

# Promoting Learning by Writing: A Study of “Length Approach” in Non-English Majors

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## ABSTRACT

The “Length Approach” is a method to promote learning by writing long compositions. In order to test the effectiveness of this approach in promoting students’ writing and comprehensive English ability, the current study introduces the “Length Approach” into college English writing teaching. This study conducted a one-semester long composition teaching experiment on 60 non-English majors in Chengdu Medical College, during which a pre-test, training of writing long compositions, post-test and questionnaire were made. The statistical results showed that the writing scores and comprehensive English level of the experimental group were significantly improved after training, while the performance of the control group showed no such significant difference. The result is also supported by the qualitative analysis of the questionnaire. Participants in the experimental group generally believed that the “Length Approach” helped them develop a deeper perception of writing. Besides, their confidence in writing, independent study awareness and habits as well as writing ability and skills were all improved. The quantitative and qualitative results jointly showed that the “Length Approach” is also suitable for non-English majors and has an obvious effect on promoting learning; thus having effectiveness, practicability and applicability.

**Keywords:** College English; writing teaching; Length Approach; promoting learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a very important language skill, writing is gaining increasing attention and importance. However, it is not an easy thing to master it in the practical learning process. Writing usually reflects a learner’s comprehensive application ability of English language. But in China’s college English teaching, writing has long been a weak link. For a long time, college English teaching has always been focused on intensive reading, while no separate course time and schedule for writing are arranged. Therefore, temporary writing tutoring has become a common teaching mode of college English writing in order to deal with some examinations. Given this, how to improve college students’ English writing ability and promote their comprehensive English level has become a hot topic that English educators are constantly exploring. Professor Wang Chuming put forward “Length Approach” in foreign language learning, namely, “promoting learning by writing”. It emphasizes the importance of improving students’ language proficiency especially writing ability by increasing language output via writing. By experimenting, this study probes into the application effect of “Length Approach” in college English writing teaching.

## 2. PROBLEMS IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING

Listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating are basic skills of the English language. However, due to various reasons, writing is often neglected in the actual teaching process and becomes a very weak link in English teaching and learning. Most of the students are afraid of writing. They have no interest, no ideas, no way to start to write and don’t have so much to express when they begin to write. Very often, the compositions they write have problems such as poor logicity, rambling, inappropriate wording, Chinglish, grammar mistakes and so on. The CET-4 and CET-6 scores in recent years show that although many students pass the tests in the overall score, their writing part is actually below the pass line. In actual teaching, college English is mostly taught in large classes with very limited class time. It is almost impossible to set writing classes in particular, so writing teaching is difficult and inefficient.

Usually, to practice students’ writing ability, writing tasks can only be assigned to students as homework after class. On one hand, for the teachers, they are heavily burdened with correcting compositions and fail to give timely guidance and systematic lectures in the writing process. On the other hand, for the students, they often only care about the scores but seldom think further and correct the

mistakes in the composition. Thus, college English writing teaching is characterized by high input, low output and slow effect, and students' writing ability falls far short of the target requirements. Therefore, it is quite necessary to change the current situation and explore some new teaching concepts and methods to improve the teaching quality and students' English writing level [1].

### **3. LENGTH APPROACH AND ITS THEORETICAL BASIS**

#### ***3.1. Comprehensible Output***

“Promoting learning by writing” embodies the comprehensible output hypothesis proposed by Swain (1985) [2], who pointed out that when accepting comprehensible input, people do not need to spend too much energy on the analysis of language rules. But during the output process, they check the target language in their mind. If they want to use proper English expressions, they must carefully recall and apply what they have learned before, including the grammar rules, the use of appropriate words, phrases and collocations, and weigh the accuracy and appropriateness of the expressions adopted. Through this process, learners can continuously consolidate and internalize the previous English knowledge, paving the way for the comprehensive development of English skills. In short, this hypothesis holds that productive use of language (including writing and speaking) helps learners to spontaneously check the sentence structure and the use of words in the target language, promotes language automation, and effectively achieves the purpose of language acquisition.

#### ***3.2. Length Approach***

In 2000, based on an in-depth analysis of the current situation of foreign language teaching in China, Wang Chuming, an expert in second language acquisition, first put forward the concept of “Length Approach” in foreign language teaching, a task-based method that promotes learning by writing and promotes quality by quantity. In a certain stage of learning, it complies with the rules of foreign language learning and can enhance students' sense of achievement in learning, improve their confidence, and speed up the building of foreign language knowledge into foreign language application ability (Wang Chuming, 2000) [3]. This approach advocates opening the learners' emotional channel by writing long compositions so as to enhance their confidence in writing, cultivate their sense of achievement, release their potential, and then comprehensively improve the proficiency of English listening, speaking, reading ability and so on.

