. Such writing habits make their writing process extremely fluid. When I taught the junior middle school graduating class last year, during the special review of students' compositions, I found that many students exhibited writing style confusion, unclear tense usage, and incorrect text due to a lack of careful examination of the questions. There are problems, such as missing key points, etc. The main requirements of the New English Curriculum Standard for junior middle school (CET-5) writing are as follows: According to the writing requirement, we can collect the material for preparation and then write after thinking. That is to say, students are required to read and understand the meaning of the questions before they can enter the writing stage. Thus, the importance of writing examinations can be seen.

2.3. Language expression error

In practical writing teaching, students make a wide range of language errors, which can be broadly categorized as grammatical errors and syntactic errors.

2.3.1. Grammatical error.

Students often make errors in their writing, such as missing articles, incorrect prepositions, mixed personal pronouns, subject-verb inconsistencies, and improper collocations.

I recall an instance during class when I analyzed two sentences written by a student: "You are good student" and "Lucy, I want you me good friend." In the first sentence, the article "a" is missing. The second sentence contains two errors: incorrect pronoun usage and improper verb form. It should be corrected to: "You are a good student." and "Lucy, I want you to be my good friend."

2.3.2. Syntax error.

Students in junior middle school will encounter these basic sentence patterns: subject-predicate and subject-predicate complement. The subject-predicate object is the most commonly used type in students' writing.

"In our class, there are most students are good at English." This is a typical syntactic error sentence: "there are", sentence patterns are confused and should be modified into, "In our class, most students are good at English." That is, a "subject-predicate" sentence will be more in line with the language habits, but also more in line with the language habits.

2.3.3. Lack of overall awareness and incoherence of the passage.

Two requirements of CET-5 in the new junior middle school English curriculum are the ability to use common connectives to express order and logical relations and the capability to write simple

paragraphs or instructions based on diagrams or tables. Middle school composition scoring standards emphasize coherent and explicit language. However, students often overlook these aspects, resulting in paragraphs lacking structure and an inadequate use of conjunctions. These issues significantly limit students' writing proficiency.

Writing instruction aims to develop students' written expression skills. The new curriculum emphasizes basic writing skills across three to five levels: activating relevant information, organizing ideas, outlining, drafting essays, structuring language, revising essays, and correctly using punctuation and capitalization.

3. The necessity of improving junior middle school students' English expression ability

The new curriculum emphasizes that junior middle school students should master four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, writing represents a higher level of competence and is a crucial form of language output. Writing objectively reflects students' language proficiency, expression, and organizational skills. Teaching students to write English and enhancing their English writing ability is a key objective in junior middle school English education.

With the ongoing promotion of quality education, there has been an increasing focus on English writing instruction. Improving English writing skills forms the foundation for enhancing students' practical English proficiency and is a significant aspect of developing their basic English skills.

4. The related research

Related research mainly focuses on three aspects: research on errors in writing both domestically and internationally, research on writing teaching both domestically and internationally, and the requirements of the New Curriculum Standard for junior middle school English writing teaching.

4.1. Research on errors at home and abroad

How should we approach students' errors in English writing, and how should we correct them? Currently, there are significant differences in attitudes towards mistakes. Firstly, it is important to recognize that students' errors present an opportunity for reform and improvement in English teaching. Psychologist Gaier suggests, "Anyone who does not consider allowing mistakes and learning from them will miss out on the most productive learning moments." Mistakes are stepping stones to success and sparks of innovation. Therefore, students' errors are valuable. Students and their mistakes should be thoroughly analyzed and studied to address these issues effectively.

4.1.1. Foreign studies on errors

Hegel famously said, "Error itself is a 'necessary link to truth,' and truth can only be discovered because of it."^[1] Error analysis emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on language learners and quickly gaining attention in theoretical and teaching fields.

Contrastive analysis, originating in the 1950s and 1960s under the influence of structuralist linguistics and behaviorist psychology, solely examined linguistic differences, neglecting learners' internal environments. Error analysis, however, shifted focus to language learners, addressing the shortcomings of contrastive analysis and enriching applied linguistics studies.

Second-language acquisition errors are generally categorized as interference or developmental errors, with varying explanations from linguists regarding their causes. A common view suggests that learners may lack understanding of the grammatical structure of the target language, leading to random responses to correct sentence patterns. Learners not proficient in their native language may also apply general learning rules that may not apply in specific contexts.

