

Research on the Teaching of College English Writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing ability is one of the most important abilities for college students. But, it has been regarded as the weakest for most Chinese college students. This paper analyzes the problems that most college students have in writing; discusses the challenges that the teaching of college English writing meets; illustrates the concepts of lexical chunks and process writing approach. A research is done in the writing class for college students on the campus of Harbin Institute of Technology at Weihai based on the two writing methods, aiming at helping students more subjectively initiative, getting more confidence, improving the teaching model of college English writing and developing the writing ability of college students as a result.

Keywords: college English, the teaching of writing, lexical chunks, process writing approach

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is not only an important part of second language teaching, but also the headache for most students. Silva have reviewed the western scholars' research on second language writing in recent years, and pointed out that compared with native language writing, second language writing has more difficulties in content design, layout, wording and phrasing. There are many studies in this field in China, but there are different opinions on the main difficulties of second language writing. Some studies have found that the most difficult task for Chinese students in second language writing is to excavate the content; some have found that the effect of the native language of text structure on second language writing is a major problem; others have shown that monotonous language, improper use of words, and colloquialism are major problems in second language writing. So, what is the difficulty of second language writing for Chinese students? The conclusion of the above research on this issue is not consistent. In addition, these studies are all based on the analysis of students' compositions to explore the problems of second language writing, without considering the students' feelings in the whole process of writing. The author believes that if the teacher knows nothing about the students' feelings in the whole process of writing, it will impact the second language teaching of writing greatly. Therefore, it is very important to understand the students' views on the difficulty of writing. Only in this way can we really help them overcome difficulties and improve their writing ability.

Therefore, the author conducted a questionnaire survey among 135 non-English major freshmen of 2018 Grade in Harbin Institute of Technology (Weihai), which focuses on the difficulties students encounter in English writing, and which is more difficult? Questions are mainly open-ended. According to the questionnaire data, students' difficulties in English writing mainly lie in three aspects: content, structure and language. According to the students' self-assessment, the difficulty of content and language is higher than that of structure. In terms of content, students think that the biggest difficulty lies in the depth and novelty of the content. They feel that the depth of their composition is not enough, and they lack original opinions. Sometimes there are difficulties in content design and material collection. They spend a long time thinking about the content, and they cannot often find enough materials to enrich the content. Furthermore, they cannot find appropriate examples to support their points sometimes. However, it is rare that there is nothing to say at all. In terms of structure, students seem to feel less difficult. This shows that they think there may be some problems in the layout of the article (including how to start and end), the use of the central idea and the topic sentence, the organization of the article, the cohesion of paragraphs and sentences, etc., but the problems are not serious. In terms of language, students think the biggest difficulty is the limited vocabulary. Due to the lack of vocabulary, students cannot fully express what they want to express, and cannot often find the exact words to express their meaning accurately. They often repeat the same words. Moreover, students have to spend more time looking up the dictionary. Sometimes, they can only give up the thought they want to express or translate the Chinese of what they want to express into

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English word by word literally, because they can't find the right word.

Comparing the difficulties of the three aspects of content, structure and language, the author finds that the most difficult is language, followed by content, and finally structure. According to the students' self-awareness, the lack of language accumulation, especially the limited vocabulary, may be the biggest difficulty in second language writing. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that students' language difficulties also affect their attention to content and structure. They have to spend a lot of energy on choosing words and building sentences, thus neglecting the content and structure due to their low level of language. In addition, the difficulty of language expressing also affects the depth of the content. It has been found that students often give up a lot of good ideas with certain content and depth because they can't find the right words to express their ideas, and merely write simple sentences to express what they think can be expressed in English correctly in the process of writing instead. The results of this questionnaire also confirmed this point.

II. THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF TEACHING DESIGN

According to the theory of language information processing, foreign language learning is actually a non-automatic cognitive processing information theory. The process is divided into five stages: input, attention, analysis, memorization and output.

In the process of input, the choice of teaching materials should be strengthened. Many language structures and phrases learned by students in the classroom never or rarely appear in the native speakers' discourse. Therefore, students should be provided with the teaching materials of native speakers as much as possible. At present, we can also use corpus to extract high-frequency chunks to provide students with the opportunity to obtain authentic first-hand lexical chunks.

In the attention and analysis stage, in terms of strategy, teachers should gradually improve students' sensitivity to lexical chunks and enhance their awareness of chunks. Teachers should make students realize clearly that learning every new word should be to learn the collocations of the word, rather than merely learning a word itself in terms of English language learning.