In an early stage, it has been proved that “promote learning by writing” has strong effectiveness and operability in the teaching for English majors. Subsequent studies also have

confirmed this. Some researchers have also conducted related studies among non-English majors and luckily got some findings. Inspired by the former researches, this study conducted a one-semester (16-week) long composition teaching experiment among 60 freshmen of non-English majors. By integrating “Length Approach” into intensive college English teaching, this study aimed to test the effectiveness of this approach in promoting students' writing and comprehensive English ability.

### **4. “LENGTH APPROACH” EXPERIMENT**

#### ***4.1. Participants and Tools***

In this study, 60 freshmen who are non-English majors were included as participants. As freshmen, they have a serious attitude and a high enthusiasm for learning. As is known to all, in the first college year, most of their courses are some basic courses. Non-English majors often spend a lot of time learning English well. Based on these factors, this study chose to conduct a “Length Approach” teaching experiment among freshmen. 30 students were included in the experimental group and 30 other students were included in the control group. For the participants in both groups, their time of receiving English education is roughly the same, their attitudes towards English writing are basically the same, and the teaching materials they used, class hours they had and the progress they experienced are the same. After enrolment, all participants accepted a pre-test, in which the scores of the two groups showed no significant difference, indicating to some extent that the English of the two groups was roughly at the same level.

In this experiment, we aimed to prove that the “Length Approach” is effective in promoting learning especially writing. Three research tools were used. One is a questionnaire, another one is the pre-test results, i.e., the scores of the comprehensive test (including composition) at the beginning of the semester after enrolment, and the third one is the post-test results, i.e., the scores of the comprehensive test (including composition) in the final examination of the first semester.

#### ***4.2. Research Design***

At the beginning of the semester, students were informed of various requirements of the English course, and the concept of foreign language learning was emphasized to them, i.e., foreign languages are learned, not taught. (Wang Chuming, 2002) [4]. At the same time, participants in the experimental group were also told the differences and similarities between the “Length Approach” and the traditional writing method, as well as the operations of “Length Approach”. Specifically speaking, participants should complete a long composition in their spare time every week for no less than a certain number of words.

The longer the composition is, the better. One or two excellent compositions were selected every week for public evaluation in class. After the participants got certain amount of training in writing long compositions, some ways and skills in writing were intensively instructed to them at a proper time by the teacher.

The themes of students' text book – *New Century College English, Zooming in: An Integrated English Course* – involve human and nature, science and technology, labor and life, life perception, international communication and other aspects. Various training activities are designed to fully reflect the close integration of input and output as well as the natural transformation from language knowledge to communicative competence. Based on the textbook, we combined the “Length Approach” with the intensive reading comprehension of texts together, and combined the analysis of discourse structure and the teaching of language knowledge with the training of writing skills together, so as to promote writing by reading and promote reading by writing long compositions vice versa. In the course of concrete operation, the specific method was to analyze the writing characteristics of the text, guide students to analyze some paragraphs in the text, and point out the characteristics of the text structure. In the writing phase, students were given an outline according to the characteristics of the text structure that has been analyzed. Students were asked to write according to the outline. Sometimes the topic was not limited so that the students could write whatever they are interested in and write as long as possible. By combing reading and writing together, students were trained to have a deeper understanding of the intensive reading materials at a higher level. Through discourse analysis, students were trained to develop the ability to construct texts, learn writing skills, develop their language sense, and then gradually form English thinking mode. At the same time, students were encouraged to use the language knowledge and expressions learned in the intensive reading class in their compositions, imitate the writing structure of model essays and so on. It is hoped that through constant practice students' awareness of putting what they have learned into practice can be strengthened. In order to maintain students' passion for writing and stimulate their thinking, we guided students to write on different themes.

### **4.3. Assessment Measures**

When Wang Chuming applied “Length Approach” on English majors, he used the 100-point system and set four grading criteria: length, organization, ideas and language. The length of the composition accounted for 40 points, and the other three criteria accounted for 20 points respectively [3]. Since college English teaching is different from the teaching for English majors and the independent learning ability of non-English major students is generally poor, we used some incentives in this study. The students' performance in the “Length Approach” experiment, the average score of each essay in particular, was considered part of the final grade (about 15%). In this way, enough

attention was paid from students to the writing tasks; thus the smooth implementation of writing long compositions was ensured.

