

On the Transfer of Learning Process to Writing Ability

—Empirical Study on a College's Award-winning Students in the Writing Contest

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Abstract—The author conducts an empirical study of the ordinary English learning process of a college's award-winning students in the National English Writing Contest in the past three years. She found that the vocabulary and grammar learning process of the subjects enjoys three characteristics: I) a solid foundation in grammar; II) a preference for graceful vocabulary learning III) preference for the use of adverbs and complex grammatical structures. The writing training process exhibits three characteristics: I) a good thinking process model; II) preference for the use of conjunctions; III) enjoying a diverse discourse layout. These characteristics are positively correlated with the subject's vocabulary use, sentence and passage structure in English writing, and also explain the reason why the subjects achieved excellent scores in the writing contest.

Keywords—writing ability; learning process; empirical study

I. INTRODUCTION

As for the factors influencing English writing, many previous studies have been made. For example, Gao Yan and Wen Qiufang have proposed that thinking ability and language factors have overall predictability of the second language writing, and they can explain the variation of its writing scores in a certain proportion^[1]. Wang Lifei has found that writing discourse knowledge and extracurricular non-proposition writing have different effects on writing: I) Class writing discourse teaching has a direct effect on expanding student's writing discourse knowledge, but it is not able to improve the actual English writing level directly; II) After-class non-proposition writing has a significant effect on improving students' use of words, correctness of language and norms in English writing; III) The comprehensive method of combining writing in class and writing out of class is more effective than pure classroom writing method^[2]. Ma Guanghui and Wen Qiufang have found that Chinese writing ability, oral English ability and English vocabulary exert a direct influence on

English writing ability^[3]. Liu Hongdong has put forward that vocabulary indirectly influences the quality of writing through text length^[4]. Zhou Weixing and Qi Jianzhong have pointed out that linguistics competencies, attitudes, motivations and personality factors are significantly related with students' writing performance^[5].

There are some other researchers who have explored methods to improve writing skills.

However, there are few studies on the factors that affect students' English writing from the perspective of the specific learning process of students.

The article conducts an empirical study on 9 students who participated in the professional group of National English Writing Contest from 2015 to 2017. We try to find out the transfer of the subjects' English learning process to English writing through face-to-face interviews with the subjects and analysis of simulation training compositions of the previous years.

II. RESEARCH PROCESS

A. Proposed research issues

The study focuses on two aspects of learning process of the subjects- vocabulary & grammar learning process and writing practice process. The questions to be answered are: (1) What characteristics do subjects' vocabulary and grammar learning process have? What impact do those characteristics have on English writing? (2) What characteristics does the subject's writing practice process have and how do they affect their English writing?

B. The subjects

TABLE I. AWARDS OF THE SUBJECTS

Number	Gender	Year of graduation	Group	Year of participation in the National English Writing Contest	Award
1	male	2015	Professional group	6th	The second place in the semifinal in Hunan Province
2	female	2015	Vocational group	6th	The second place in the semifinal in Hunan Province
3	male	2015	Vocational group	6th	The third place in the semifinal in Hunan Province
4	female	2016	Professional group	7th	The first prize in the semifinal in Hunan Province
5	female	2016	Vocational group	7th	The second place in the semifinal in Hunan Province

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6	female	2016	Vocational group	7th	The second place in the semifinal in Hunan Province
7	male	2017	Professional group	8th	The first place of the first prize in the national finals(champion)
8	female	2017	Vocational group	8th	The second place in the semifinal in Hunan Province
9	female	2017	Vocational group	8th	The third place in the semifinal in Hunan Province

The subjects in this study are all students from a university in Hunan. Among them, 3 students participated in the contest of professional group and 6 students participated in the contest of vocational group. The subjects participated in the preliminary competition and semifinal of the “FLTRP Cup” National Higher Vocational English Writing Contest in 2015, 2016 and 2017 respectively, and they all won the awards of the Hunan Provincial Semifinal Competition. Among them, a student of the 2017 professional group advanced to the National Finals. In the end, he won the first place of the first award (champion) in the National Finals.

C. Research Tools

The study uses the author's designed interview outline and the subject's simulation essays of the previous contests. The interview outline consists of three parts.

