

A Study of Optimizing Non-English Majors' English Writing Teaching Approach Through Micro-Writing

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Abstract

As an important output activity, English writing is a full show of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' English proficiency, for it is associated with vocabulary, grammar, sentences, culture and English thinking pattern. However, as for non-English majors, English writing is the part that they easily fail to gain marks, though they have been learning English for years. Four traditional writing teaching approaches which are product approach, process approach, genre approach and task-based approach don't help students too much and students still hold negative attitudes towards their writing and have no passion for writing. Such writing problems as oversimplified vocabulary and sentences, unrelated contents, incoherent and illogical discourse and negative transfer of the mother tongue are easy to be found in students' compositions. The more their writing problems are found, the more painful they feel when they write. As for teachers, although they spend a large amount of time teaching words and sentences and employing kinds of approaches in their teaching, the results are still rather disappointing. Therefore, this study analyzes four traditional English writing teaching approaches and proposes that micro-writing can be used to facilitate and optimize English writing learning and teaching. Different from traditional writing teaching approaches, micro-writing asks for concise and comprehensive writing. In addition, micro-writing is applicable for non-English majors' psychological features and advocates the integration of reading and writing. Therefore, micro-writing can inspire Chinese English majors' desire for English writing, thereby improving their writing proficiency.

Key words: Non-English majors' writing; Traditional writing teaching approaches; Micro-writing, optimize

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INTRODUCTION

Micro-writing refers to a concise but comprehensive, clear-targeted and short-texted but deep-meant writing approach (Du, 2015). A range of micro-writing tasks can activate language, encourage communication and aid class cohesion. Different from four traditional teaching approaches of English writing, micro-writing stresses on being concise but comprehensive. Meanwhile, it fits into English majors' psychological features. Besides, what is advocated by the micro-writing is that writing is integrated with reading. Thus compositions are no longer devoid of meanings. What's more, micro-writing accords with the ideological trends of fragmentation and liberalization.

The authors got 171 papers whose topic is micro-writing from CNKI, 34 papers from Wanfang and 9 papers from Calis. To be mentioned, 34 Papers in Wanfang can also be found in CNKI. Thus in total, there are 180 papers related to micro-writing. Among 180 papers, about 68 papers which are only Chinese compositions, are unrelated to the author's research and turn out to be ineffective. Amid the rest 112 papers, 82% papers concentrate on Chinese micro-writing and 14% papers focus on the relationship between micro-writing and reading as well as the internet technology and micro-writing. Papers on English micro-writing (as the First Language and Second Language) only account for 4% among these effective 112 papers. It can be inferred from the above analysis that

the target of micro-writing is mainly the mother tongue. Micro-writing studies abroad focus on English writing as the first language, while studies at home stress on Chinese writing. Seldom discuss the English micro-writing as the second language. Therefore, the paper proposes that micro-writing which is borrowed from English writing as the first language can be implemented to stimulate non-English majors' desire for writing and optimize English writing learning and teaching.

1. ANALYSIS OF FOUR TRADITIONAL WRITING TEACHING APPROACHES

1.1 Analysis of Product Approach

The theoretical basis of product approach is behavioristic theory which centers on stimuli-responses and holds that the teaching of writing is achieved in terms of the development of sets of habits through process of stimulus and response (Nunan, 2001). It means that teachers provide accurate and concrete writing examples and students are required to imitate them. Put simply, students are asked to imitate the provided example and write one composition and then teachers just correct them and make comments. As its name suggests, product approach stresses on the product, namely students' accomplished writing and it overemphasizes the linguistic knowledge such as words, phrases, sentences and structure. However, what are ignored in this one-way traditional product approach are interaction, negotiation and creation in pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing. In addition, students' writing motivation is not activated. As a result, students lose interest in English writing and it is hard for teachers to achieve their teaching objectives.

