

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The nature of EFL writing:

“ Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.” (Francis Bacon, as cited in Harvey, 2002, p. 29)

When we write, whether in our native language or in a second or foreign language, we use “graphic symbols”: that is, letters or combinations of letters, which are regarded as the basic elements of writing. In this sense, these graphic symbols are parallel to the sounds we make when we speak. Though, to some extent, writing can be said to be the act of forming these symbols, making marks on a flat surface of some kind, writing is clearly much more than the production of graphic symbols, just as speech is more than the production of sounds; we have to arrange the symbols to form words, sentences and text according to certain conventions. In other words, we produce a sequence of sentences arranged in a particular order and linked together in certain ways. The sequence may be very short including only two or three sentences, or may be very long which extends to over twenty sentences. No matter of what length it is, the sequence of these sentences can be formed into a coherent text due to the way the sentences have been arranged; i.e. how the sentences are put in order and linked together. It is during this “un-casual” process that we put meaning into the symbols or express ourselves through the forming of graphic symbols.

From the cognitive perspective, writing in one’s native language is not as natural as speech.

“It is learned through a process of instruction: we have to master the written form of the language and to learn certain organizations which are less used in speech, or perhaps not used at all, but which are important for effective communication in

writing. We also have to learn how to organize our ideas in such a way that they can be understood by a reader who is not present and perhaps by a reader who is not known to us.” (Byrne, 1996, p. 1)

Furthermore, EFL writing involves various aspects of knowledge not only in linguistics but also in non-linguistics. Tribble (1996) points out that the range of knowledge that a writer requires when undertaking a specific task can be summarized in the following way:

- 1) Content knowledge: knowledge of the concepts involved in the subject area
- 2) Context knowledge: knowledge of the context in which the text will be read
- 3) Language system knowledge: knowledge of those aspects of the language system necessary for the completion of the task
- 4) Writing process knowledge: knowledge of the most appropriate way of preparing for a specific writing task.

For EFL learners, language system knowledge may be a big obstacle for them to overcome, but it is not the whole. To put it simply, in order to produce a readable written work, students need not only linguistic knowledge to form correct sentences, paragraphs and further a coherent article, but also relatively wide knowledge to form his opinion. Content is the soul of an article. Without it, the writer could not prepare an effective writing. This kind of knowledge cannot be attained in short term; instead it is the result of one’s long-term learning concerning different subjects. Apart from that, the context knowledge is also very important. Since every piece of writing involves some kind of reader and carries out a certain communicative purpose, a good sense of context knowledge, such as audience, writing purpose, style or genre is quite necessary for a writer to become persuasive and successful in fulfilling some communicative task in writing.

The importance of EFL writing:

Writing is universally recognized as having a dual role: on one hand, it can be used to consolidate and harmonize other language skills in language study; on the other hand, it serves as an important means of communication between people.

First, EFL writing plays an important role in SLA (second language acquisition) and is not merely a language skill. In fact, from the beginning of 1980s on, language teachers and researchers paid increasing attention to the research of second language writing. It is of crucial importance for the foreign language learners to develop their writing abilities. One important reason is that writing helps our students to learn, as mentioned by Raimes (1983, pp. 7-8).

According to Swain (1995), comprehensible output plays a part in L2 acquisition. Output can serve a consciousness-raising function by helping learners to notice gaps in their interlanguages. That is, by trying to speak or write in the L2 they realize that they lack the grammatical knowledge of some feature that is important for what they want to say. Bello (1997) also points out that writing enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and larger chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they are learning in class. When students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have just learned to say, to take risks.

Byrne (1996) points out that the role of writing in reinforcing other language skills is fourfold:

- 1) Students are impressed by the exercises that need to be written and handed in.
- 2) Writing helps to consolidate the students' vocabulary and structure since in writing we have to use acquired knowledge of the language.
- 3) Some writing activities may serve as a welcome change for the students.
- 4) Writing provides students with physical evidence of their achievements.

It is easy to see that writing is an inseparable procedure of SLA and it can be reinforced in language learning as well. Without learning to write, we cannot have an effective acquisition of a target language.

Meanwhile, when students write, they necessarily become very involved with the new language. The effort to express ideas and the constant use of eye, hand and brain are a unique way to reinforce learning. As student writers struggle with what to put down

next or how to put it down on paper, they often discover something new to write or a new way of expressing their idea. They discover a real need for finding the right word and the right sentence. The close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of language leaning. Therefore, writing is more a mode of learning than merely a language skill.

Second, EFL writing is very important in the workplace and in daily life, regardless of whether one is in management, teaching, technical support, or writing-intensive professions such as journalism. Ellis (2000) says, “This has been a time of the ‘global village’ and the ‘World Wide Web’, when communication between people has expanded way beyond their local speech communities.” It is worth noting that writing is a means of communicating ideas and any piece of writing is an attempt to communicate something: that the writer has a goal or purpose in mind; that he has to establish and maintain contact with his reader; that he has to organize his material and that he does this through the use of certain logical and grammatical devices. Therefore, English writing should be treated as a kind of problem-solving tool, which is as useful as one’s native language writing as a written communication medium. Suppose one wants to visit another country. At this time, one will often have to leave a note for the mailman, fill out a customs declaration form, give written instructions, or write a thank-you letter and so on. Without learning how to write in English, one may be put in difficulty when dealing with such things even though one may ask somebody for help.

Due to the highly advanced development of the electronic information media and the Internet today, the interaction among all trades and professions in the world is much faster and more frequent than before. Such rapid development demands a greater ability in English, an international language. Suppose one is working with a company. In order to do the work well, one has to adapt oneself to many kinds of work demanded by one’s boss or the company. To be precise, one has to grasp the skills of how to write memos, market analyses, proposals, and various business communications. Without a certain ability of English writing, how can one fulfill one’s job capacity in such a competitive society? Even to look for a good job in a very

competitive job market, one has to be able to write good letters of application. In short, good writing helps one to market oneself and opens up opportunities for personal development. Undoubtedly, writing, as one of five basic skills of English language, has been becoming more and more important.

