

## The Network-Assisted Process Approach in College English Writing Instruction in China

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### Abstract

The teaching of college English writing in China has been long criticized for its low efficiency. The traditional product approach calls for much investment of time and energy from the teacher's part, yet is not effective in inspiring student's motivation and productivity. In order to improve the situation, modern teaching approach needs to be adopted. In this paper, the author attempts to explore the feasibility of the network-assisted process approach in college English writing instruction in China, discuss the specific stages and analyze the advantages of this approach.

**Key words:** Network-assisted English teaching; The process approach; Writing instruction.

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### 1. THE TEACHING OF COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING IN CHINA: SITUATION AND PROBLEM

According to College English Syllabus, the main goal of college English teaching is to cultivate relatively high-level skills in reading comprehension and certain skills in listening comprehension, speaking, writing and translating with college students, and to make them capable of English communication. Among the five skills, the teaching of writing is the least effective

one. The causes of the situation can be summarized as follows.

First, writing classes cannot independently exist for non-English majors due to traditional practice and the limit of time. So far, there is no specialized textbook in this respect yet. The writing teaching activities can only scatter among the comprehensive teaching process. In this situation, students cannot have a systematical set of concepts in wording and organizing; instead they can only get some incomplete impression.

Second, with the influence of different history, society and culture, Chinese and westerners have vast differences in thinking modes, which in turn bring some obstacles in English writing teaching. Under the strong influence of their own thinking modes, Chinese students will unavoidably produce articles with evident Chinese flavor even if they know some theories and principles of wording and organizing, and are proficient in grammar. Therefore, Chinese students need to be very familiar with western thinking modes in the first place before they can produce natural writings.

Third, with the constant increase in the number of college students, college English teachers are faced with increasing working loads which almost run out of control. As a consequence, more often than not a teacher cannot spare enough time and energy to give effective guidance when grading students' writing assignments. A large proportion of students cannot find their weaknesses from the teacher's comments; much less can they get any enlightenment. Gradually, many students lose their interest in practicing writing, and their writing ability stays at a rather low level over a long period of time, some even giving up the attempt.

Forth, although cultivating the writing skill is clearly required in College English Syllabus, it has not yet got due attention. Traditionally, the teaching of reading dominates the college English teaching program since reading comprehension accounts for a large proportion in the college English tests.

In order to improve the teaching of college English writing, we should lay adequate importance on the teaching and learning of College English writing, and be fully aware that the teaching of English writing is a necessary part of college English teaching.

At present, the traditional product approach is still widespread, but it is also widely criticized for its low efficiency. The process approach has obvious advantages over the product approach. When adopting the new approach, we need to give full account to the special situation in our country and at the same time make full use of modern information technology.

## 2. TWO APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF THE SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

### 2.1 The Product Approach and Its Strengths and Weaknesses

The product approach is widely used in traditional classes. Within this approach, a writing class is typically like this: the teacher gives the writing assignment and offers a model for the students to imitate; then the students finish the assignments by imitating the models; finally the teacher grades their writings, correcting grammatical and spelling mistakes and hands them back.

The theoretical basis of the product approach is the behavioral language learning theory, which holds that language learning takes the form of habit formation through the medium of stimulus-response-reinforcement. In the product approach, writing is mainly concerned about linguistic knowledge, with consideration given to the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax, and cohesive devices.

The Product approach used to be popular among college English teachers in China for its obvious advantages. On the one hand, it can help students to develop such writing knowledge as styles and organizations as well as assist students with their languages abilities; on the other hand, with the product approach, it is easier for the teacher to control the classroom. At the same time students can have a stronger sense of accomplishment by imitating.

However, the disadvantages of this approach cannot be neglected either. In the first place, in this class pattern, the Teacher is the center of the class, dominating all the activities so that students have very little chance to take part. Students can only obtain some limited ideas and information about the topic from the teacher. There is no communication between the teacher and students since the teacher's task is only giving and students are just taking, let alone communication and discussion among students. It goes against the principle that an effective class should be student-centered.

In the second, students can hardly get the necessary guidance during the constructing process since they have to finish the writing assignment out of class by

themselves. Too much emphasis is attached to the language accuracy, and students try to show a good writing ability by copying the structure and even the content of the model. This situation will unavoidably discourage students' creating passion.

Finally, it is difficult for the teacher to monitor the writing process and locate students' weaknesses. S/he is burdened with heavy correction work. Therefore, effective feedback from the teacher can hardly be accessible.