In the stage of memorization, it is necessary to design carefully to improve the recurrence rate of the lexical chunks that students meet in a certain period of time, so as to promote intentional memorization and unintentional acquisition. People's memorization mainly depends on the depth of information processing.

The repetition of isolated words is a kind of shallow processing with poor memory effect; the combination of words and their grammatical structure is a kind of deeper processing with good memory effect. It can be seen that lexical chunks itself is easier to memorize than isolated words.

In the output stage, writing is based on oral expression. As for writing, some studies have shown that the process approach is more conducive to improving students' English writing ability than the result approach, especially for students with higher writing ability. In other words, multi-draft writing is often more effective than traditional one draft writing. Multi-draft writing is conducive to the combination of input, attention, analysis, memory and output activities around lexical chunks in a healthy circle, which proves that well begun is half done for writing teaching with more effective input and more abundant output.

A. Lexical chunks

Jespersen first defined lexical chunks in different categories. He believed that grammar consists of two parts: free language and lexical chunks. The former is created and generated by brain every time, while the latter is extracted directly from memory. Wray defined formulaic language as "a set of words or meaning units that are stored and used as a complete prefabricated lexical chunks, rather than being analyzed or produced by a group of consecutive or inconsecutive words or meaning units according to grammar rules". Her point of view basically covers the three characteristics of lexical chunks mentioned in the existing literature, namely, relatively fixed structure, overall prefabrication and easy extraction.

The classification of lexical chunks can be different from different perspectives. Wray emphasized that lexical chunks are not a uniform linguistic phenomenon, but a complex continuum. They cannot be classified by a single standard. But, in order to facilitate description, Nattinger and DeCarrico classified them into the following four categories in terms of formal structure. However, there is no absolute boundary between different types, and there may be partial overlap.

Polywords refer to those phrases whose forms are fixed and inseparable. They act as a word, such as "by the way; for instance; so far so good; you know".

Institutionalized expressions refer to those phrases with fixed forms which cannot be split when they are used, such as "how nice to meet you; a watched pot never boils; there you go; long time no see".

Phrasal constraints refer to those phrases of medium length to short length, some part of which can be replaced by words or phrases of the same type, such as

"see you ____ (soon, later, tomorrow); as far as I ____ (know, can tell); the ____er the ____er."

Sentence builders refer to those phrases that provide the frame structure for the whole sentence and act as the beginning of the sentence with variable forms, such as "my point is that...; let me start with...; that reminds me of...; it seems (to me) (that) ..."

To sum up, lexical chunks is a kind of linguistic phenomenon of high frequency words in real communication which combines the advantages of grammar, semantics and context, and whose form is relatively fixed. It is found that lexical chunks play an important role in the production of the second language. Because chunks are learned as a whole, they can be extracted directly when they are used, so as to gain more time, relieve the pressure, and greatly improve the fluency of English writing. Nattinger & DeCarrico pointed out that lexical chunks have three functions: social interaction, necessary topics and discourse skills. However, in the field of English writing, the role of lexical chunks has not been paid more attention. In my opinion, its main functions can be summarized as the following three aspects.

Lexical chunks help to improve the idiomaticity and vividness of words. Pawley and Syder point out that the problem that puzzles second language learners is how to achieve native-like fluency and native-like selection. When foreign language learners write in a foreign language, they construct sentences according to grammar rules more, which is not authentic. Because chunks are examples that are learned and kept in long-term memory as a whole with the characteristics of accessibility, plate character and authenticity, employing a large number of chunks in writing can make the language expression more authentic and vivid, and avoid "Chinglish".

Lexical chunks are also good for the improvement of discourse organization. The text organizing function of chunks mainly refers to their macro organizing function. Nattinger & DeCarrico divides macro discourse deixis into comprehensive (paratactic) deixis and partial (subordinate) deixis. The former indicates the beginning of the text, the conversion topic and the summary of the discourse; the latter includes examples, the relationship between topics, the limitation of the previous topics, side-coach, etc. The common problems in College English writing are incoherence of texts and confusion of logical relations. According to the text organization function of chunks, the article will possess the clear structure, explicit organization, coherent meaning, and coherence and logic of the expression will be improved.

Lexical chunks are conducive to enhancing confidence. Chunks' memory conforms to the basic rules of cognition and brain memory, and follows the

language acquisition procedure of "input- hypothesis-verification-internalization-creation". Chunks have a fixed grammatical structure, a stable collocation meaning and a specific pragmatic environment. In writing, students can transfer some chunks from the brain and make them fluent. The use of chunks can reduce language errors to the greatest extent, thus lower the anxiety caused by the fear of making mistakes and enhancing their self-confidence and sense of achievement.

