Investigation and analysis of current writing teaching mode among English majors in normal universities in China

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Abstract: This paper has made an investigation on the current writing teaching mode among English majors in normal universities in China, by means of questionnaire, interview and class observation. The study finds out that the current writing teaching mode is not purely product approach or process approach. In fact, the two approaches to writing co-exist in today's English writing teaching, with product approach to writing enjoying a relatively dominant place. Problems are discovered of this writing teaching mode, such as students' inactive involvement in the class. Then, this paper focuses on the teachers and students to find out the reasons. At last, the author proposes MAP-CORE framework for English writing class.

Key words: product approach; process approach; college English writing teaching

1. Introduction

In the past decades, some Western linguists and teaching researchers made a great effort to do a lot of researches and practices on how to teach English writing effectively, among which the process approach and the product approach were mostly disputed. Meanwhile, English writing reform in Chinese universities experienced a shift from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented approach. The two approaches had their dominant positions. Before the late 1970s, the product approach was the mainstream of writing research; while after that time, the process approach gradually substituted the former.

This paper has made an investigation on the status quo of English writing teaching mode among English majors of normal universities in China. Then it mainly discusses the result of the investigation and provides readers with some pedagogical implications on the teaching mode of English writing.

2. Literature review

In recent years, with the development of English teaching and educational reform, more and more attention has been paid to the study of English writing in China. In Chinese universities, especially in normal universities, many scholars and professors had rounds of heated discussion on the product-oriented approach and the process-oriented approach in English writing classes. Yet no definite conclusion has been made. Both of the approaches have their strong and weak points.

2.1 Product approach to English writing

In the product approach, compositions are judged as final products and the evaluation of writing skills is

done on the basis of timed production of grammatically and lexically accurate texts (Porto, 2001). The tasks are those in which the learner imitates, copies and transforms models provided by the teacher and/or the textbook (Nunan, 1991). Teachers give a general explanation of certain writing skills and assign a topic to students, and then students finish the task individually and hand in their work (the product) to receive comments from the teachers. Learning to write generally has four stages: familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing and free writing (Badger & White, 2000).

2.2 Process approach to English writing

In process approach to writing, teaching focuses on the writing process rather than the final product. The most important principle of process approach is that writing is a self-discovery process and the result is very complex, highly individualized process, it is a form of self-expression, an idea-making activity and ideas develop as one writes. Raimes (1991) commented that the process is not liner at all but recursive. Writing is itself an idea-formation process which involves communicating with readers. The approach stresses quantity rather than quality, and it also encourages group work or peer work which would involve a lot of collaboration and cooperation between learners (Nunan, 1991).

2.3 The main remarks from Chinese scholars

In China, essays and papers which focus on the English writing have frequently been discovered in journals. Scholars like LI (2000), LUO (2002), ZHANG (2005) and CHEN (2005) have already done researches on product and process approaches to writing.

In LUO's (2002) research, she held that both product approach and process approach to writing instruction contribute to the gains of writing proficiency for English students at Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) colleges, and that product approach to writing instruction is more effective than process approach for college English students in the very distinctive EFL context in China. Process approach has demonstrated some strength in helping college English students change their attitudes positively towards writing in English.

ZHANG (2005) considered a new English writing model with process-writing as the classroom organization accompanied by product approach as an assistant. His research found out that the process-centered new model was more effective than traditional model of product approach in EFL college English context in China. It has been found out that the process teaching, as revealed in the present study, has exerted positive influence on students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions

Q1: What are the characteristics of the English writing teaching mode for English majors in normal university?

Q2: What are students' attitudes towards the English writing?

Q3: What are the major problems of this teaching mode?

3.2 Subjects

The 225 subjects are from Zhejiang Normal University (ZJNU) in China, for they are at the medium level of the nation's English teaching environment. Thus, they can be representative.

3.3 Instruments

(1) The questionnaire is the main approach for this study, which contains ten questions. All the ten questions

are designed on the basis of the features of the product approach and process approach to writhing;

(2) Class observation: Two months are spent on class observation;

(3) The interview: Fifty students are inspired to talk freely on their English writing.

