Chinese high school students’ L1 writing instruction: implications for EFL writing in college
--A qualitative study

Wang Zhaohui
Beijing Institute of Machinery

Abstract

Recent theory in L2 writing has been influenced by the social constructionist view. (Journet, 1990). This approach emphasizes the importance of the social content where learning takes place and conceptualizes writing as a social act. The current study of genre (Swales, 1990) and L2 and L2 literacy theory also highlighted the nature of genre knowledge as being dynamic and situated in a particular context. A case study by Spack (1997) and research by Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) showed that students’ L1 educational background influenced their approach to learning L2 and shaped the way they thought about L2 learning. This study is to explore the issues related to Chinese L1 literacy background, such as: (1) Learner’s L1 writing experience and instruction in writing class; (2) the nature of Chinese high school students literacy. The study shows that many students have sufficient opportunities to express themselves in L1 writing, since journals are collected every week. However, writing product rather than writing process is evaluated in class. The interview also indicates that most students have been intensively trained in expressing ideas and opinions clearly and logically in L1. However, even if students get certain training in writing, the writing instructions they have are much less than that of reading. The implications for EFL writing in college is that (1) college EFL writing teachers should encourage students to make full use of their L1 writing abilities and expertise and writing strategies to facilitate their L2 writing; (2) due to the difference in rhetorical features of the two languages, teachers should introduce the English rhetorical features in class; (3) teachers should turn writing class into a place where students research their own literacy and develop critical awareness of what they need to learn about L2 writing.

key words: EFL writing, L1 literacy, L1 writing instruction

1. Introduction

In EFL situation, the college English teaching has been criticized for being “time consuming and low in proficiency”. However, in the case of writing, the problem is not only concerned with efficiency, but also the long-lasting poor performance on the students’ part. One assumption of the poor performance is that college students are unskilled L1 writers, due to the lack of training in their high school, though they have L1 literacy. Even when they are trained in high school, the emphasis of the instruction in L1 writing class might be different from that of English writing class. Also, teacher’s standard of good writing is culturally related. Students may adopt the
standard in the course of their L1 literacy. In a sense, when Chinese students write in English, they are doing cross culture communication. Therefore, the study attempts to explore the field of first language acquisition, in terms of writing skill, to get the insight of the influence of L1 instruction on EFL writing.

2. Related theories
2.1. New contrastive rhetoric
Recent theory in L2 writing has been influenced by the social constructionist view. (Journet, 1990). The main impetus for a new view of the writer and text as being dynamic has come from the social constructionist belief that “knowledge is socially constructed” through interaction with other people rather than embodying some kind of objective reality. This approach emphasizes the importance of the social context where learning takes place and regards writing as a social act. Based on the new perspective of L2 teaching, the new contrastive rhetoric took shape. The interests of new contrastive rhetoric include investigation of the amount of emphasis placed on planning, drafting and editing and possible effects of L1 literacy on L2 writing.

2.2. Theory of genre
The current study of genre (Swales, 1990) highlighted the nature of genre knowledge as being dynamic and situated in a particular context. A genre, rather than being considered as a text type, is defined as a set of communicative events that share the same communicative purposes within a given discourse community. As a result of shared communicative purposes, particular educational situations tend to require particular genre exhibiting similarities in content, style, structure, and intended audience. At the same time, students need to familiarize themselves with “patterns of discourse”, which is appropriate in that situation.

2.3. The theory of L1 and L2 literacy
The current L1 and L2 literacy theory, which is referred to as the socio-literate theory” of academic literacy (Johns, 1997) or the “socio-cognitive perspective”, argues that literacy includes previous experience with texts as well as awareness of the purposes served by a particular genre in specific situations. According to this view, literacy development is influenced by the languages, cultures, literacy experiences, roles, and communities of readers and writers, as well as the immediate context. The socio-literate theory addresses the need to prepare inexperienced students to cope successfully with unfamiliar academic activities and discourse, a need that both product- and process-oriented approaches to literacy are seen as unable to meet.