The first part mainly covers the subject's learning experience and family background, which is composed of 8

questions. The second part is a detailed investigation of subjects' learning process of grammar and vocabulary, learning preferences, and methods to improve their writing skills through training, which consists of 20 questions. The third part is the subject's experience sharing and suggestions for contest training.

The simulated composition of subjects 1, 2, 3, and 4, 5, 6 are all provincial-level semifinal writing titles, including a business application composition and a graphic composition. The compositions of subjects 7, 8, and 9 are 3 writing titles in the National Finals, including writing a conference Minutes by watching the video 1, an E-mail based on the content of the video 1, and the argumentative writing is writing the composition assignment of the propositional composition “Treat others the way we want to be treated” based on the content of video 2.

TABLE II. COMPOSITION TITLES IN THE PREVIOUS WRITING CONTEST

Number	National English Writing Contest	Contest composition1	Contest composition2	Contest composition3	Remarks
1	The 5 th “FLTRP Cup” English Writing Contest	An advertisement of a product	A proposal on possible cuts to promotion budgets		Composition title in the semifinal
2	The 6 th “FLTRP Cup” English Writing Contest	A report about export	An Email for advice whether work or further study		Composition title in the semifinal
3	The 7 th “FLTRP Cup” English Writing Contest	Application composition based on video1:Minutes	Composition based on the video1	Composition based on the video2:Treat others the way we want to be treated	Composition title in the National Finals

D. Resources collection

The resources collection process includes five steps-interviews, discussions, recording, transcription, and collation.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results show that the English scores of 9 subjects in senior high school are at intermediate level. They didn't participate in any special English tutoring courses or writing training after class. Their learning of vocabulary and grammar and practice of English writing were as same as any other students, which mainly focused on classroom learning.

We will discuss the characteristics of the subject's learning process and its influence on English writing from two aspects-vocabulary and grammar learning process and writing practice process.

A. Characteristics of grammar and vocabulary learning process and their influence

1) Solid foundation in grammar

The subjects basically have mastered the essence of grammar and had a good command of grammar through understanding grammar points, punctuating keywords and interpreting examples of sentences in the senior high school. For example, they generally conclude that the attributive clause is an adjective clause; the adverbial clause is of adverbial characteristics; and the adjective's post-attribute is equal to the clause without relative pronouns plus “be” verb. As a result, the subjects did not make any grammatical errors in the compositions, which was consistent with the viewpoint put forward by Peng Tong“ Overall, the better students master knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, the better writing scores they get”^[6] (Peng Tong,2005). If students want to improve their writing abilities, they must grasp enough vocabulary and necessary grammar knowledge.

2) Preference for graceful vocabulary learning

The subjects used the dictionary and APP in the mobile phone to recite and memorize English words repeatedly in the

period of senior high school and the period after the college entrance examination. They already had a solid foundation in the accumulation of vocabulary. During the one year or so in the writing training, they can write down good vocabulary, structure and expressions on their portable notebook at any time inside and outside of the classroom, the manuscript of which has reached 8 in the entire training period. According to the interview, the subjects believed that the so-called good words are: I) Ones that can replace words that are frequently expressed daily; II) Words that are brilliant, that is, the pronunciation is pleasing or the collocations of words are beautiful. Subjects used pens with different colors to record manuscripts, and used the special five-pointed star notation to mark the most beautiful collocations, then applied it appropriately in writing. Wen Qiufang (1993) made a study and found that vocabulary learning can directly promote the improvement of English. If only students had sufficient vocabulary, they could read and understand well and could provide "intelligible input" to writing (Krashen 1984); therefore, vocabulary expression level of English is critical to English writing skills. The greater the expression vocabulary of students, the more content they can write. In this way, longer passages will be written, and the subject idea is more likely to be fully developed and the texts will enjoy higher quality^[7].

3) Preference for application in adverbs and complex grammatical structures

In the vocabulary accumulation and writing training, subjects found that learning and using adverbs would make the sentences read ups and downs with rhythm. Therefore, subjects tried to use different adverbs to write. In the subject's training of contest composition titles, the proportion of adverbs to the total number of words was almost 5.10%. Using the Chinese Learner English Corpus CLEC and the contemporary American English Corpus BROWN as references, the subject's adverb usage frequency was very close to 5.90% of CLEC and 5.24% of BRWON. The corpus of CLEC was mainly from Chinese undergraduate students, and the corpus of BROWN came from Native American English users.^[8] Obviously, the subject's adverbs use skills showed that they have a strong ability to handle compositions. The appropriate and accurate use of a large number of adverbs improved the readability and vividness of subjects' compositions.

