

# Pedagogical Implications to Teaching English Writing

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**Abstract**—English, as an international language, takes such a position in foreign language teaching and learning in China. As we all know that the ultimate purpose of language teaching is to cultivate students' communicative ability including not only the oral ability, but also the writing ability. However, teaching of English writing is far from satisfactory, and many students still have a great difficulty in writing English composition. They find it hard to express their ideas and feeling freely and fluently, also they make many mistakes in vocabulary and grammar. Even though there are few grammar mistakes in the composition, it still seems more or less odd when read by native speakers. Teachers should make corresponding changes of the emphasis and pedagogy in their teaching and thus provide the most effective way to ease the students in the writing process and motivate them to write. The aim of this paper is to provide pedagogical implications to help the students to improve their English writing competence.

**Index Terms**—English writing, pedagogical implications, contrastive analysis, vocabulary, correcting

Many Chinese students take it for granted that English writing is just a process of translating from Chinese to English. When the students can't find appropriate strategies for learning to write and they do not know how to express and organize their ideas in English, what they do is just to transfer their familiar Chinese sentence patterns into English sentences. It is harmful to their writing and slow down their writing improvement. The reality is that English writing should be composed in English way. Chinese students are non-native speakers of English and they are entering a new language environment. As Chinese and Chinese thought patterns are deeply rooted in their mind, what the teachers should do is to help their students overcome the language barrier, come close to the target language and use the language as freely as they can. If the students are led to get involved in the new culture and get familiar with the new thinking patterns and attempt to use them frequently in their writing, their writing proficiency can step on a new platform. Some suggestions be of value when considered in the light of the current English writing situation of the Chinese students. They are shown as follows.

## I. CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

No matter what methods teachers use in the classroom, contrastive analysis turns out to be a better way. Since linguistic errors are the result of distinct thinking patterns in Chinese and English languages, the initial problem is to make the students aware of the differences in thinking patterns.

### A. *Introduction of Contrastive Thinking Patterns in Class*

As awareness of differences in the two languages' thinking patterns facilitates the students' utilizing English in English way, teachers should introduce contrastive thinking patterns of Chinese and English in classroom and increase the students' consciousness of English thinking patterns. In the teaching process, teachers should consciously guide the students to discover and compare the differences in thinking habits between these two languages, to help the students accept such differences and to develop a habit to think in English. This will probably help them communicate in accurate and standard English. When their sense of English is stimulated, they can automatically classify the characteristics of English and learn to think in English.

Cultural differences should also be introduced to the students because language can not be separated from culture. In pedagogical process, it is not realistic that the English language forms should be thought highly of, while the pragmatic application of the language is ignored. Students' sense of cultural acquisition should be developed. That is to say, teachers need to introduce the cultural differences between Chinese and English, to increase the contrastive language categories, to explore the different rules developed in different languages and to enable the students to understand the conflicts and discrepancies between the two languages. In this way, negative transfer of native culture would be reduced or avoided in English learning.

### B. *Introducing Lexical Transfer in Class*

Lexical transfer is a major factor that influences English writing. Kellerman comments "there are enormous quantities of evidence for the influence of the L1 on IL when it comes to lexis" (Kellerman, 1987, p.42). Non-English majors' vocabulary input is largely restricted to the classroom. This kind of pedagogy can not introduce a large amount of vocabulary information in a limited time. Therefore, teachers should increasingly explain word meanings from their

grammatical meanings and collocative meanings. (The latter category includes associative meaning, affective meaning, connotative meaning and reflective meaning). This would be quite different from asking students to learn by rooting English words with equivalent Chinese words. Some special words should be explained with corresponding text, and teachers should focus on the words which are easily transferred from the native language.

Malapropism should also be given close attention by teachers because grammatical meaning is very complex in the English language, which includes parts of speech, the inflection of words, the singular and plural, transitive and intransitive verbs, nouns and pronouns, clauses, etc. Those characteristics do not exist in the Chinese language, so Chinese students can not avoid committing errors. Thus, teachers should encourage the students to practice more to remember the different functions of grammatical meanings and collocative meanings.