2.4. Previous researches
Under the development of these new theories, Spack (1997) closely observed one Japanese student’s struggle with her writing difficulties during her first three years at a US university. The analysis showed that in the initial stage “her first language education background … influenced her approach to learning in a second language and shaped the way she theorized about the learning”. The research demonstrated how the writer and written texts can develop as products of dynamic interaction with their contexts and argued that cultural perspectives are always undergoing change. Research by Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) showed that students’ L1 literacy background influences their approach to learning L2 and shaped the way they thought about L2
3. Description of the study

3.1 Purpose of this study
This study is to explore the issues related to Chinese L1 literacy background, such as: (1) Learner’s L1 writing experience and instruction in writing class; (2) the nature of Chinese high school students literacy. The assumption of the study is that some problems of college students in EFL writing are closely related to their L1 writing experience and instruction.

3.2 Method
Since the study is a qualitative one, the research methods involved are interview and observation. 50 students and 3 teachers are interviewed on the nature of their L1 writing instruction received and given respectively. 10 writing classes were observed in this study to get more objective view of the classroom management and instruction.

4. Result
4.1 L1 literacy background
a. Appreciating and interpreting literacy classics and modern prose are the focus of L1 literacy instruction.

b. Writing, though contributing greatly to the national college entrance exam (2/3 of total score), is not trained sufficiently in class.

c. There is no definite specification of the level of writing skill that should be developed in syllabus.

4.2 Writing experience and instruction
a. Kinds of classroom activities are involved in L1 writing class:
Teacher’s general comments; reading aloud of highly recommended piece of students’ writing; responses from other students (including criticism).

b. Where do students get information of writing
Students personal experience; writing resource books; text books of other courses; after class readings (newspaper, magazine and casual readings), most students are not trained to use library and internet resources as the ways to get information of their writing.

c. How the organization and content are taught
The logic in presenting the ideas and clearness in language expression are greatly stressed.

Most comments from teachers and instructions in class are devoted to this issue.

d. Whether the writing process is evaluated
Most students refused to have outline before writing. Outline and first draft are not required in writing class. Students usually do not rewrite a composition unless they are forced to. prewriting activities are rarely observed in class.

e. Whether originality of content is emphasized by teachers
Originality is less evaluated than the organization and beauty of the language, though most teachers emphasize the authenticity of the content.

f. Types of writing experience of students
Students are demanded to write and hand in journals every week, while compositions (above 600 words and with a topic) are only 5-6 every term.

g. Students attitude in L1 writing
Some students enjoy both writing and instruction, while others show no interests and poorly trained in L1 writing. Most only work for the exam.

4.3 Native concept
In analyzing the data, the author detected a native concept (陈向明, 2000) of high school Chinese teachers. They mentioned (抒情) (lyrical expression) frequently when they specify the standard of good writing. They said that students should demonstrate their literary talents (文采) in their writing. In answering the detailed inquiries about the nature of literary talents, the teachers say that lyrical expression, when used appropriately, is the sign of literary talents. They believe that even in writing expository or argumentative compositions, lyrical expression is necessary. One of the teachers said since China is a land of poetry, the use of lyrical expression finds its way in every types of writing. She illustrated her point in quoting an ancient Chinese prose, which was to persuade the emperor to give up a planned invasion. In the first part of the prose, the ancient politician used lyrical and figurative language to show the current political situation, which may turn out to be a confusing part for English readers, since English readers may expect a clear and logic statement in this part. However, Chinese teachers believe the lyrical expressions will make the opposed opinion of the politician less aggressive, then the chances of being well received will be improved.

The native concept of teachers who teach Chinese in high school shows that those teachers do have a different standard of good writing. The influence of the teachers’ standard is obvious in EFL writing.

4.4 Summary of results
The study shows that many students have sufficient opportunities to express themselves in L1 writing, since journals are collected every week. However, writing product rather than writing process is evaluated in class. The interview also indicates that most students have been intensively trained in expressing ideas and opinions clearly and logically in L1. However, even if students get certain training in writing, the writing instructions they have are much less than that of reading.