Psychologically, errors can be classified into interlingual errors, influenced by native language habits, and intralingual errors, stemming from incomplete knowledge of the target language. Both types of errors reflect students' cognitive abilities and are linked to their learning strategies.

Foreign scholars have varying attitudes toward language learners' mistakes. Behaviorists, for instance, do not tolerate mistakes during learning. They believe that errors should be immediately corrected to prevent the formation of habits.^[2] According to behaviorist theory, repeated mistakes can solidify incorrect responses as habits, hindering new learning.^[3] In contrast, cognitive psychologists

hold a different perspective. They view mistakes as an inevitable learning process and emphasize their acceptability. Constructivism, within cognitive psychology, recognizes that each student has a unique background and perspective, valuing mistakes as valuable resources for learning. Teachers are encouraged to nurture a positive attitude towards mistakes, viewing them as opportunities for students to build confidence and explore their potential.

In handling students' mistakes, teachers should refrain from criticism and protect students' emotions with encouragement and support. By fostering a nurturing environment, teachers can cultivate enthusiasm for learning and inject vitality into English teaching.

The debate over the value of handling errors continues, leading to diverse teaching practices. Behaviorist-oriented teachers prioritize providing opportunities for students to apply correct language usage learned in lessons.

4.1.2. Domestic research on errors

Error analysis emerged at the end of the 20th century, focusing on studying errors in second language and foreign language learning. Through analyzing these errors, researchers identify students' strategies and root causes, allowing for a deeper understanding of the psychological processes involved in second language acquisition.

In the early 1900s, mistakes were often seen as failures in language learning. However, perspectives have shifted to recognize the importance of confronting and understanding mistakes to minimize them. Thus, error analysis gained prominence in addressing learners' language errors effectively.

Unlike contrastive analysis theory, which focused on differences between learners' native and target languages, error analysis shifted attention to errors within the target language. Its primary contribution lies in correcting misconceptions about errors.^[4] Errors are now viewed as valuable insights for research rather than mere failures.

Learners' errors reflect their ongoing acquisition of a second language, enabling teachers to develop targeted teaching strategies based on this feedback. As research in second language acquisition progresses, error analysis, alongside contrastive analysis and interlanguage theory, provides deeper insights into learners' mistakes.

4.2. Research on writing teaching at home and abroad

Over the past three decades, research on writing theory, both domestically and internationally, has become systematic and comprehensive, leading to the maturation of writing pedagogy. Scholars categorize writing teaching methods into three main types: content-oriented, result-oriented, and process-oriented models.

The first category includes content-oriented teaching, which focuses on substance; result-oriented teaching, which aims for specific outcomes; and process-oriented teaching, which emphasizes the writing process. The second category distinguishes between models emphasizing outcomes, processes, and genre-specific approaches^[5]. The third category encompasses methods such as result-oriented, process-oriented, learning-oriented, genre-oriented, content-oriented, and task-oriented approaches^[2]. Among these categories, the process-oriented teaching model has garnered significant attention, featuring various approaches. In recent years, there has been increased discussion in second language teaching about the process-oriented approach to writing. This model involves learners receiving feedback from peers or teachers and revising their work multiple times. By prioritizing the writing process over the final results, this method facilitates substantial improvements in students' writing abilities.

Genre-based teaching methods highlight the social nature of writing and its role in communicating between authors and readers. Effective written communication in this mode ensures readers understand the text's purpose^[5]. Conversely, content teaching methods integrate language proficiency with expressive content, emphasizing research, drafting, and revision phases such as gathering information. This approach is generally more suited to advanced learners and less so for beginners and intermediate students. Since the 1980s, the task-based approach to writing has practically applied task-based teaching principles to English writing instruction. Scholars often view this method as a blend of result-oriented and process-oriented approaches, combining the strengths of both methodologies.

4.3. The requirements of the New Curriculum Standard for junior middle school English Writing Teaching

The 2011 edition of the New English Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education clearly outlines the goals and characteristics for English language learning. According to this standard, junior middle school students are expected to achieve significant progress in their English language skills over three years of study. Specifically, the standard aims to improve students' English writing abilities from level three to level five. The requirements for levels three, four, and five are as follows: learning to use English letter cases and punctuation, utilizing simple English greetings and expressions, and writing short sentences based on picture prompts or example sentences.