1.2 Analysis of Process Approach

Since the 1980s, researches abroad on English writing (English as the First language) have found that the development of writing process is not a linear trend but a cyclic trend, which has also aroused second language acquisition researchers' attention. They reflected on the product approach, criticized its deficiencies and finally proposed the process-oriented writing approach. The theoretical basis of process approach is the interactionist theory, which holds that writing is actually a cyclic-trended cognitive mental process, emphasizing the role of interaction among students or between students and teachers. As its name indicates, process approach focuses on the creating process. Four steps are taken in the writing process, including pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing or proof-reading, which intervene throughout the whole writing process. Creating, thinking, interaction and cooperation are involved in the process approach. In comparison with the product approach, the process approach has made a leap especially in the aspects of contents-enriching and creativity, but the linguistic

forms and genres are paid less attention to. Implementing the process approach is time-consuming and energy-consuming. The students with higher English level and those who are eager to study writing well find it valuable to take these four steps of the process approach and can gain a lot during their writing process, while students with lower English level find it hard to interact with their peers and they are unable to help check errors and mistakes, not to mention give useful suggestions. Hence they are likely to dislike English writing due to lack the sense of achievement. Furthermore, even for students with higher English level, they could not handle the time-limited writing tasks in CET-4 and CET-6 (CET-4 and CET-6 are two examinations which non-English majors take and the ultimate objectives of these two examinations are to evaluate non-English majors' English proficiency), for they are accustomed to going through the cyclic four steps which take much time. If so, they will lose confidence in English writing too.

1.3 Analysis of Genre Approach

As its name tells, genre approach applies genre analysis theory to English writing teaching. In the mid 1980s, genre approach came into being and nowadays it has been widely employed in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language Learning) writing teaching class. This genre approach attaches importance to the schematic organization of the text, which means all the writing activities are conducted under this schematic text. Compared with the process approach, the genre approach makes students put more emphasis on the process of constructing different genres. Moreover, different genres' expressions vary based on the communicative purposes under different contexts. To be concise, according to different communicative purposes of texts, writing can be fallen into categories like narration, description, argumentation and exposition. In the writing class, teachers provide model texts of different genres and guide students to imitate them. In the genre approach the teacher is still the center of the class while students are the negative receivers like in the product approach. As students are negative receivers in class, their writing skills and proficiency are hard to improve. Accordingly, they feel bored with English writing.

1.4 Analysis of Task-Based Approach

Task-based teaching approach emphasizes accomplishing tasks, advocating communication and sharing of ideas in an interactive environment. During the process of cooperating to accomplish a certain task, teachers make the necessary instructions on writing strategies, while students discuss, write and evaluate with peers. In this way, students' interest in English writing can be aroused. However, it is still unclear how to implement task-based approach in the teaching of English writing, for it is difficult to find a universal framework of how to

design tasks and how to arrange for students to make presentation, discuss, evaluate and report together within 40 minutes (in China, there are usually 40 minutes for one period of class in universities). Like in process approach, students with higher English level are liable to gain benefits from the task-based approach, while students with lower English level feel painful and gradually refuse to take part in the writing process due to low achievement.

To sum up, after a systematic analysis of the four traditional approaches, each approach bears its disadvantages as well as advantages. Speaking of product approach, it fails to engage students in the writing process and students' motivation is not stimulated. As for the process approach, it is time-consuming and energy-consuming as well as unaware of communicative purposes of different genres. Students with lower English level will feel unconfident in the writing process. As to genre approach, students act as negative receivers like in the product approach and they gradually lose interest in English writing class. In view of task-based approach, it is also time-consuming and it is hard to operate in class. In addition, students with lower English level have no desire for complex tasks. All in all, it is urgent to find a new writing approach which can not only accord with the requirement of social development and technological updating but also meet students' needs.

2. MICRO-WRITING OPTIMIZING ENGLISH WRITING TEACHING APPROACH

2.1 Characteristics of Micro-Writing

Micro-writing involves four types, namely the rapid experience writing, character experience writing, text migration writing and prototype writing. Characteristics of these four types of micro-writing in English writing (English as the First Language) are analyzed to prove that micro-writing is able to arouse students' motivation and promote their writing proficiency.