### 2.2 The Process Approach and Its Strengths and Weaknesses

By 1960, behavioral theory has gradually given way to cognitive leaning theory. In response to this shift of focus, the traditional product approach met with some criticism from many scholars. Some believe it fails to address the psychological and cognitive process of writing, and easily leads to unimaginative work as well as low motivation from the student's part. Under the influence of the cognitive learning theory, the process approach was gradually formulated. Within this approach, the focus of writing was turned from the linguistic form of the end product to its meaning and creative process.

The process approach focuses on the process a writer engage in composing activities,, including such stages of the writing process as pre-writing, writing and re-writing. Once the first draft has been created, it is polished into subsequent drafts with the assistance from both the author's peers and teachers. After final editing the author may choose to publish his or her writing. It is "an approach to the teaching of writing which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models" Tribble (1996).

How real or real-world writers compose texts provides strong practical support for the process approach. In real-world writing, most writers compose several drafts to produce texts for presentation and publication. They often engage in a variety of activities such as planning, drafting, seeking feedback, revising etc. The process approach holds that in the writing classroom such activities involved in the real-world writing process may be reproduced.

Within this approach, emphasis is given to content rather than form, fluency rather than accuracy, process rather than product.

Students' sense of frustration and anxiety can be repelled through the writing process. They can enjoy writing in a relaxing and pressure-free atmosphere. Their creative potential is fully explored.

Interaction between the teacher and students, interaction among students will increase. Students encourage and motivate each other so they learn actively. They would also develop a better habit of cooperation. Therefore, the approach benefits students not only in the academy but also in character. The teacher also

gets benefits, since s/he can more easily detect students' writing obstacles provide proper feedback. Writing instructed in this approach can be an active, creative course.

However, this advanced teaching theory has its own limitations. It requires a lot of investment of time. In most universities in China, non-English majors have no special writing course, so it is hard to be put into practice.

Besides time factor, the process approach needs other conditions. For example, it can only be effective with small class and hardly feasible in large-size class. In large class, the discussion among students generates a mass of ideas that can lead to more disorder and confusion instead of clarifying a point. When conducting the activities required in this approach, a large class might be in chaos.

However, with access to the Internet, most of the activities required by this approach can be conducted online. Therefore, if the modern information technology is fully taken advantage of, the process approach can be conducted in college English class in our country and satisfactory result can be obtained.

### **3. NETWORK-AIDED ENGLISH WRITING INSTRUCTION WITHIN THE PROCESS APPROACH AND ITS SPECIFIC STAGES**

Traditional interaction in teaching process means the mutual communication between teachers and learners, learners and their peers, learners and learning resources for the purpose of solving problems and exploring new knowledge. People communicate directly with each other in real time. It's convenient and highly efficient and misunderstanding can be decreased to a certain extent. However, its disadvantages still cannot be ignored. Face-to-face interactions can only happen when people are in the same place. Both parties are supposed to be available at a given time. It is highly influenced by time and place. Within this mode, the quantity and frequency of information exchange is greatly decreased. By contrast, network-based language teaching creates a multimedia learning environment by making use of different communicating technology. The communicating teaching approach based on the Internet has a lot of advantages. In the first place, the interaction can happen any time and any place simultaneously or at different time. Real time interaction on the Internet can be as effective as face-to-face interaction. In the second, Learners can interact with different people through diverse media, and the interacting material is diverse. Lastly, Language learners can manage their own learning process and therefore get stronger motivation.

Network can provide easy access to a wealth of information. Any user around the world can get immeasurable material from it. In the past, with the limited resources, it was hard to get authentic language material that suit certain learners and teachers.

Computer technology enables students to take control of their own learning. Technology can be individualized to meet a learner's personal needs.

The Internet technology has already been widely used in the teaching of listening and speaking, but its application in the English writing teaching in China is still seldom attempted. In college English writing teaching reform, if the Internet interacting technology is taken full advantages of, the disadvantages and limitations of the traditional classroom which is teacher-centered and line will finally be overcome. Integrating modern information technology into the college English writing teaching will improve the low efficient situation, create ideal teaching environment, and modernize teaching contents and media. The combination of advanced teaching approach and media is the tendency of the language teaching development.

Specific stages of network-assisted process approach in college English writing instruction will be discussed as follows.

#### **3.1 Pre-Writing Stage**

In this stage, student's main task is to decide on purpose, audience, form, and voice, to generate ideas and put these ideas into groups and outlines through discussing and reading literature.