### C. *Introducing Syntactical Transfer in Class*

Teachers should compare the different syntactical structures of the two languages in class and expand the practicing time to strengthen the students' cognitive abilities. When the students' sensibility to syntactical structures is raised, they will be more likely to discover the typical English sentence structures consciously and practice more to make themselves more proficient in writing English sentences logically. As we know, English and Chinese belong to different language families. The syntactic structures are very different from each other. English word order is quite rigid and its sentences are in Tree Type. Subject-predicate structure is strictly obeyed and a predicative verb is the focus of each sentence. Chinese sentences, in contrast, are linear structures. The verb is not the center of the sentence as it is in English. The word order or semantics is the center of the sentence and the sentence is complete only if the word order and semantics are correct. As with the discrepancies mentioned above, teachers should draw the students' attention to recognizing the rigid word order, the explicit connectors, and the accordance with the tense, number, person, etc. Also students should be instructed to notice the forms of negation. Compared to the simple usage of the negators in Chinese, English ones are more complex. They are represented as postverbal and preverbal, which have various forms and different meanings such as partial negation, total negation, double negation and prefix and suffix negation, etc. Students should be taught to avoid using negators in Chinese way.

In addition to teaching these syntactical patterns, time should be arranged for the students to practice by exchanging sentence patterns and conjoining two or more sentences together. When they learn the rules of the syntactical structures, they will be able to use them skillfully in their English writing.

### D. *Introducing Contrastive Discourses in Class*

Contrastive discourses in the two languages should be introduced in class to help students become aware of the differences between Chinese and English. Such knowledge will help the students improve their English writing effectively. Direction vs. indirection and deductive vs. inductive are two pairs of discourses in Chinese and English languages. Direction and deductive are two focuses of English discourse. On the contrary, indirection and induction belong to Chinese discourse. In English writing, writers often explicitly state the topics, which are supported by facts. English discourse focuses on logical reasoning and clearly organized ideas. The main idea is explicitly stated as a topic sentence, with support of facts and references. However, Chinese discourse is commonly regarded as indirect and inductive in style. With circular thinking patterns, the students seldom mention the main ideas directly but adduce them progressively. This kind of discourse is understandable in Chinese. However, it is unacceptable to English speakers. Therefore, it is very necessary for students to know the different discourses in the two languages in order to improve their writing proficiency.

## II. ACQUIRING VOCABULARY

As justified in the previous chapter, most Chinese EFL learners tend to lay stress on the acquisition of the signified meaning of words. They are also found to refer only to the Chinese equivalents in textbooks or dictionaries. All these have led to literal translations of some words and phrases from Chinese to English on the part of the learners. Therefore, it is high time for those EFL learners to change their way of acquiring English vocabulary.

First, the emphasis of vocabulary acquisition on the part of the teachers and learners should also be placed on a wider range of word meanings instead of merely on the single translation equivalents as given in most textbooks. Most usage of the words in the textbooks implies that words have single meaning. That is, the vocabulary lists in those books usually contain single word translation. On the other hand, a traditional technique to teach vocabulary is to ask students to memorize wordlists. Hence, the words learnt in such a way will hardly form part of the learner's active vocabulary. Even though the learner has memorized the vocabulary, he/she tends to stick to its base meaning, which makes the occurrence of transfer possible.

Then, words should be learnt in a specific context such as in sentence structures, in phrases, or even in comparisons of grammatical features. Gross (1990) have found that among 12,000 simple verbs in French, no two could be used exactly the same in sentences. Recent research in SLA has started to attract learners' attention to not only the acquisition of word meaning but also to how to use the word in sentences. For example, in an investigation of the traditional way of making up sentences with particular words, Greenall (1994) gave students a box containing verbs such as "accept", "drink" and "sit", then he asked them to write sentences about hospitality of their country with the given words. The

students were found to use the words productively in meaningful syntactic contexts. In fact, Greenall's proposal in vocabulary acquisition is what Nida (1975) refers to as the acquisition of "grammatical meaning" of the vocabulary.

Speaking of structural context of vocabulary, one more issue should be highlighted in vocabulary acquisition. That is word collocation. Collocation designates a specific semantic relationship between words that co-occurs in phrases or sentences. Most cases of lexical transfer in the Chinese EFL writing are concerned with collocation errors of phrases, such as *do an honest man*, *go know the world*, and so on. Therefore, special attention should be paid to the collocation differences between the two languages in order to reduce the occurrence of transfer phenomena.