Firstly, the core concept of micro-writing is being concise but comprehensive. All the four above-mentioned kinds of micro-writing are required to be finished within a short while. Students are in favor of micro-writing, for not wanting to write too long compositions is their dream. Although micro-writing is short-texted, comprehensiveness is also taken into account. Micro-writing is not a mere form of words but full of rich contents. As for teachers, it is convenient for them to conduct discussion, peer evaluation and reflection.

Secondly, micro-writing possesses the characteristic of educational applicableness. Simply saying, micro-writing is applicable for the psychological features of English majors. As grown-ups, English majors are more liable to express their own ideas and feelings towards their lives

freely. They would like to actively take part in the writing activities and experience their own lives in writing instead of passively accepting teachers' instructions, so writing materials and contexts are more authentic in micro-writing than the other four approaches. For instance, the rapid experience writing can be precisely described as a writing teaching approach associating students' experiences in lives with the required writing task which is combined with themes of reading materials. Questions closely related with students' lives are raised by teachers and then students are supposed to write down their inner feelings. Character experience writing regards the reading materials as the breakthrough point, asking students to shift all roles in the reading materials to several contexts in their real lives and play the roles. As indicated by its name, the text migration writing aims to put themes of the reading materials into the writing task. For example, after reading *Night Watch* in Integrated Course 2, New College English (Second Edition), students are requested to write a touching story happening in your life. In the prototype writing, prototype is not restricted to texts. Besides, pictures, videos, contexts and questions could also be used as prototype, which is the trigger of inspiration and creativity of non-English majors.

Thirdly, micro-writing features the integration of reading and writing. What micro-writing advocates is that writing comes before or after reading. Based on the view that reading and writing are interdependent and inseparable, micro-writing is designed before or after reading texts. In doing so, micro-writing can be clear-targeted and meaningful. What the four above-mentioned writing teaching approaches are concerned about is not the combination of reading and writing but writing itself. Thus in this aspect, micro-writing makes a big progress and solve the writing problems of articles devoid of substances and meanings. As one kind of micro-writing, the rapid experience writing is always taken before reading one text, while the character experience writing is often assigned after reading one text. As for another two micro-writings, it is obvious that they are both closely associated with texts. Since students in English writing class fancy lots of inputs, their motivation and desire for writing are stimulated.

Fourthly, micro-writing approach also emphasizes the creative process writing like process approach. The process is described as "pre-writing-drafting-revising-proofreading", while the process of micro-writing is described as "pre-writing- drafting-discussing- revising-reporting". Both processes are recursive. However, what distinguishes micro-writing approach from the process approach is that each process in micro-writing is brief but effective. Therefore, it is feasible to implement micro-writing in non-English majors' writing class and students don't reject this brief and effective micro-writing approach.

2.2 Application of Micro-Writing in Non-English Majors' English Writing Class in China

Four main kinds of micro-writing including the rapid experience writing, the character experience writing, the text migration writing and the prototype writing in English writing (English as the First Language) in America are applied to Chinese non-English majors' English writing class, aiming at proving that micro-writing is beneficial for Chinese non-English majors' English writing and it is an optimized teaching approach, compared with the four traditional English writing teaching approaches.

2.2.1 Application of the Rapid Experience Writing

The rapid experience writing attempts to explore students' past experiences for writing. The writing direction can be designed as follows before reading one article titled as *The Day I Was Fat* by Lois Diaz-Talty in Reading Course 2, New College English (Second Edition).

The writer of this essay felt offended by the young guy who called her fat. The boys' words hurt her badly. What made you feel offended ever? Plumb your memory for experiences and write down some details and your feelings. You may let it unfold in a story-like fashion.

The rapid experience writing makes students recall their past experiences, the storage of knowledge, social experience and emotion and offers an experiential reference to reading. Furthermore, this short-time writing strikes a sympathetic resonance in the students' minds. Through writing their own experiences quickly, their desire to express and write is greatly inspired.

