

Theoretical Analysis of Pre-writing Activities in College English Writing

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ABSTRACT. *The low efficiency in the teaching of writing makes us examine again the traditional teaching approach we have been applying. This article tries to explore an effective way to improve the teaching of writing by implementing the first stage of process approach --- prewriting. The analysis of theoretical framework of this approach provides a powerful theoretical support and guidance for the teaching and research on pre-writing in college English writing.*

KEYWORDS: *teaching of writing; prewriting activities; theoretical framework*

1. Introduction

In recent years, considerable researches have been made to improve college English teaching and learning in China. Writing, as a skill involving comprehensively using knowledge of English, is currently the focus of much concern. But nowadays, college English teaching of writing is quite ineffective. In the National College English Test Band 4 and Band 6, the national average score of the composition is less than half of the total score (less than 7.5 points). At present, college English teaching in many colleges and universities attaches great importance to the cultivation of students' listening, speaking and reading skills, but neglects the improvement of writing ability. The fundamental reasons for the low efficiency of college English writing are the insufficient emphasis on writing and the lagging application of research results in writing teaching.

During the past several decades, different teaching approaches to ESL writing achieved great development. Different scholars classified the ESL writing approaches in various ways. Among them, the two writing methods proposed by Nulan (1991) are widely accepted: Product Approach and Process Approach. The process approach makes students aware of the process of writing which includes prewriting, drafting, revising and editing. The process approach emphasizes the students' writing process and gives them effective guidance to resolve the students' problems of not knowing how to write and what to write. However, carrying out all the stages of the process approach is time-consuming. Thus this approach is difficult to be implemented in the present college English writing classroom in China. Since every approach has its merits and demerits, we should integrate their reasonable

parts into our teaching. In teaching writing, we can incorporate the merits of the two approaches to improve our writing instruction. In this article, the first stage of process approach-prewriting is studied.

2. Definition of Prewriting Activities

According to John Langan (2004), a sure way to wreck our chances of learning how to write competently is to believe that writing is a “natural gift” rather than a learned skill. People with such an attitude think that they are the only ones for whom writing is unbearably difficult. In addition to believing that writing is a natural gift, many people falsely believe that writing should flow in a simple, straight line from the writer’s head onto the written page. But writing is seldom an easy, one-step journey in which a finished paper comes out in a first draft. The truth is that writing is a process of discovery involving a series of steps, and those steps are very often a zigzag journey.

The success of any writing assignment depends on the writer having something to say and the reader finding something worthwhile to read in the writer’s work. In fact, any activities that writers go through to generate ideas about the topics they want to write about belong to the first stage of the writing process called prewriting or invention. Such activities may involve thinking about the topic, simply loosening up and finding a good spot to think, analyzing the audience, or focusing on the purpose.

Raimes (1985) defines prewriting as “the activities that students engaged in before they wrote what was the first sentence of their draft.^[1]” These activities allow writers to generate ideas about a subject and arrange those ideas successfully. Students are encouraged to experiment with a variety of prewriting activities which help to unlock their memory and to associate their ideas with other experiences and recollections.

3. Classifications of Prewriting Activities

As more and more linguists and teachers have recognized the importance of writing process, prewriting activities are arousing their much concern. The following will present several well-recognized prewriting activities.

3.1 Brainstorming

Brainstorming is often used as preparation for other activities. In writing teaching, free discussion is a form of pre-writing conception. In a brainstorming, students are divided into small groups that meet face to face to discuss a topic. Each group assigns a person to record various ideas, and after the discussion, the group members can find the most useful information for themselves by browsing these ideas. Through brainstorming, students can get different or even opposite views on a

specific topic, and in the process of communication, students gradually establish their own views and positions. Brainstorming makes the writing class livelier and more enjoyable, thus helping to relieve the students' anxieties when they confront a new writing assignment. Cooperation among students also makes the writing class more supportive. Brainstorming produces unexpected results, which is what makes it so valuable.

3.2 Freewriting

Freewriting means jotting down in rough sentences or phrases everything that comes to mind about a possible topic. Brown (1994) claims that an important aspect of freewriting is that students write without being concerned about spelling, punctuation, or grammar. These elements of writing are important, but students' concern about them can sometimes inhibit the free flow of their ideas. They had better leave those things for later consideration. What they write rapidly on the paper may be a word, a phrase or a sentence. In this way, they'll soon be surprised to find they have too much more to say than usual. Raimes (1996) comments that rapid freewriting, just like warming up before a game, flexes students' writing muscles.