### III. ENCOURAGING THE STUDENTS TO READ AND WRITE

According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), when given new language material, learners will try to understand it actively with the help of their knowledge, and in this way, the input will become "comprehensible input" and be acquired by the learners. Therefore, input is the essential approach in language learning. There are two ways of input: reading and listening. So teachers should pay more attention to train the learners' ability in reading and listening, and lead them to read and listen conscientiously. To the students of non-English majors, different input material should be given according to their different interest so as to meet their different needs.

For Chinese non-English majors, their language environment is rather poor. Therefore, reading widely is one of the best ways to acquire standard English. Teachers should encourage their students to be exposed to authentic English so that the students could have the established native linguistic expressions to imitate in their writing. At the same time, teachers should help the students summarize the typical sentence patterns used by native English speakers. Only through this way can students master the patterns. And only by mastering these patterns can they avoid the appearance of Chinglish expressions in their English writing. As long as the students try to read extensively and make adequate summaries, they can produce more native-like English passages.

The teacher can carefully design some in-class or after-class reading exercises in their English class. Before reading, the teacher should guide the students to learn how to use the vocabulary with the same meaning or how to use different words in different styles. However, when the composition is assigned after class, the students should be encouraged to use dictionaries to deal with the items that they are not sure about. In addition, teachers should encourage the students to imitate the linguistic expressions of the foreign language. And imitation is based on wide reading. Teachers should provide the students with more authentic English materials, and encourage them to be exposed to authentic English widely outside the classroom so that the students could have the established native linguistic expressions to imitate in their writing and use less avoidance strategy.

The development of students' English writing skill should be treated as the same important as that of other three language skills, that is, the skill of listening, speaking and reading. Teachers should offer students opportunities for sufficient amount of writing practice with the purposes varying from basic functional sentence patterns to various styles of text such as narration, argumentation, exposition and description essays. Firstly, allow more time in the unit for writing practice rather than spend most of the time in analyzing small segments of language, hence, increasing students' motivation to learn and to write. Secondly, provide written text models, especially model essays written by native speakers which reflect real-world language or situations, thus increasing students' authentic intake.

### IV. CORRECTING OF THE WRITING

Teacher correction should be done with different strategies according to the English level of the students. Corder (1967) identified errors of language learners as three stages: presystematic, systematic and postsystematic. At the presystematic stage, the learner is unaware of the existence of a particular rule in the target language and his use of the target language is through random guessing. He is neither able to correct his errors nor to explain them. At the systematic stage, the learner has discovered some rules of the system of the target language, but is inconsistent in applying these rules or has wrongly applied these rules. He usually cannot correct his errors although he can explain why he makes them. At the postsystematic stage, the learner is quite consistent in his use of the target language. When he makes an error, he can both correct it and explain why it is incorrect. Though errors still exist at this stage, the occurrence of errors becomes infrequent. This almost coincides with Chinese students' three levels in learning English. Therefore, the author believes that different correction strategies should be used according to the varied English levels of students. For the students who are rather poor in English, or considered in their presystematic stage, teachers should clearly point out where the errors are and explain these errors directly to them. For the students who are in intermediate level, or considered in their systematic stage, teachers could only point out where the errors are, and then ask the students to explain their errors themselves. For those advanced learners who are in their postsystematic stage, teachers only need to put a mark on the paragraph where there are errors. By this way, students may gradually be conscious of the errors they frequently make and not commit such errors any more.

### V. USING DICTIONARY

One point is clear that the students are required to learn to look up words in dictionary to make up for the shortcoming of the textbook and class teaching. No matter how carefully the textbook is chosen, it can cover only

limited knowledge, and class time is also limited for solving problems. In order to cultivate students' capability in solving problems independently, looking up words in dictionary is a rather efficient way. It is also worth mentioning here that when and which word needs looking up and this point needs guidance from teachers. Almost every one of the non-English majors has a dictionary at hand. Teachers should put forward some suggestions: firstly, try not to use the dictionary with only Chinese translation in it; secondly, use English-Chinese dictionary instead and then transfer to the English-English dictionary; thirdly, the dictionary should bear a certain number of sentence examples.

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