The requirements for level four include learning to use English punctuation marks, utilizing simple charts and other forms to convey information, replying to or writing simple English invitations or greetings, using English phrases or sentences to describe pictures, and learning to write simple English stories. For level five, the requirements are learning to use English punctuation marks, using English phrases or simple sentences to write captions for pictures, writing short English phrases to convey simple instructions and plans, and drafting and revising English texts under the guidance of teachers or in collaboration with peers.^[6]

The new English Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education was formulated considering the physiological and psychological characteristics of junior middle school students, the principles of second language acquisition, and the actual conditions of English teaching in our country, aligning with objective educational laws. According to the teaching suggestions for English writing skills proposed by the new curriculum, students should be encouraged to express their thoughts in English, state facts, feelings, or opinions coherently, and initially develop their English writing abilities.^[7]

The author believes that based on the review of L2 autonomous learning and writing instruction, English teachers in junior middle schools should fully leverage their autonomy. Guided by the new 2011 syllabus from the Ministry of Education and adhering to the principles of junior middle school English writing instruction, the advantages of the autonomous learning teaching model can effectively cultivate students' English writing abilities.

5. A Survey of errors in junior middle school students' English Writing

5.1. Purpose and object of investigation

5.1.1. Purpose of investigation

This paper aims to analyze the classification of errors in the English writing of rural junior middle school students and to compare these errors to identify their underlying causes.

5.1.2. Object of investigation

The respondents are 100 students from Grade Nine at Beidou Junior Middle School, selected using a random sampling method. The writing materials analyzed include the students' regular compositions, such as text rewritings, homework assignments, diary entries, and written expressions in English exams. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews.

5.2. Implementation of the investigation

According to the criteria of error recognition and judgment mentioned above, I first distinguish between explicit and implicit errors. Explicit error refers to some obvious grammatical and lexical errors. Such as tense errors in verbs, errors in the form of non-predicate verbs, errors in sentence structure, errors in part of speech discrimination, errors in articles and complex numbers, errors in the case of words,

Misspelling of words, mixed use of adjectives and adverbs, etc. Implicit errors are syntactic phenomena that do not correspond to context, the cultural habits of English-speaking countries, the coherence and cohesion of contexts, and so on.

According to the above criteria, where there are related errors on record, the use of manual statistics, statistics of the total number of errors, and. These errors are then analyzed.

The specific categories are as follows.

Type of error	Vocabulary error	Solecism	The relationship between sentence structure and sentence errors
Total	123	156	93
Percentage	33.06	41.93	25

The table indicates that most of the mistakes made by junior middle school students are lexical and grammatical errors. For vocabulary errors, the most common issues include misspelling of words, incorrect choice of parts of speech, errors in the past tense of irregular verbs, weaknesses in using past participles, and misrepresentation of vocabulary. These account for the largest proportion of all mistakes. Students often struggle with memorizing words effectively, resulting in quick forgetting and improper use of words. They may remember spellings but fail to understand their correct usage, often resorting to analogies based on Chinese, which leads to errors.

In terms of grammatical errors, there are numerous mistakes in students' use of verbs. This suggests that students do not fully grasp sentence structure, including the roles of the subject, predicate, and object. Consequently, they misuse tense verbs, non-tense verbs, and verb collocations.

Regarding sentence structure, errors in verb usage within predicates are prevalent. Students often lack clarity on what constitutes a complete sentence, leading to direct translations from Chinese customs. This indicates that junior middle school students do not fully comprehend English sentence structures. When writing, they tend to piece together isolated English words based on Chinese sentence patterns.

The smallest unit of language expression is a sentence. The ultimate goal for middle school students learning English is to use complete sentences to express ideas, exchange feelings, and convey information. Generally speaking, in English sentences, aside from imperative sentences, a complete sentence must have at least a subject and a predicate. A complete sentence consists of a series of words and phrases beginning with a capital letter and ending with a full stop, conveying a complete idea. If any part of a sentence is incorrectly isolated as a separate sentence, or if a complete sentence is fragmented by punctuation marks, the composition of the sentence becomes incomplete, leading to errors.