From these theories of researchers, we can infer that freewriting will limber up our writing muscles and make us familiar with the act of acting. It is a way to break through mental blocks about writing. Since we do not have to worry about mistakes, we can focus on discovering what we want to say about a subject. Our initial ideas and impressions will become clearer after we have got them down on paper, and they may lead to other impressions and ideas. Through continuous practice in freewriting, we will develop the habit of thinking as we write. And we will learn a technique that is a helpful way to get started on almost any paper.

3.3 Clustering

Clustering, also known as diagramming or mapping, is another strategy that can be used to generate material for a paper. This method is helpful for people who like to do their thinking in a visual way. In clustering, we use lines, boxes, arrows, and circles to show relationships among the ideas and details that occur to us. Longan (2004) describes how to make clustering: begin by stating the subject in a few words in the center of a blank sheet of paper. Then, as ideas and details come to us, put them in boxes or circles around the subject and draw lines to connect them to each other and to the subject. Put minor ideas or details in smaller boxes or circles, and use connecting lines to show how they relate as well. Keep in mind that there is no right or wrong way of clustering or diagramming. It is a way to think on paper about how various ideas and details relate to one another. Below is an example of what one of Longan's students might have done to develop ideas.^[2]

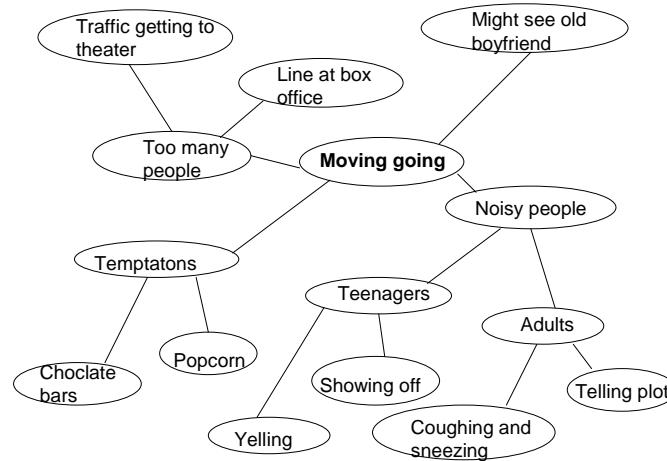


Figure.1 Clustering: A Student Model

From the model, we can find that in addition to helping us generate material, clustering can give us an early sense of how ideas and details relate to one another. The cluster for the student's essay suggests that different kinds of noisy people could be the focus of one paragraph and that different kinds of temptations could be the focus of another paragraph.

3.4 Questioning

As we all know, journalists, assembling facts to write the story of a news event, ask themselves six simple questions - the five W's and an H: who, what, where, when, why and how. In the opening paragraph of a good news story, where the writer tries to condense the whole story into a sentence or two, we will find simple answers to all six questions. Later in the news story, the reporter will relate the details of the event, using the six basic questions to generate more information about what happened and why.

For the college writing we can use these six questions in a similar manner to generate specific details of the essays. The six basic questions can help learners not only discover what to write about but also generate specific details to use as evidence in their essays. These questions can lead to further questions, providing learners more to write about than space and time will allow. They are valuable because they can provide any kind of writer information that might not at the moment seem relevant, but which can be developed into something interesting.

3.5 Preparing a Scratch Outline

A scratch outline is an excellent sequel to the first four prewriting techniques. A scratch often follows brainstorming, freewriting, clustering and questioning, or it may gradually emerge in the midst of these strategies. In fact, trying to make a scratch outline is a good way to see if the writer needs to do more prewriting. If he cannot come up with a solid outline, then he needs to do more prewriting to clarify his main point or its several kinds of support. According to Langan (2004), in a scratch outline, the writer thinks carefully about the point he is making, the supporting items for that point, and the order in which he will arrange those items. The scratch outline is a plan or blueprint to help the writer achieve a unified, supported, well-organized composition.

When students are planning an essay consisting of an introduction, supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion, a scratch outline is especially important. It may be only a few words, but it will be the framework on which their whole essay will be built. Once they have worked out a good outline for a paragraph or a short essay, they have completed 50 percent of the work. With an outline, the actual writing becomes easier because students don't have to worry about what they are going to say. Hence, they can write more quickly.