5. Implications
The findings of this study could have several implications for EFL writing instruction in college.

5.1 It is important for teachers in EFL contexts to find out about their students background, particularly in terms of what kind of literacy training they have received. Teachers may ask students to write journals to on how they learned to read and write in their first language. Such self-reflective activities can facilitate students’ writing because those who have undergone the acquisition of literacy in their first language can draw their own inferences for their foreign language studies from their L1 experiences. By eliciting this kind of background information, teachers can become aware of students’ strengths in relation to L1 literacy and build on those strengths in helping them to acquire English literacy.

5.2 If students have received extensive training in using lyrical expression in any kinds of writing,
teachers should bring the point clear to them that particular content, style and structure are appropriate to given situation. The idea of using lyrical expression to show literary talents is not appropriate in argumentative essay in English.

5.3 Knowing students’ L1 writing instruction, English teachers may tailor their instruction to the needs and problems of students. Many EFL teachers devoted much of class time in teaching the organization of paragraph, and the order of arranging ideas; however, Chinese high school graduates have received intensive training in these aspects. The special perspective that should be stressed is the possible difference of between the two rhetoric structures of the two languages.

5.4 The study results showed that students have little knowledge in evaluating the information they read and questioning its accuracy or reliability. Students in high school had very few chances to develop critical skills. Many of them did not experience the process of finding information from outside sources and incorporating it into their arguments. These students did not learn academic conventions for citation of outside sources and develop academic skills that are necessary for writing papers.

5.5 This study shows that Chinese high school students lack training in the process of writing. Without outline and even the thesis statement, students may start the composition from unrelated information, diverge from the topic, or be indirect. When they go to college, students tend to transfer their L1 writing practice to EFL writing. Thus, helping students developing writing process is necessary.

6. Conclusion
The implications for EFL writing in college is that (1) college EFL writing teachers should encourage students to make full use of their L1 writing abilities and expertise and writing strategies to facilitate their L2 writing; (2) due to the difference in rhetorical features of the two languages, teachers should introduce the English rhetorical features in class; (3) teachers should turn writing class into a place where students research their own literacy and develop critical awareness of what they need to learn about L2 writing.

Reference
Appendix 1.

**Chinese high school student questionnaire**

(1=never, 2=not very often, 3=somewhat often, 4=very often)

1. How often did the following activities take place in your Chinese language classes?
   A. Reading and interpreting literary work (e.g. poetry, fiction)
   B. Reading and interpreting modern prose (e.g. essays)
   C. Writing personal impressions of fiction or non-fiction you read
   D. Writing essays or reports
   E. Learning how to evaluate the content of what you read

2. What abilities do you think were emphasized as goals in the Chinese language classes you took?
   A. Developing ability to appreciate literary work
   B. Developing ability to write compositions
   C. Developing ability to read and comprehend modern prose
   D. Increasing your knowledge of vocabulary/grammar
   E. Developing ability to evaluate content of reading and form your own ideas

3. How often did you do the following kinds of writing in your Chinese language classes?
   A. Personal impressions of materials you read
   B. Compositions (short essays about a given topic including your own opinions)
   C. Summaries of what you read
   D. Journals or diaries

4. How important do you think the following features were for your Chinese language teachers reading your writing?
   A. Organization of your ideas
   B. Grammatical errors
   C. Development of the content
   D. Originality
   E. Expressing your true ideas honestly

Appendix 2.

**Interviews**

**Purpose and activities in regular Chinese language classes**

What abilities were emphasized in regular Chinese language classes (reading ability, writing ability, or others)?

why were they emphasized?

Did you have the following activities in your classes: group discussion, stating your opinion, questioning the writer’s idea or opinion, or gathering information through newspapers, the internet, or books?
What abilities do you think you developed in class?

Writing instruction in high school
Did you ever practice writing in classes?
If so, what kind of classes were they?
What kind of instruction did you receive?
What was emphasized in the instruction?
How often did you write?