In this stage, the teacher gives the writing assignment, and devises some translating exercises to prepare the students in topic-related vocabulary and use sentence structures

After class, all the students are asked to surf the Internet searching for more topic-relevant materials, which help them to open up horizons, stimulate ideas. Eventually they come up with their own ideas of writing the article concerning structure and content. Students have the autonomy to choose whatever information or resources they are interested to study instead of receiving instruction passively from the teacher; In this way, students are greatly motivated to take the initiative to explore, to analyze and solve problems, and their potential is fully exploited. Abundant topic-related information as well as useful vocabulary and sentence structures collected by other classmates is shared among all the students.

On the Internet, an open learning environment is created, since all the participants could share, exchange and check resources and discussion on them. By working in groups through the online platform, students can get more ideas, get benefit and inspiration from other group members, and they can make the relations of ideas clear as well, which in turn helps them with the organization of their writing.

In other words, through the Internet technology, learners could use and exchange a large variety of information available. They could analyze and study the information through their chosen online media with

their classmates. Through this active acquisition, control and process of information, learners will understand the writing topic and the collected data deeply and formulate their own ideas.

### 3.2 Drafting

Drafting is an important stage of the writing process. In this stage, the students are supposed to compose a coherent text by organizing the ideas and information produced in the prewriting period. They can communicate with their peers or the teacher about the problems they are confronted with during the writing of these first drafts synchronously or asynchronously. After finishing his or her first draft of writing, the student is required to post it in the public forum where all other classmates could easily get access to.

### 3.3 Revising

After carefully reading each other's writing, all students are demanded to offer comments on the writing. The feedback will be accessible to the writer for revision.

Revising is another important stage in the writing process. Peer-editing is conducted at this stage after self-editing by the writer. It is a process of rethinking, rediscovering and recreating the content, through which the first draft is reshaped. The interacting error check can help the students to recognize mistakes in vocabulary and grammar. They can find mistakes in content, structure through the editing process. Teacher should give advice about the word selection, sentence structure and even specific details. Other aspects include spelling, grammar and punctuation. These are also achieved by self-editing, peer-editing. During the editing stage, the writing works are exchanged and the evaluation is done by other classmates. Every student is wholly involved in the revising process, and so everybody acts actively.

Network greatly facilitates the learning and teaching activities in this stage. Without online interaction, group discussions are greatly limited by time and place. Even if such activities are organized, it is hard for them to produce fruitful result without teachers' interference. However, through the Internet the collaborative learning activities can be conducted at any time in any place in various ways. For example: In practice, the teacher can arrange students to work in pairs or in groups of three to five. They exchange their first draft and give each other feedbacks on improvement of their works. By taking part in the activities, the teacher can provide necessary guidance. Students can also seek the teacher's personal comments and advice.

### 3.4 Final draft

After collecting advices and feedbacks from all channels, now the writing makes more sense. Students polish and edit their works and present them to the teacher, who gives evaluation on the writing and on

the revision made by the group members. After that, students get back their homework and read the advice from the teacher. At the end of the process, students finish their final drafts and share them among the whole class by posting them on the network platform.

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## CONCLUSION

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In the first place, within this approach, students have easy access to abundant language materials and other information from the Internet. Besides, effective peer feedbacks for revision helps students generate more ideas and enrich the content of their articles. More language input available leads to better language output.

Secondly, the sharing activities can help cultivating students' confidence and sense of accomplishment. Writing is no longer a burden, but a sharing and interacting process. Their writings carry much more value since there are readers.

Students interact more with each other through the net media than in non-networked environment. They participate in discussion more equally, make more comments and offer more suggestions for revision online than in face-to-face discussions, especially for high-apprehensive individual. In online learning environment, students, especially those lower-performing and silent ones, tend to have less anxiety and thus to get more involved in the learning process. They have more frequent opportunities to release their expressions, which lead to more language production and writing output.

All the above factors greatly enhance motivation on the student's part. With higher motivation, the students are more likely to produce better writings.

Thirdly, the flexibility of net-based learning environment creates greater autonomy for one's own study. Students can independently decide the study time and place convenient for them.

In addition, the process and content of online interaction can be stored in electronic form permanently, which make it easier for students to read repeatedly and improve understanding on the one hand, and for the teacher to keep track of the course progress on the other hand. It also provides objective data for the teacher to make formative evaluation.

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