3.6 Cubing

In addition to the aforementioned prewriting activities, which are commonly recognized, some other prewriting activities also arouse researchers' concern. Cubing is a case in point. Cube refers to a three-dimensional block which has six sides. When a student uses cube, he or she swiftly considers a subject from six points of view: describe it (look closely and tell what you see), compare it (what is it similar to? different from?), associate it (what does it remind you of? and what other associations come to mind?), analyze it (tell how it's made, make it up if you aren't sure), apply it (tell what you can do with it; how can it be used?), and argue for or against it (take a stand; give any reason-silly, serious, or in-between)^[3]. Cubing helps students discover ideas from different perspectives in the process of quick writing. In this process, they are told not to concern about grammar or spelling so that they mainly focus on all that they want to say about the topic. The six perspectives can help analyze the topic and inspire ideas. Through considering from these perspectives, an ABSTRACT. topic gradually becomes concrete.

4. Theoretical Framework for Implementing Prewriting Activities

4.1 Discovering Ideas through the Creative Unconscious

According to Schmidt (1990), some parts of language knowledge, learning and possessing cannot easily be made explicit in a speaker's mind. This is unconscious knowledge. Other conscious knowledge is more readily accessible^[4]. Some writers

have equated “implicit” with “unconscious” knowledge (equivalent to Krashen’s notion of “acquisition”) and “explicit” with “conscious” knowledge (equivalent to Krashen’s notion of “learning”). However, writers, like all creative people, must spend a good deal of their time scouring the unconscious for ideas.

Sigmund Freud said that the unconscious is always with us, that it pops up when we least expect it. He felt that the lapses we make in everyday speech, when we say things that embarrass us, are controlled by the unconscious. Sometimes, according to Freud, we surprise ourselves with such lapses because we have repressed our real feelings so deeply that we no longer know what they are. The unconscious suddenly reveals our genuine feelings to us.

Techniques for finding ideas that go into our writing are often based on tapping the conscious. Those prewriting activities are techniques that help us relate one idea to another, uncovering associations and producing leads that push our thinking in any of several directions. In all cases some ideas will result, but as a writer we will always have a wide range of choice as to whether or not to use the results. In a way, each prewriting activity represents a way of gathering raw material. The next job is to refine them and put them to use.

Therefore, as teachers, in order to help students generate more ideas, we should encourage them to tap the rich creative sources of the unconscious.

4.2 Making Input and Output Transform and Facilitate Each Other

Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, as the central claim of Krashen’s Monitor Theory, states that: “Learners progress along the natural order by understanding input that contains structures a little bit beyond their current level of competence.^[5]” Learners acquire language through comprehensible input at a level of difficulty just beyond their current level of acquisition (i+1). Learners are able to understand language containing unacquired grammar with the help of context, which includes extra-linguistic information, their knowledge of the world, and previously acquired linguistic competence. A corollary of the Input Hypothesis is that “if input is understood, and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided. The language teacher needn’t attempt deliberately to teach the next structure along the natural order—it will be provided in just the right quantities and automatically reviewed if the student receives a sufficient amount of comprehensible input”. This hypothesis gives us much insight in second language teaching. If we want to help students acquire beyond the current level, we should focus on meaning and provide them with sufficient roughly tuned input. So a class should provide students with enough opportunities for students to talk in English. Group discussion is thus a good classroom activity.

One function of output is to develop discourse skills. Discourse management, turn taking, and a range of similar capacities that underlie the negotiation of meaning in ongoing discourse, can only be achieved by actually participating in discourse. It is the same for writing. Writing a coherent essay requires the ability to organize sentences and paragraphs. Only through practicing writing can learners

know how to use effective linking devices and how to arrange sentence logically.

Another function of output is that it can develop a personal voice. If one completely depends on what his interlocutor says, he will have no opportunity to say what he wants. This implies that one has to steer the conversation if he wants to exert an influence on conversational topics. Writing is another way to express one's meaning. For example, when one receives a letter, he will get information after reading. But if he wants to tell his friend his own things, he has to write a letter in reply.

From the above discussion, we can draw a conclusion that output is an essential condition for language learning. In teaching a second language, we should lay emphasis on the input such as listening and speaking as well as the output such as reading and writing. As far as this study is concerned, many prewriting activities are conducted by group discussion or pair work. At the prewriting stage, students generate all kinds of ideas through different prewriting activities, which are their output. Then, they discuss them with their group members or partners. In the process of discussion, other students' ideas serve as an input which will trigger more useful output.