The current situation regarding the teaching of EFL writing at Chinese colleges:

Currently, many college students in China have acquired a relatively high level of proficiency in English reading while they have made little progress in English writing. Gao (2001) argues that the teaching of college English writing cannot match the need of teaching syllabus. Some students can pass Band Four or Band Six with a high score in the vocabulary, grammar or reading comprehension sections, but they cannot do so in the writing part. Those who have graduated from college or university also feel the difficulty in their job when required to write in English.

Ji (2001) argues that most college English teaching in China has been somewhat guided by the college English tests, which put a lot of emphasis on the test of reading comprehension through knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. As a result, both teachers and students have not paid enough attention to the importance of writing. The situation is much worse for non-English majors. Not only in the teaching syllabus, but also in teaching practice, writing is put in the least important position. There is no special English writing class designed for non-English majors in many colleges and universities. "Writing has been a neglected area of English language teaching in China." (p. 24). Apart from that, the defect of traditional approaches directly results in the current unsatisfactory situation.

Traditional writing approaches in Chinese colleges and universities are product-oriented approaches, which do not regard students as the main body of the whole writing process and lay great emphasis on the form of a written work, ignoring the fact that writing in itself is an active and complicated process. This kind of approach has sometimes placed an unrealistic demand on the students to produce writings of the same quality as those of native English speakers. To make errors is regarded as a bad thing. Teachers are so eager to correct all the errors or mistakes and treat them as an

enemy, which in their mind must be eliminated on the spot. Many teachers haven't realized that making grammatical errors is an inevitable process in SLA, and the interlanguage, which learners have produced, has reflected how much second language knowledge they have developed. Students are afraid of making errors because they feel shameful when they do so. Their shame and "guilt" feelings discourage them from taking further steps to improve English.

As we have discussed before, writing in one's native language is a complicated process. For EFL students, they may face more difficulties with linguistic aspect partly due to the negative transfer of one's mother tongue, as well as the cultural gap between their native language and the target language. Hedge (1988) points out that effective writing requires a number of things: a high degree of organization in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence organizations to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers. It is these demands, which present particular problems to foreign writers of English. To put it specifically, in most cases, we write a few lines, reread them, scribble out one of the lines and move on. We are constantly checking for correctness. We are thinking about editing and generating ideas at the same time. Our minds do have difficulty in processing and retaining so much information at one time. These are conflicting processes: creating and destroying. Then, how to deal with such a complicated process? Undoubtedly, students need appropriate instructions from the teacher. However, the traditional teaching approach has great limitations and cannot meet the demand of instructing students' writing efficiently.

In summary, writing English in a non-English speaking environment for a Chinese student can be a formidable task. To accomplish such a task requires a relatively comprehensive teaching program including teaching syllabus, teaching materials, curriculum design, teaching approaches and so on. As an English teacher, one cannot decide the teaching syllabus or the design of the curriculum directly. But the defects of some teaching policies and concepts will be realized and improved

gradually as the problems in EFL writing become increasingly conspicuous. This is not what the author plans to study here.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

What blocks occur for Chinese non-English major students in writing compositions?

How to solve these problems?

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Although English writing is very important, it is found to have received less attention on the part of Chinese EFL learners than other skills like reading and listening. In fact, we find through their compositions that the students' writing abilities are very weak. Therefore, to improve students' writing ability is an urgent and important task.

There are many Chinese college students, especially non-English major students, who have learned English since secondary study, but are not able to write appropriately and effectively. We can find some common phenomena and difficulties when they write compositions, such as they struggle to find appropriate ways to write ideas they really mean; they are hardly able to organize so much information and ideas in their mind; they prefer to reread and edit what they write to make sure the accuracy as possible as they can, even for a few sentences; though they like to edit frequently, they still make many errors like Chinglish, misspelling, grammar misuse etc. in their articles. It seems that what the students lack in writing is not only structural organization of text, but also the most basic sentences writing ability.

The aim of this report is to find effective teaching approaches based on the understanding that for English teachers, the appropriate teaching approach is the most direct and powerful tool for instructing students to learn efficiently in class. Appropriate learning strategies are at the same essential level with teaching

approaches. Furthermore, the students' attitudes and understanding of EFL writing are really important and need to be addressed at the first step because any approach will be useless without students' active participation.

Some methods for solving other barriers such as blocking, premature editing and complexity are suggested.

1.4 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Chinglish---Chinese style of English

Blocking---Rose defines 'an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of skill or commitment, which is measured by passage of time with limited productive involvement in the writing task'

Premature editing---An excessive concern with form while writing. Pre occupation with editing and correctness to the extent of forgetting the thought one was trying to express (Rose, 1984, p. 46).

Complexity--- Complexity is that property of a model, which makes it difficult to formulate its overall behavior in a given language, even when given reasonably complete information about its atomic components and their inter-relations (Biber, 1988).

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Second year undergraduate students major in computer at Yangzhou University.

1.6 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

This research about "A study of Chinese College English Writing barriers and solving strategies for Non-English Major Students" is divided into five main chapters: Chapter one is the introduction of the study, including the general information and

background of doing this study. Chapter two is a review of “the study of Chinese College English Writing barriers and solving strategies”---related literature and information. Chapter three is the methodology of the study; what methods were used and how data was analyzed. Chapter four is the results of the study. Chapter five is the recommendations and conclusion. Concluding the main ideas of the study, the author makes some recommendations for teachers and students for learning English more effectively.

