Teaching Writing With Comparison-Contrast Approach

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1. Introduction

Of the four basic language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing occupies an important and indispensable position. Writing, as well as speaking, is normally considered as a productive or creative skill. Therefore acquiring this skill seems to be more laborious and demanding for the Chinese students. It goes without saying that the writing skill needs special training: hence various writing courses offered at tertiary institutions. Moreover, Since the implementation of College English Test Band 4 and 6 in 1985, great advances have been made in college English teaching and learning for non-English majors in Chinese tertiary institutes. Such advances are best reflected in the teaching and learning of reading. However, what puzzles and worries tertiary English teachers in China is that there is a big gap between students’ reading and writing ability. Although they have gone a large step further in reading competence, they remain at the starting point in writing. Li & Li (2001: 55) summarize three main reasons for the ineffective teaching and learning of writing:

--low priority and low requirements for writing
--students’ false perceptions about English writing
--students’ lack of knowledge about the characteristics of English writing

According to Hayes & Flower (in Zhang, 2001: 45), writing is an individual cognitive problem-solving skill, focusing on the writing process in literate adults as a complex and recursive process weaving through stages of planning, sentence generation, and reviewing with each stage containing additional recursive sub-processes, such as organizing and editing. EFL students are non-native speakers of English and they are entering a new culture with a generalized set of academic rules that apply to discourse. However, as an old Chinese saying goes, first impressions always stick to the mind the fastest. The same is true with the learning of a language. Unlike native speakers of English who start their language lessons with beautiful nursery rhymes, children stories, etc. in which the non-finites, the subordinate clauses, the elliptical sentences, the prepositional phrases, etc. come only as a matter of course, the Chinese students start off with simple, regular sentences. Many students take it for granted that writing is just a process of translating words and filtering meaning from one language to another. Furthermore, their textbooks are compiled by language teachers whose task is to rewrite from original English books by taking away the modifiers and idiomatic expressions, for they are afraid that the students may not be able to assimilate English in the natural English way. Hence, the English taught and learned in primary and middle schools goes somewhat Chinglish. When the students get to college, they have already
formed the habit of trying to say and write in English what they would in Chinese.

Since first impression sticks to the mind the fastest, the composition teacher’s first task is to remove the old impressions from the students mind by imprinting new ones on it. Therefore composition teachers must make special researches on how to adjust the Chinese mind to English ways of putting an idea in proper written form.

2. Theoretical Base: the Product-Based Approach

In teaching writing in English as a second or foreign language, the focus has traditionally been on the production of appropriate kinds of written text. Students have been taught to write paragraphs or essays exemplifying contrast and comparison, description, classification, and so on. Writing techniques has typically focused initially on the level of the sentence, moving on to practice larger units of discourse. From this perspective, writing is taught through guided practice in producing the various kinds of texts we create when we write. This is referred to as a product-focused approach (Richards, 1985: 329).

According to Richards, the product-focused approach bears some of the following features:
1. learners are assumed to have specific product-related writing needs: e.g. how to write essays, reports, business letters
2. these can best be addressed by teaching learners to recognize the different kinds of rhetorical patterns used in particular kinds of writing: e.g. difference between descriptive, narrative, expository and persuasive writing; formats used to present information in an essay of report; different ways to organizing information in paragraphs.
3. these rhetorical patterns and compositions based on them serve as models for different kinds of writing.
4. the mechanics of writing are also taught; handwriting, capitalization, punctuation and spelling
5. correct sentence structure is an essential component of writing; grammatical skills receive a considerable emphasis.
6. errors in writing are avoided by providing learners with models to follow or by guiding and controlling what learners write to prevent them from making errors.

Techniques often used in a product-based approach begin with controlled writing exercises and gradually move towards freer writing once the learner has memorize the underlying models he is intended to follow. Techniques include:
--expanding an outline or summary provided
--providing models to which learners make minor changes and substitutions
--constructing paragraphs from frames, tables, and other guides
--writing a text by answering a set of questions
--sentence combining: developing complex sentences from sentences provided by the teachers

Taylor (1976) discuses techniques for teaching composition to ESL learners and notes:

Training in free composition should begin at the sentence level….Students should receive practice in sentence writing….The essential points to bear in mind is that the students should
be made aware of what a sentence is, what it looks like on paper, and how to write one. (Taylor, 1976: 312)

The overall emphasis on this approach is clearly on the finished product, and teaching techniques and activities are generally aimed at highlighting the rhetorical organization required for the task, and at the qualities of coherence, logic, paragraph organization, style, technique, and other aspects of good composition. From this perspective, as a learner’s writing proficiency develops, the learner develops the capacity to handle more complex writing tasks, using a greater variety of rhetorical and discourse modes and mastering more subtle and complex aspects of paragraph and sentence organization.