5.3. The present English Writing of Rural junior middle school students

Junior middle school students typically possess a strong perceptual understanding due to their age, with their rational understanding gradually developing. This often results in a superficial grasp of concepts. From interviews, the author learned that many students do not understand the purpose or goals of learning English. They perceive learning English as merely memorizing a few words and phrases. Consequently, many students engage in rote memorization during class and quickly forget what they learned afterward, leading to a cycle of learning and forgetting. This lack of understanding about the importance of writing contributes to their reluctance to improve their skills. Students who cannot comprehend the purpose of writing compositions are unlikely to be motivated to excel.

For junior middle school students, each composition practice and examination is viewed merely as a task. They do not actively seek ways to improve their English through these exercises. This lack of initiative hinders their progress in developing English writing skills. To enhance the writing abilities of junior middle school students, it is essential to first improve their overall understanding of English.

Students' approach to writing relies heavily on Chinese cues, translating word for word and sentence by sentence into English. This method results in lengthy English compositions that lack coherence and fluency. The difficulty in remembering English words and phrases and frequent writing errors diminish students' enthusiasm for writing and erode their confidence in improving their English writing skills. With motivation and clear guidance, students can progress.

To break this stagnation, it is crucial to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of English among junior middle school students. By addressing the underlying issues in their learning approach and encouraging a more meaningful engagement with the language, students can develop the motivation and skills necessary to improve their English writing abilities.

6. Strategies of error correction in junior English writing

6.1. Setting up a portfolio of students' Writing

A portfolio is an important tool for formative evaluation. It is a purposeful collection of student works demonstrating the student's efforts, progress, and learning outcomes in one or more fields.

The contents of an English writing portfolio include:

- a. Status analysis table
- b. Target card
- c. Summary of periodic errors and record of progress
- d. Students' best composition of the month

Students practice writing once a week, with limited time for writing in class. Once a month, these writings are collected and placed into a portfolio, which serves as the final evaluation of the student's writing for the semester.

6.2. Collect the wrong materials and practice them repeatedly

In recent years, repeated training has shown that correcting errors in students' compositions does little to reduce the mistakes, mainly because teachers must consistently correct them. Teachers are advised to record the students' errors in the diagnostic table to find out which language links caused them.

Error tables are useful for diagnosing, accumulating personal learning materials, establishing hierarchical error correction, and understanding second language acquisition.

6.3. Demonstration correction

The author advocates an alternative method for correcting written language by having students correct each other's compositions. Studies indicate that peer correction helps students identify more grammatical errors. Some language experts argue that once students know their mistakes, they often correct each other more effectively than teachers do. It is emphasized that merely pointing out an error does not equate to correcting it. They believe that despite teachers' efforts, students must actively engage in their language learning to progress.

To implement this approach, the teacher selects students' work with typical mistakes, prints it out or projects it on a screen, and facilitates a class-wide correction session. Initially, the class discusses the errors freely, allowing students to engage in collaborative problem-solving. The teacher then provides the correct answers. This process is repeated weekly with exemplary pieces chosen from student groups, making the examples more relevant, engaging, and adaptable to diverse learning needs and levels.

Through this method, students not only learn from each other but also fill their knowledge gaps. It fosters a positive mindset, encourages critical thinking, and boosts enthusiasm, leading to better learning outcomes. As the saying goes, "Successful teaching requires not coercion but fostering a love for learning." Interest in the material serves as the greatest motivation for learning. Students' mistakes are part of the learning process, emphasizing active engagement and meaningful learning activities that resonate with and inspire students..

7. Conclusion

According to error analysis and interlanguage theory, it is crucial to approach students' mistakes with the right attitude. The primary goal for junior middle school students is focused on testing, a fundamental reality that cannot be changed. To foster more natural and effective English acquisition, English classes in junior middle school should be conducted primarily in English. This immersion allows students to be surrounded by a robust English environment for a designated period. Emphasis should be placed on cultivating students' language awareness and proficiency across listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Increasing exposure to English input is essential for expanding vocabulary and learning correct usage. Additionally, it is beneficial to conduct comparative analyses between Chinese and English languages, understanding their respective ways of thinking and cultural

differences. Understanding these cultural and cognitive disparities aids in enhancing learners' interest in English learning, developing their intercultural communicative competence, and promoting better English acquisition in the future.

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