4.3 Achieving Lower Affective Filter in Writing

The Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) states that affective factors play an important role in learning a second language. Krashen postulates that the affective filter is a mental block that prevents acquirers from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition. If the filter is "up", the input will not reach LAD (Language Acquisition Device). This occurs when the acquirer is unmotivated, lacking in self-confidence, or anxious. The filter is "down" when the acquirer is not concerned with the possibility of failure in language acquisition and when he considers himself to be a potential member of the group speaking the target language. According to Krashen, low affective filter helps performers "open" to the input, and that the input strikes "deeper".

In implementing prewriting activities among students, cooperative learning is employed. Such an approach to learning can increase students' learning since it is less threatening; it increases the amount of students' participation in the classroom; it reduces the need for competitiveness and it reduces the teacher's dominance in the classroom. In prewriting activities, students are usually required to generate ideas and share ideas in a cooperative way instead of cudgeling one's brain individually. It is far easier and less intimidating for each student to begin writing with enough materials than to write an essay without clear thought. In this way, prewriting activities can weaken affective filter in ELT writing class.

4.4 Integrating Receptive Skills with Productive Skills

Conventionally, literate people are believed to possess four basic skills, namely, speaking, writing, listening and reading. "Speaking and writing involve language

production and are therefore often referred to as productive skills. Listening and reading, on the other hand, involve receiving messages and therefore often referred to as receptive skills^[7].

Harmer summarized the four major language skills in the following way:

Medium Skill	Speech	Written word
Receptive	Listening	Reading
Productive	Speaking	Writing

Figure.2 Four Major Language Skills

Generally speaking, language learners can deal with a higher level of language in receptive skills than in productive skills. Being able to understand a piece of text does not necessarily mean that students have to be able to write or speak like that. Therefore, a high level of competence in receptive skills does not necessarily mean a high level of competence in productive skills. However, good productive skills do entail good receptive skills.

As for the productive skills, reading and writing are two important tools for people in their communication. But learning to write is not just learning to speak a language. We learn to speak our first language at home, whereas most of us have to be taught in schools how to write that language. Many adult native speakers of a language find writing difficult. The reason why we find writing difficult is that the process of speaking is quite different from that of writing. According to Raimes (1983), speakers use their voices (pitch, stress, and rhythm) and bodies (gestures and facial expressions) to help convey their ideas. Writers rely on the words on the pages to express their meaning. Speaking is usually spontaneous and unplanned. Most writing takes time. It is planned. We can go back and revise what we have written. Speakers use simple sentences while writers use more complex ones. From these differences (there are many more), we can see that our students will not just “pick up” writing in the way they learn other skills in ESL class. They have to be taught.

In recent years the need for comprehensive development of language skills in language learning has already been stressed and demonstrated in many respects. Teaching of writing skill is often integrated with other skills. In teaching writing, we should integrate receptive skills with productive skills. Prewriting activities require students to utilize four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. We should make students aware of how language functions as a communication system in order to help them write effective compositions.

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, more and more linguists and teachers have recognized the importance of writing process. In China, recently, some researchers and teachers have paid close attention to the importance of prewriting activities in writing. Those who advocate

the process approach lay great emphasis on the function of prewriting. He Minghui (2003), introduced eight prewriting activities such as brainstorming, working in buzz group, clustering ,using a matrix, rapid freewriting, asking WH-questions, listing and outlining to help students write in a more motivating and stimulating way^[8]. Wang Hongxiao (2004), also introduced eight prewriting activities such as freewriting, brainstorming, branching, cubing, 5Ws, drama, jigsaw and change of point of view to cultivate the opening mind in College English writing^[9].

From the previous researches in prewriting activities, we can find that many of their researches are descriptive and some researches belong to case studies. The fact that many are case studies with a limited number of subjects makes it difficult to form conclusive generalizations. There is not enough information available to attest to the efficacy of these pre-writing activities for ESL learners. Besides, those case studies have few Chinese subjects. We don't know how Chinese students react to the prewriting activities of process writing or how they experience different invention techniques. And in China, most composition textbooks still treat writing as a linear movement toward the final product and emphasize form and correctness. Process writing and its research have not been fully developed. So an experimental study is needed to test the efficacy of using prewriting activities for improving English learners' writing. Some researches just listed several prewriting activities, but they didn't indicate students' preferences in prewriting activities and whether the language proficiency level influences students' preferences. Those questions deserve further research.

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