B. Process writing approach

To a large extent, students' difficulties in writing are related to the disadvantages of the traditional writing teaching method. The teacher "gives the final word" and the students "write once and for all", neglecting the students' subjective initiative. According to the questionnaire, there are some problems in students' composition, such as the use of limited vocabulary, the unclear expressions, syntactic errors and so on. In recent years, many foreign new writing teaching approaches have been introduced to China, among which the process writing approach is of great concern. The process writing approach regards writing as a kind of social communication activity and students as the subject of writing, which enables students to excavate and create meaning in the interactive process, and enhances their autonomy and self-confidence in writing.

Wallace Douglas, the originator of process writing approach, pointed out that "what the writing class should teach is the step-by-step operation method that constitutes the writing process". The process writing approach considers that writing is a complex process of circular interaction, in which students are the center. Teachers participate in the whole process of writing and give targeted guidance to students, so that students can find problems in time, solve problems and complete the whole writing process successfully. Students communicate with teachers and peers with a positive attitude in a relaxing atmosphere of cooperation in the whole writing process. According to this teaching principle, writing is always a process of "discovering and creating meaning". In the whole process, students can deepen their understanding of their own process of psychological cognition and improve their ability to find, analyze and solve problems. Raimes believes that "writing means expressing ideas, so elaboration and self-expression are the purposes of writing". Students are not writing for teachers, but for better communication with readers. Then, readers include not only teachers, but also peers. In this interactive process, the author's cognitive ability, productive thinking ability and writing ability have been improved. The internal process experienced by the writer in the writing process and what the writer should do in the writing process (such as outline, modification, etc.) are the

focus of the writing process, rather than the final product (such as format, grammar, etc.). Kroll points out that writing is that people should know what is writing firstly before they know how to write. The process writing approach focuses not only on the final product, but also on the process of producing such a final product. As a result, writing has become a real process of discovering meaning and creating meaning.

Process writing approach emphasizes the importance of the writing process, not only the writing results. Focusing on the process of writing is the core of "process writing approach" which holds that writing is a cyclic process of discovering meaning. From the perspective of process writing approach, writing becomes a process from the generation of ideas to the collection of materials to the completion of the writing, which is mainly related to thinking and writing skills, and the development of writing ability is unconsciously completed in the process of writing skills training. Process writing approach is based on the theory of communication, the process of writing is essentially a kind of communication between groups, rather than the writer's own behavior.

Process writing approach regards writing as a dynamic process, and pays attention to the whole process of writing. Students improve their interactive ability and writing ability with a series of interactive activities such as consultation, supervision and mutual evaluation before writing, during writing and after writing. Process writing approach divides writing into several parts, such as information collection, plan making, writing stage, peer evaluation, etc., paying attention to all aspects of writing, such as conception, writing, revision and finalization. In this process, teachers are responsible for organizing, coordinating and guiding students to turn the writing process into a collaborative learning process, so that they can understand and internalize every step of writing, and master the effective writing skills. The teaching purpose is no longer whether students can hand in a composition according to the directions. Its teaching principle accords with the essential law of writing teaching.

In the past two decades, many scholars and teachers who study writing have experimented with various process writing approaches. Some feasible teaching modes are summarized for teachers to use. The author integrates various teaching modes and process writing approaches and roughly divides the writing process into six stages: conception, outline, first draft, modification, finalization and sharing. In the conception stage, teachers should attach importance to the cultivation of students' creative thinking, adopt various teaching methods flexibly to inspire students and expand their writing thoughts. In the outline stage, teachers should guide students to establish the center of the writing, design the structure and select materials. In the first

draft, teachers should encourage students to express their ideas freely. In the modification stage, teachers should cultivate students' awareness of readers, consider the reading expectations of potential readers, and give consideration to the content, structure and language of the whole writing. In the final stage, students will summarize the students' and teachers' opinions on revision. And finally, in the sharing stage, students can enjoy the happiness of writing and experience the sense of achievement through communication and display. It should be noted that these six stages intersect with each other repeatedly, which is an interactive process rather than a simple linear process.

To sum up, lexical chunks have a direct impact on the proficiency of the language and play a key role in the idiomaticity of the language for the learners. While process writing approach is students-centered which can motivate students in writing. Therefore, the author explores a new teaching mode of writing in order to make students' writing more authentic and enhance students' writing ability. The following is a further discussion on how to promote writing teaching with process writing approach and lexical chunks.