In the specific operation, we adjusted the above criteria according to different stages. The entire experiment period, a semester, was divided into four stages with each month a stage. In the first stage, 40 points were awarded for the length of the composition, and 20 points for spelling, grammar and language expression respectively. If the students write for more than 120 words, they can get 40 points. But to get a high score, they need to pay more effort to the other three aspects, especially to language expression. Students were required and encouraged to use the newly learned language knowledge and expressions. A month later, when the students basically met these requirements, the grading criteria changed accordingly. During the last three stages, the length of the composition plus conciseness accounted for 40 points. Composition organization, ideas, and expression each accounted for 20 points, but the focus of each stage was slightly different. The second stage focused on sticking to the topic, good structure design, and correct use of linking words and substantive words. The third stage focused on logical organization, topic sentence, argument statement, conclusion, and English expression. The fourth stage focused on the full text, viewpoint development, and overall English expression. By adopting this grading method, students could easily see their strengths and weaknesses in the composition and know clearly what they should do to write better in the future.

### **4.4. Error Tolerance Principle**

Having just experienced the teaching mode in senior high school, these students have been accustomed to the teacher's meticulous revision of the composition, believing that only when the teacher helps them understand and correct their mistakes can their English get improved. The teaching concept of “Length Approach” advocated by Wang Chuming puts forward that teachers should take a tolerant attitude towards students' language errors in writing and advocates appreciation and encouragement evaluation. For students, this concept and practice protect their confidence, stimulates their innovation spirit and strengthens their motivation to learn English. Learning from this point of view, in the assessment process, we required students to make self-evaluation first in order to avoid errors such as letter case, word spelling and incomplete sentences. In this process, students can gradually develop good writing habits. After self-evaluation, we organized students to carry out mutual evaluation in or after class, during which students can learn from each other's strengths and promote their own writing skills. After mutual evaluation, we selected one or two excellent compositions to evaluate in class. Teachers and students were allowed to fully express views on many aspects like the composition layout, argument statement, grammar, sentence pattern, language expressions, etc. Critics were only given on common mistakes, while merits

were given to various aspects and praises were given to some wonderful compositions or paragraphs.

The Second Language Acquisition Theory shows that learner's language is a transitional language, which is in a constantly changing and unstable state. Therefore, making mistakes is inevitable. Since non-English majors can hardly find the mistakes by themselves in a short time, and in order not to discourage their enthusiasm for writing, we provided guidance to them at some proper time by helping them know and correct the mistakes. Meanwhile, we set up a learner's document for each student to record their mistakes and performance. After two months of long composition writing training, we exemplified a short composition in class and give an intensive discussion and evaluation. After class, students were asked to analyze the compositions carefully and correct the mistakes they made in their previous compositions. When the students turned in their corrected compositions again, we found that most students could discover some obvious mistakes they have made in their previous compositions, such as word spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc. Judging from the students' later compositions, their similar mistakes were gradually decreasing. For the mistakes that the students were not aware of or failed to find out, we marked them and asked the students to correct by themselves. If the mistakes were still unknown, the students were encouraged to ask classmates or the teacher. It was proved that students welcomed the way we treated mistakes.

#### 4.5. Data Analysis

It can be seen from Tables 1 and 2 that in the pre-test, the average comprehensive English score and English writing score of the experimental group and the control group are both low. However, there is no significant difference ( $p = 0.855; 0.729 > 0.05$ ), indicating that the English level of the two groups is roughly at the same level at the beginning, which is comparable.

Table 3 and 4 show that in the post-test, the average comprehensive English score of the experimental group is higher than that of the control group ( $75.7-72.72=2.98$ ), and there is a significant difference between the two groups ( $t = 5.179, p = 3.005 \times 10^{-6} < 0.05$ ). The average English writing score of the experimental group is also higher than that of the control group ( $12.45-10.55=1.9$ ), also showing a significant difference between the two groups ( $t = 6.754, p = 1.180 \times 10^{-8} < 0.05$ ). This indicates that after the training of writing long compositions, both the comprehensive English level and the writing level of the experimental group are higher than those of the control group.

Tables 5 and 6 show that after a semester's application of "Length Approach", the performance of participants in the experimental group is significantly improved. Their average comprehensive English score in the post-test is

higher than that in the pre-test ( $75.7-71.8=3.9$ ), indicating a significant difference between the two tests ( $t = -6.119, p = 8.770 \times 10^{-8} < 0.05$ ). Their average English writing score in the post-test is also higher than that in the pre-test ( $12.45-10.01=2.44$ ), also showing a significant difference between the two tests ( $t = -7.353, p = 7.522 \times 10^{-10} < 0.05$ ). As for the control group, although their performance is improved to a certain degree, no such significant differences are found.