3. Specific Practice in Teaching Writing in A Comparison-Contrast Approach

As is discussed above, the comparison-contrast approach mainly focuses on the sentence level. As far as writing is concerned, the teacher is duty-bound to enable his students to put an idea into the kind of English which a native-speaker of English can readily understand. When a student writes the sentence: “Human bodies are the only source of blood in the hospitals so that its amount is limited”, he actually wants to express the meaning that “More blood is needed in the hospitals than human bodies can apply”. Obviously he has misused the “so that” clause and is not accustomed to the use of the comparative degree of adjectives. In fact there are a lot of phenomena in the English language which are especially difficult for the Chinese student to get used to. Such language phenomena are understandable to him, but he can hardly use them with ease in his own writing. In other words, he knows them receptively, but not productively.

With a view to removing the hampering influence of our own native tongue, in my process of teaching writing, I try to make my students consciously compare the English language with Chinese and learn to find out the similarities and dissimilarities of the two languages in the wording as well as in the syntactic structure, with emphasis on dissimilarities.

The following is my way of arranging writing class.

1. in-class work:
   --selected passages for studying materials
   aim: model consciousness-raising
   --group discussions on good models useful for Chinese students
   aim: comparison-and-contrast consciousness

2. out-of-class work:
   --extensive reading to find more dissimilarities
   aim: reinforcement
   --composition exercises
   aim: application

Some important dissimilarities between the two languages found by the students are summarized as follows:

1. The Chinese are more apt to use verbs in many cases where the English would most probably use nouns.

   Ex.  I ran out when it was raining. (Chinese style)
I ran out in the rain. (English style)

2. In many cases the Chinese think in the negative way whereas the English think in the positive.

Ex. Don’t pay attention to him (Chinese style)
Leave him alone (English style)

3. Chinese students don’t have the consciousness to use the There be structure to describe something abstract, although they know how to use it to state the concrete thing.

Ex. Something was stolen in the hotel last night. (Chinese style)
There was a theft in the hotel last night. (English style)

4. Chinese students don’t have the consciousness to tend to use the absolutes structure.

Ex. She smoked a lot and her fingers were brown with nicotine. (Chinese style)
She smoked a lot, her fingers brown with nicotine. (English style)

5. The English tend to use prepositional phrases.

Ex. He looked at her and was surprised (Chinese style)
He looked at her in surprise. (English style)

As a matter of fact, there are quite a lot to be compared between the two languages. But what we are concerned with are only those which the Chinese students will most likely ignore and fail to turn into productive knowledge. Armed with these findings, I intentionally guide the students to make comparison and contrast of their own writings, through which they can raise their awareness of English style of writing. Next part is a good example cited from our daily practice.

4. A Case Study

The following passage is written by one of my students. I single it out as a model to show how comparison-contrast approach works.

A Short Vacation

1. It was October 1, I traveled with my classmates. We went to the vast field in the village. 2. There are many big trees planted around the field and the big leaves are very green. We ate brown bread for lunch. Xiao Cheng cut loaves with his fine knife. After lunch, someone said, “Would you like to listen a story?” 3. We all put up our hands. 4. The theme of the story is about prince and princess. How wonderful their dream was! They dreamt to travel all over the world. 5. They succeed in the end by getting over some difficulty. 6. Then we have a match. Zhang Min ran very fast and he won a red ribbon. Xiao Cheng took a fine vase and collected some pretty leaves. 7. It was six o’clock, we begin to have supper. We sang many fine songs. Suddenly, we heard someone cried out, “Catch those thieves”, and the voice became nearer and nearer. After a moment, we saw two men run very fast. We thought this two men perhaps are thieves. 8. Then we used a good method to catch this two thieves. 9. And the luck woman gave a thousand thanks to us. What a wonderful and short vacation it is!

The main errors in this writing are:
--Inconsistence in tense—sentences 2, 6, 7
--Misusing of infinitive verbs—sentence 9, 11
--Confusion of simple and complex sentences—sentences 1, 8
Apart from these grammatical errors, this essay uses too many simple sentences thus lack of variation in writing. Furthermore, it also needs connective words to indicate coherence. The following is the revised version after the discussion and correction by the students themselves, which is comparatively as native as possible.

On October 1 I traveled with my classmates in the vast field near our village. There were many big trees with green leaves around the field. At noon we ate brown bread for lunch and Xiao Cheng cut loaves with his fine knife. After lunch some one suggested, “Would you like to enjoy a story?” All of us raised our hands and clapped. The story is about a prince and a princess who had a wonderful dream to travel around the world. They met many troubles, but they succeeded in the end by getting over them.

After the story, we had a match. Zhang Min ran so fast that no one could catch up with him. So Zhang won a red ribbon as prize.

At six o’clock we began to have supper. Suddenly we heard someone shouting, “Catch those thieves!” In the distance we saw two men rushing out of the village with a handbag. We immediately dashed towards the two thieves. After ten minutes’ chasing the thieves were caught. The woman who got back her bag showed her thanks to us. What an exciting and wonderful vocation we had!

5. Conclusion

In the course of time, my students are able to make more and more contributions to the class by studying the models they had found out and soon they became so model-conscious, comparison-conscious that they would whoop with joy when they came across a good model or when they found that they could be able to produce one themselves. In a word, once being comparison-contrast conscious, the students will watch out for good idiomatic usages and be prepared to work toward overcoming the interference of his mother tongue on the target language.

References

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