III. TEACHING STRATEGIES

Many writing difficulties are actually caused by the lack of vocabulary. According to the discussion above, "lack of vocabulary" refers to "lack of lexical chunks". According to Hil, most learners with large vocabulary have problems in expression mainly due to their limited "collocational competence". Therefore, the first thing for teachers in writing teaching is how to guide students to pay attention to lexical chunks and obtain more chunks in the first-hand language materials. Then, the students are helped to enhance the memorization and acquisition of those chunks in the process of recurrence of chunks through the activities in class, and then the students' ability of utilizing chunks is cultivated by the training of multi-draft process writing. The specific operation steps are as follows:

A. Assigning the writing task

Taking iEnglish (An Integrated Course) Book 1 unit 2 as an example, the writing assignment is to write an essay "Effective ways to enhance your personal image". The teacher should explain the specific requirements in structure, content and language step by step (collect ideas-develop ideas-organize ideas-complete first draft) to the students; provide reading materials (See "Fig. 1") related to the theme and writing skills (See "Fig. 2") to students and remind them to collect relevant chunks from the text and reading materials which will be helpful to finish the assignment. The teacher should also tell students to finish this assignment in three drafts in total and hand in the final draft a week later.

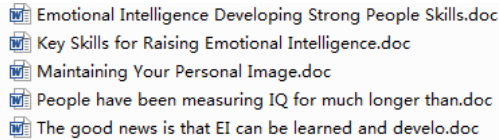


Fig. 1. Additional reading materials.

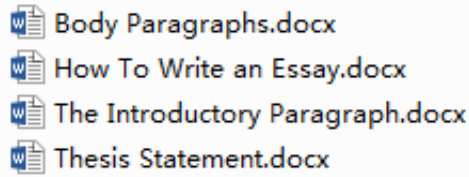


Fig. 2. Materials of writing skills.

B. Reading relevant articles and discussing in groups

Students are required to read at least two articles related to the topic "personal image" in addition to the texts and supplementary reading materials provided by the teacher. The articles must come from formal and authoritative websites, English newspapers and magazines, etc. When reading all articles, students are told to find out the chunks and share them with their group members (4 people in each group).

C. Finishing the first draft

Students are required to complete the first draft (no less than 150 words) according to the requirements after class with chunks they obtain themselves or from the group members. The more they use those chunks, the better result they will get.

D. Self-modification

Students are required to read their own articles carefully after completing the first draft, and modify the draft from three aspects of structure, content and language according to the specific requirements given by the teacher before writing. As students are not qualified to identify language errors, they are suggested to make full use of the correction network—www.pigai.org to do language modification.

E. Evaluating in groups

This step needs to be done in groups in class. Each student needs to read the other three students' articles. First of all, they need to put forward specific suggestions for modification according to the requirements; second, they need to find out and list the chunks in their articles.

F. Finishing the second draft

According to the peer evaluation, finish the second draft in class, and try to use the chunks taken in the previous step.

G. Teacher's evaluating

Students submit the second draft in class, and then the teacher gives comments and suggestions, especially on the use of chunks, but does not give a score temporarily.

H. Finishing the third draft

After class, students revise their second draft according to the teacher's comments and suggestions, so as to complete the third draft—the final draft.

I. Teacher's appraisal in class

The teacher grades the final draft and selects four essays from the most excellent to the worst to discuss and evaluate in class in order to help students realize the strength and weakness of their writing. Furthermore, the teacher should draw students' attention to the lexical chunks properly used and list the typical ones in the writings to help students enhance the memorization of them.

In a word, the process writing approach focuses on the recognition, collection, attention, absorption and application of lexical chunks. In the whole process, the more students obtain lexical chunks, the more they can apply them fully and properly, making their expressions in writing more authentic and fluent.

IV. CONCLUSION

Starting from the problems existing in the teaching of College English writing, this paper discusses a new teaching mode of writing by combining process writing approach with lexical chunks. The author believes that the writing process is a complex cycle of psychological cognition, thinking creation and social interaction. In the process of writing, the application of lexical chunks will make the sentences more fluent and the language more authentic and vivid. Furthermore, the ability of text organization will be greatly improved. After adopting this writing teaching mode, students reflect that writing is no longer hard work. They know how to express with abundant lexical chunks after the group discussion; their grammatical errors are significantly reduced after peers' mutual evaluation and mutual correction; in terms of content, most students have something to say in their writings and wonderful expressions and sentences can also be seen. Students express that such a learning method makes them fulfilled very much. They are able to learn something really and feel their progress in writing exactly. The combination of process writing approach and lexical chunks enables students to have fun in the process of writing and improve their writing ability in a pleasant atmosphere.

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