READ TO WRITE, WRITE TO LEARN

-- An Output-oriented Mode for ELT

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Abstract

Enlightened by Stephen Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1985) and Merrill Swain’s Output Hypothesis (1995), the author tries to illustrate a three-step output-oriented ELT mode in the layer of reading and writing, which she invented on the basis of years of college English teaching and experimented with satisfying results. The mode consists of three steps: optimal and extensive input followed tightly and surely by intensive writing practice designed accordingly, which might be afterthought of the contents, comments on the writing styles or characters, and/or imitation of certain technique etc., then assessment and improvement, which includes self and peer evaluation and typical good, bad or even so-so sample analysis. The purpose is to bridge across reading and writing, to maximize transition from input to output by timely practice of writing. At the same time, the paper calls for enough attention to be paid to the importance of writing teaching and practicing in Chinese ELF classroom and curriculum.

Key words: Stephen Krashen, Input Hypothesis, Merrill Swain, Output Hypothesis, output-oriented

I. Introduction

Many a survey and research shows that both Chinese English teachers and learners tend to be more interested and more proficient in receptive skills (reading and listening) than productive skills like writing and speaking. This tendency naturally resulted in a disconnection between input and output (Niu Qiang, 2001), and a comparatively low efficiency in both English language teaching and learning. The undeniable reality of omnipresent LEP (Limited English Proficiency) phenomenon has brought Chinese ESL practitioners to realize that partiality and think about what they can do to tackle it. With the reform in ESL education in China, emphasis is placed on listening and speaking (oral output) by teachers and learners as well. However, written output is well neglected as it used to be, especially in non-English major field of tertiary (undergraduate and postgraduate) level. As a matter of fact, writing seldom occurs to learners unless they are pressed for, in exams or in assignments, for example. When they come to write, they, more often than not, resort to doing translation from perception in their native tongue rather than writing in English in its real sense. (That’s one of the major reasons why awkward and inappropriate Pidgin English or so-called Chinglish abounds in Chinese students’ composition.) In English classes, writing is usually used as a testing device to diagnose grammar or comprehension errors. In the past few years scholars pointed out that written language is not just a conversion of oral language on pages. It is “a true representation of the correct forms of language and should be more valuable to
language learning itself” (Grabe, W. & Kaplan, R.B. 1996). Since written output is for and of learning, can we resort to it for a higher efficiency and better proficiency in English learning? And how?

Enlightened by Stephen Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1985) and Merrill Swain’s Output Hypothesis (1995), the author tries to illustrate in this paper a three-step output-oriented ELT mode in the layer of reading and writing, which she put forward on the basis of years of college English teaching. The twice experiments on non-English major students in Shanxi University turn out favorable.

II. The Program

The mode can be briefly described as ‘read to write, and write to learn’.

The objective of the program is to bridge across reading and writing while awakening a producing desire and consciousness in learners throughout the process of input, attempt to enlarge and maximize transition from input to output by the timely practice of writing after reading, and thereby to make ELL more efficient and effective. Meanwhile, the program calls for more importance to be attached to written output’s role in ELT and ELL in China.

2.1 Theoretic Basis

“Reading and writing are integrally linked as skills, and reading and writing have common cognitive processes” (Flower et al., 1990). The interaction of the pair is obvious: we read to write. While reading is a way of learning, writing, as a more accurate kind of output, is another. “Writing reinforces grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary.” “Writing is unique way to reinforce learning.” (Ann Raimes, 1983) Much more than that, “writing is an activity that involves the intuitive and non-rational as well as the rational faculties”, as Maxine Hairston stated (1982; Reid, Joy M. 1993). All these utter one voice that writing should work in helping to developing learners’ intuition for as well as proficiency in language.

As to reading, Krashen’s “i+1” comprehensible input hypotheses (1985) holds up in language teaching. That is, language acquisition is most likely to happen through comprehensible input, through understanding messages in the target language that are just a little above the learner’s current level.

Thirdly, Swain’s Output Hypothesis maintains that the learner’s comprehensible output has an independent and indispensable role. Encouragement of or even pushing for it is significant for learners to progress further towards target-like competence (1985). However her research stays at listening and speaking, and seems more feasible to beginners. This mode is designed in an attempt to extend the theory to tertiary learners in reading and writing.