**Table 1.** Comprehensive English scores in the pre-test

Group	No.	Mean	SD	Analysis value
Experimental group	30	71.85	2.47	$t=0.184$
Control group	30	71.73	2.37	$p=0.855$

**Table 2.** English writing scores in the pre-test

Group	No.	Mean	SD	Analysis value
Experimental group	30	10.1	1.20	$t=-0.349$
Control group	30	10.2	0.97	$p=0.729$

**Table 3.** Comprehensive English scores in the post-test

Group	No.	Mean	SD	Analysis value
Experimental group	30	75.7	2.32	$t=5.179$
Control group	30	72.72	2.06	$p=3.005 \times 10^{-6}$

**Table 4.** English writing scores in the post-test

Group	No.	Mean	SD	Analysis value
Experimental group	30	12.45	1.23	$t=6.754$
Control group	30	10.55	0.88	$p=1.180 \times 10^{-8}$

**Table 5.** Scores of the experimental group in the pre- and post-tests

Scores	Test	Mean	SD	Analysis value
Comprehensive English scores	Pre-test	71.8	2.47	$t=-6.119$
	Post-test	75.7	2.32	$p=8.770 \times 10^{-8}$
English writing scores	Pre-test	10.01	1.20	$t=-7.353$
	Post-test	12.45	1.23	$p=7.522 \times 10^{-10}$

**Table 6.** Scores of the control group in the pre- and post-tests

Scores	Test	Mean	SD	Analysis value
<b>Comprehensive English scores</b>	Pre-test	71.73	2.37	t=-1.687
	Post-test	72.72	2.06	p=0.097
<b>English writing scores</b>	Pre-test	10.2	0.97	t=-1.439
	Post-test	10.55	0.88	p=0.156

#### 4.6. Qualitative Analysis

After a semester's training in writing long compositions, students have achieved satisfactory results in the first term final examination. Compared with the results before the experiment, each student had different degrees of progress. After the training, we conducted a questionnaire among students in the experimental group, which further confirmed the results of the quantitative analysis. The questionnaire results mainly include the following aspects. (1) In terms of their understanding of writing, students generally reported that they had a deeper understanding of the importance of English writing and a clear understanding of their progress and weaknesses in writing. (2) In terms of confidence and changes of interest in writing, many students reported that they became more confident and fluent in writing than before. Particularly, for those students who have poor English foundation and low self-confidence, they reported that "Length Approach" helped them strengthen their confidence in writing and stimulated their interest in learning English. Some students said that they like the teacher to choose some excellent compositions as model works and carry out discussions in class. (3) In terms of the influence of writing on the consciousness and habit of independent learning, most students said that they have broadened their thinking of writing and enhanced their consciousness of independent learning. Some students even said that writing long compositions made them form a writing habit of paying more attention to the overall structure and content of articles to enhance the readability of articles. (4) In terms of the improvement of specific writing skills, many students said that they learned to review the topic, design and make a good outline before writing. In the process of writing, they learned to pay attention to the organization of information, logical cohesion, and the echo of the contexts. In the process of revision, they learned to pay attention to the choice of vocabularies, the diversity of expressions and other details. (5) In terms of promoting learning, students generally said that writing long compositions is conducive to the expression of ideological content and the learning and mastery of vocabulary, collocation, grammar and other knowledge. Writing long compositions is also conducive to their reading. Many students felt that writing gave them a sense of accomplishment and that they probably can learn other English skills well as well. In order to write long and well, some students even consciously expanded their vocabulary and increased their reading amount.

All these show that the improvement of the post-test scores is inseparable from their efforts paid to the writing training process. Thus it can be concluded that the "Length Approach" experiment has achieved the effect of promoting learning by writing. At the same time, the survey results also give us an inspiration: when teaching English writing, if teachers actively reform the teaching concept, content, methods and other aspects, the needs of students can be largely met and their writing abilities and comprehensive English level will also be significantly improved.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses indicated that "Length Approach" has achieved remarkable results in college English writing teaching. Writing long compositions can not only consolidate the knowledge, increase the opportunity to use new knowledge, but also accelerate the internalization of new knowledge. The increasing writing amount can accelerate the transition of English knowledge to the application. In order to meet the requirements of writing long, learners constantly use new words and ideas, and therefore take in the corresponding input, and then output, forming a virtuous cycle. The "Length Approach" is beneficial to activating students' psychological learning process and improving their writing level. This teaching approach injects vigor and vitality into college English teaching, indirectly promotes the improvement of the overall English level of non-English majors, and has enlightenment for future research. However, there are still some shortcomings in this study. Since the experimental period is short and the participants are not very extensive, it inevitably has certain limitations. Moreover, the factors affecting the improvement of English writing ability are complex but only a few factors were involved in this experiment, which is expected to be improved in future studies.

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