2.2.2 Application of the Character Experience Writing

The character experience writing task is in the following. After reading the article titled as *I Know What's Right for My Son* by Louise Fitzhugh on Reading Course 2, New College English (Second Edition), students are asked to write in this way.

Supposing you are Willie, the seven-year-old boy, you try to convince your parents of your ambition of being an actor but you fail. To figure out the solution, you may ask for help from a local newspaper. Therefore Mr. Sherldan, Mrs. Sherldan, Emma and you are ready to be interviewed by the newspaper. Three classmates pretend to be Mr. Sherldan, Mrs. Sherldan and Emma. You four are sitting at the table and the rest of your classmates begin to ask you various kinds of questions. You want to publicize your ambition and persuade your parents, especially your father to support you. You are supposed to write down the process of the interview.

In the character experience writing, after acting Willie in the article, students write down what Willie thought and acted. Consequently, as active learners in this writing process, students are more willing to write than before.

2.2.3 Application of the Text Migration Writing

The direction of text migration writing is designed as follows. After reading carefully the article *Not Poor, Just*

Broke by Dick Gregory from Reading Course 2, New College English(second edition), you are required to finish one micro-writing. Although the writer's single-parent black family lived on relief, his mother did not lose her hope. The writer revealed the beautiful soul of his mother and the values she cherished in this article. The mother has the beautiful soul, so do your parents, teachers and intimate friends. To exemplify beautiful soul of one of them, you are going to write one instance which left a deep impression to you in the past.

In the attempt to make reading facilitate writing, the text migration writing is a lead. Students' final compositions are not so boring and meaningless as they used to be after the text migration writing is conducted among non-English majors. The key to the text migration writing is to find an association between the reading materials and students' writing assignments. Through this association, students imitate to write instances and feelings.

2.2.4 Application of the Prototype Writing

As mentioned, pictures, words, and texts can be treated as prototype in English micro-writing. Along with the high-speeded technological update, such social network platforms as QQzone, Microblog and Wechat are widely used by Chinese non-English majors. Pictures which could be taken as prototypes are accumulated from these platforms by teachers, for these pictures are students' favorite and can arouse their curiosity.

Take one example, one picture of a big hole is shown at the beginning of the class and Students are told that they followed one dog towards this hole. That dog ran into the hole. What will happen next? Will you go into the hole after the dog? When you pass through the hole, what comes to your mind? Write a short story within ten minutes.

Texts from reading books or social network platforms can play the prototype as well. Texts as prototype writing are similar to the text migration writing. Based on the theme which the text provides, students begin creative writing and finish it within the regulated time.

SUMMARY

Compared with four traditional English writing teaching approaches, micro-writing approach makes progress in the following aspects. First, micro-writing is effective and not time-consuming. Like in process approach, micro-writing stresses on creating process which involves prewriting, drafting, discussing, revising and reporting. However, it takes students less time to go through steps in micro-writing than in process approach. Unlike task-based approach, micro-writing approach is much easier to carry out in a 40-minute class. Second, micro-writing approach accords with the mental characteristics of Chinese non-English majors. In micro era, the ideologies of

fragmentation and liberalization have great influence on the styles of non-English majors' expressions. As shown in the four kinds of micro-writing, the micro-writing contents are closely associated with students' personal experiences and feelings. As a result, writing materials are more authentic in micro-writing than the other four approaches. Last but not least, what distinguishes micro-writing from four traditional approaches is advocating the integration of reading and writing. The idea of reading promoting writing is rooted in micro-writing, which provides a better solution of compositions devoid of substances. That reading and writing are interdependent and inseparable complies with the nature of language learning. As creation and innovation stand on the giants' shoulders, reading plays an indispensable role in writing. Micro-writing can remarkably arouse non-English majors' enthusiasm of writing and improve their writing proficiency. Therefore, non-English majors' English writing teaching is optimized through micro-writing. It is highly recommended by the author that micro-writing should be applied on a larger scale. For the next study, the author could do research on micro-writing in optimizing English majors' writing teaching models.

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