2.2 Procedures

The mode consists of three strictly-controlled steps: 1) optimal input as model, guided by message understanding and text analysis in light of its producing; 2) intensive writing practice to follow tightly and surely; 3) assessment and improvement,

2.2.1 the first step first of all involves teacher’s labor in material choosing, text analysis, and so on.

The material chosen should be proper as a model, comprehensible and slightly above the learner’s present level, though it is not necessarily “i+1” as Krashen stated in his Input Hypothesis
It is ok even if it is “i+2 or 3”. It is hoped the material be “interesting and/or relevant, and in sufficient quantity” (Krashen, 1982) to be optimal.

Besides, teacher should be able to analyze the text in both form and style in an interesting way, and inspire learners to read with a producing desire all the time. He plays a role as a guide who show the learner how to read: read for the message instead of for words, phrases and grammar only; read critically instead of reading passively like a data sponge into which meaning is poured and then dries up as time goes by; read as a writer to see how an article is formed and how an idea should be organized, and how this formation and organization helps to convey the writer’s idea. The step mainly finds its support in Patricia Carrell’s opinion that when form and content are familiar, reading and writing are relatively easy. But when one or the other or the both are unfamiliar, efficiency, effectiveness, and success are problematic (1989, 1990).

After some demonstrations, teacher might as well sit back and encourage or push students upstage to read actively as showed. Group discussion is encouraged. Extensive supplementary reading is needed to ensure the input quality sufficient. All the time, a producing consciousness is to be stressed for learners to get ready for following production.

In a word, the input and the way of putting in should serve to inspire the learner’s interest in the content, to develop learner’s sensitivity to the language, and to trigger learner’s consciousness and desire to express his own views in the language he has just learned. Reading in this way consciously and making it a habit is the first and foremost step to transition. This step is quite demanding for teacher, yet it is the prerequisite.

2.2.2 the second step follows the first with reader and learner’s immediate and intensive response, which might be afterthought of the idea, comments on the writing styles or even characters, and/or imitation of certain technique or structure and whatever interests the learners as a reader. Meaningful writing of importance and interest to the learners (writer now) is inviting enough, so is more possible to be put into practice. By whatever the topic, and in whatever way, output in the learner’s part is encouraged and sometimes pushed for the learners to turn from passive receiving to active producing-guided or free. Passive input without reflection is not of much good to language acquisition in the author’s view. Producing in the target language causes learners to notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge, stimulate them to “notice what they do not know or know only partially”(Swain, 1995). That’s kind of learning. Meanwhile, the process of producing, acted immediately upon by input, might be a process of discovery, for the learner to rack his/her brains to find the thoughts as well as words for his/her output, which he/she would never think of venturing to use in other cases, and therefore reinforce and maximize intake to take place subtly in learners’ mind. This step is of vital importance.

2.2.3 The third step includes self and peer evaluation besides teacher’s assessment. The purpose of the evaluation and assessment, however, is not to grade, nor should it be used only as a testing device to diagnose grammar or comprehension errors. Instead, it means to improve. So the sample chosen might probably not be typically good, or bad; it might as well be so-so writing. Its analysis often anonymously by teacher in class, or by the writer her/himself, or by peer students, is intended for the learner to beware himself/herself of the awkwardness or the improperness of the language system itself while awakening the learner’s consciousness to go beyond the system itself to develop an intuition and a feel for the language, which is regarded as critical to language proficiency.

A revised version is usually kept for learners to gain some sense of achievement. That is a
stimulus good enough for them to carry on. With writing, the learner explores, develops, and refines the language he’s acquired as well as the ideas he’s got in a way that “doing in your head” can’t compare with. He writes as he reflects, explores and discovers, only to find a language structure has been established, and a native – like language proficiency has been developed, totally unknown to himself.

The mode stresses the consistency of the three steps and lays more emphasis on the latter two. It is especially applicable to those intermediate learners, who have learned English for a quite some time and is able to understand well by reading or sometimes listening and struggle to produce a little, though quite so often not in a native speaker’s way, as most of the non-English major college students are. The method might be challenging for teachers yet would be effective and efficient if carried out properly.