In addition, the nine students are also good at using complex sentence structures, such as attributive clauses, noun clauses, adverbial clauses, subjunctive moods, inverted sentences, etc. From the compositions of the students, the compound sentences account for 34% of the total number of sentences. The proportions of inverted sentences and virtual tone are 7.5% and 6.7% respectively, which are higher than the 30.5% of compound sentences and 6.55% of parallel sentences in the distribution of university students' English writing sentence types by Yang Yuchen and Wen Zhaorong. It can be seen that the subjects are more skillful in using complex sentences than ordinary college students.

The combination of the complex sentences with diversification and the unusual grammatical structure can enrich the composition language of the subjects and produce positive effects on the scores of the contest.

B. Characteristics of writing training process and its influence

1) Good thinking process model

In 1962, Wallas proposed to divide the thinking process of writing into four phases, namely preparation, incubation, illumination and verification. Roman divides the writing process into three stages, namely prewriting, writing and re-writing, among which the most important stage is pre-writing.^[9]

It can be seen that the preparatory period or the pre-writing stage has an important influence on writing. In the interview, the subjects thought that their writing process included four complete steps, namely writing an outline, drafting, revising and writing. When writing the text, the subject used to write the outline, draft, then modify, and finally write the final version.

This was completely consistent with the writing process that being divided into the preparatory period and the pre-writing stage by Wallas and Roman (Liu Hongwei, 2005). From the perspective of the subjects, the order of these steps was consistent with their thinking sequence. It was easier to clarify the ideas according to the steps, and it could save time and improve writing efficiency.

In addition to the writing steps that the subjects were accustomed to, they had their own habits of time allocation when writing. If an essay was limited to 40 minutes, then the subject's time allocation was approximately like this-15 minutes of conception (including outline), 15 minutes of drafting, 5 minutes of writing, and 5 minutes of checking.

The proportion of time allocation in the two phases, namely conception and first drafting, was 75%; and the time allocation of follow-up steps only accounted for 25%. In contrast, subjects spent more time on the overall idea of the text and spent less time on language expression.

The distribution of time indicated that the subject attached great importance to the pre-writing conception phase. Only by thinking clearly about how to write in the layout conception phase can we write in one go.

2) Tend to use conjunctions more frequently

Most subjects believed that it was vital to use connectives properly and frequently because of the important role logically playing in English. The use of connectives not only allowed readers to understand? The context of the article clearly, but also offered readers a feeling of pleasing when reading the article. According to statistics, the frequency of using connectives and phrases in the composition of the contestants averaged 14, accounting for 5.96% of the total number of words. The researches of Wang Lifei and Sun Xiaokun showed that the proportion of connectives in college students' argumentation writing was 5.82% for Chinese high group and 5.45% for Chinese low group^[10].

It can be seen that the proportion of the subjects' composition conjunctives was slightly higher than that of the Chinese high-group students, which indicated that the subjects' ability to use conjunctions was higher than that of the average student.

3) *Being accustomed to the diverse composition layout*

When simulating essays with the same or similar content, the average student was accustomed to recall the content and layout of the previous composition, while the nine subjects tried to use different expressions and different composition layout to express as much as possible during training. The long-term attempt to express with different expressions and different sentence patterns has improved the subject's basic language skills, the expansion of sentence patterns and their ability to think, which was consistent with the idea proposed by Li Liwen "In the important phase of the writing process, we should focus on the task of designing and cultivating readers' consciousness and speculative ability, enhance and improve students' readership and thinking ability"^[11].

Of course, some subjects expressed that sometimes the content of writing and the analysis of the causes of the problems needed to be strengthened because they focused much on vocabulary, sentence patterns and complex structures.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the study, we found that the subject's English vocabulary& grammar learning preferences, learning process and writing training process showed certain characteristics, which had a positive impact on their English writing. From it, we could explain the reason why the participants obtained excellent scores in the English Writing Contest.

Therefore, it is a question worth pondering by educators of how to develop and guide the learning ability, learning preferences and habits, which are suitable for students' specialties.

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