2.3 Survey & Discussion

I was fortunate to have the chance to experiment the program twice, firstly on the first year graduate students of 2003 year in their writing class, and then on the sophomores of 2002 in an optional course. The first group of subjects number up to 82 and the second, 24, both non-English major, and of intermediate level. Apart from personal interview at random, questionnaires (attached at the back) are handed out to subjects before and after the course to inquire about how, how much, and what they read and write, inclusively their expectations and the effects of the 20-hour-course on their ESL learning and learning strategies. Comparison of the two questionnaires shows that most of the subjects (72% and 78% respectively) underwent changes in four aspects listed below:

a) Way of reading: before the course, they mainly read to understand, to grasp the message and tick the correct choice provided; after the course, they begin to read critically from a writer’s view, and above all they now read with an output demand lingering in their mind all the time.

b) Way of writing: before the course, they write very little in English, and most often they write in the three-paragraph format to meet the requirements of CET band 4 or 6. And when they write, they resort to translation in the real sense; after the course, they turn to writing more often after reading. Above all they begin to “learn to write in English” in their own words.

c) Writing’s status in their English learning: writing in English was something they hate to do; now writing is an effective and efficient means for them to learn English.

d) The course is quite refreshing and helpful in many ways.

Although subjects’ progress in proficiency has yet to be quantified and qualified, their improvement is noticeable. It is believed the great reward is only a matter of time if the method is carried on with commitment. The experiment stands in that it provides a thought – provoking way towards other than away from what we want.

2.4 Limits & Limitations

No method can be so perfect as to fit for everyone. Neither is the one discussed here.

It is no easy job for a writing teacher to find appropriate materials all the time, since there is no a prepared textbook or something of the kind available in China so far. They have to cut and shape available materials to meet the requirements.
It remains a problem how can busy English teachers in China give daily assignments especially to big class, which is so common in China’s universities, and at the same time ensure students’ work be “substantially correct” and “in acceptable form with acceptable usage” (Christina Paulston 1972, Reid, Joy M. 1993).

In addition, quite a number of English teachers in China have received little education about the teaching of writing, and they themselves seldom write. So they’d rather choose not to teach writing.

Above all, it’s hoped the testing system could balance rationally on receptive ability and productive competence.

III. Conclusion

With all the limits and limitations, the mode sheds on ELT in China a few rays of hope. In the near future to come, any new ELT method is supposed to “acknowledged the value of writing for generating language and sees writing not just as one of the four skills to be learned, and usually the last one to be learned” (Raimes, 1985). It could well be an effective and efficient means for us to employ to acquire the maximal transition, and further, language proficiency in English language teaching and learning. Writing class is entitled to be “a more integral, if not integrated part of ELT curricula”. (Reid, Joy, 1993)

No wonder written output is a hard labor. The lazy nature of human beings tends to deviate both teachers and learners from it. Yet the role that it plays in effective and efficient second language learning/ acquiring and literacy should by no means be ignored.

References

Appendix

Questionnaire

Following are some questions concerning your English learning strategies. Please tick from the items provided. You are encouraged to write your own if none of it fits you. Thanks.

1. Have you read some extra-curriculum materials? If yes, note down some.
   a) Yes ( ) __________________________  b) No ( )
2. Most of the time you read to
3. After reading, what is left in your mind is most often
   a) almost nothing ( )  b) some words and phrases ( )
   c) the message conveyed ( )  d) the writing style or form ( )  f) some characters ( )

4. How often do you write in English?
   a) unless have to ( )  b) seldom ( )  c) after reading ( )
   d) whenever I feel like writing about once a week ( )  e) almost every day in diary ( )

5. How do you write in English?
   a) always to meet the requirements of CET 4 or 6 ( )
   b) most often to meet the requirements of CET 4 or 6 ( )
   e) as I like ( )
   e) _______________________________________________________________________

6. Does the saying “writing in English is translating” hold true in you? If not, what’s your
   writing philosophy?
   Yes ( )  No ( )
   _______________________________________________________________________

7. What is the status of writing like in your learning strategy?
   a) unimportant ( )  b) moderate ( )  c) important ( )  d) very important ( )
   e) ______

8. What do you expect from this course? (first questionnaire)
   Is the course helpful? In what way? (second questionnaire)