4. Results and discussion

The process of survey, data collection and analysis covers a period of more than two months from October to December in 2009. All the questionnaires were collected immediately after the survey and corrected for data collection. The return rate is 98.7% with three invalid questionnaires written with some blank answers. The results for each item were collected afterwards. The following tables would illustrate the general results of this research, based on which some important issues would be discussed according to the research questions.

4.1 The current situation of English writing teaching mode

From Table 1, it is easy to find out that English writing teaching is still taught with a traditional teacher-centered method. The teacher speaking time takes up seventy-five percent of the total class, while students speaking time is only thirty-three percent. There is little pair work and group work, let alone the game. However, it does not mean that teachers want to dominate the class. During the class, the teacher encourages students to speak out their ideas. Although quite a few students are actively involved in class, there are still many students just sitting there quietly, listening to the teachers and other students. During the group work, many students cannot cooperate well with each other.

Table 1   Observation of the classes

Items	Time (minute)	Rate (%)
Teacher speaking time	30	75
Students speaking time	13	33
Individual work	6	15
Group work time	3	1
Game time	0	0
Silent (look at the PPT)	8	2

In the oral interview, most Chinese students said that they are quite used to the traditional teacher-centered class. In today's college English writing teaching, teachers are still under the pressure of exams, taking TEM (Test for English Majors) and CET (College English Test) for example. Due to all these factors, today's English writing teaching mode is still teacher-oriented.

4.2 Students' attitudes towards current English writing teaching

(1) Students' attitudes towards English writing

From Table 2, item 1, it can be found that more than half of the students do not like English writing, while only twenty-two percent students show their interests in it. Item 2 clearly points out that only three students think that English writing is not difficult, while one hundred and twenty-six students regard English writing as a difficult job. Accordingly, more than eighty percent students are not confident of English writing with regard to item 3. This is the main reason why students do not like English writing.

(2) Students' attitudes towards the writing topics

Most students are not in favor of the writing topics given by teachers. According to item 4, only thirty-one percent students are interested in the writing topics given by the teacher. This is another reason why students have

little interest in writing. However, in language learning, motivation is rather important. According to Krashen (2003), motivation to learn appears to be one of the most important determinants in successful language acquisition.

(3) Students' attitudes toward the way teachers assess their writings

On the whole, students accept the way that teachers check their writing. The comments given by the teachers on the writing do not seem to help students improve their writings. Item 5 tells that more than sixty percent students are content with the way that the teachers check their compositions. From item 6, it is not difficult to find out that although more than half of the students are satisfied with their teachers' way of correcting their compositions, the comment by the teachers does not seem to help students improve their future English writing. From item 7, it is obvious that only thirty-six of the two hundred and twenty-five students believe that the comment does help improve their English writing. In that case, there emerges a problem: On one hand, students are agreeable to the way their teachers check their compositions; on the other hand, teachers' comment seemingly exerts little effect on students' English writing.

Table 2   Students' attitude toward present way of writing

Items	A	B	C	D	E
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Item 1: I like English writing	6 (2%)	45 (20%)	87 (39%)	87 (39%)	0 (0%)
Item 2: I find it difficult to write English composition	6 (3%)	120 (53%)	96 (43%)	3 (1%)	0 (0%)
Item 3: I'm confident of English writing	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	30 (13%)	183 (81%)	12(6%)
Item 4: I'm interested in the writing themes provided by teacher	0 (0%)	69 (31%)	147 (65%)	6 (3%)	3 (1%)
Item 5: I'm content with the way in which the teachers check our compositions	9 (4%)	138 (61%)	69 (31%)	6 (3%)	3 (1%)
Item 6: I think the comment given by the teacher for the composition helps me a lot	0 (0%)	36 (16%)	96 (43%)	90 (40%)	3 (1%)
Item 7: My writing has improved a lot from the English writing class	0 (0%)	36 (16%)	75 (34%)	111 (49%)	3 (1%)

4.3 Major problems in English writing

(1) Students' difficulties in writing a composition

As Table 3 displays, vocabulary, collocation and the influence of Chinese account for a considerable proportion. Difficulty in vocabulary is the most prominent, followed by collocation. Among all the factors, these three occupy sixty-five percent, sixty-one percent and fifty-one respectively. Without a good mastery of vocabulary and collocation, the influence of Chinese is inevitable. In oral interview, "When I write an English composition, first I think in Chinese, then I translate it into English" is the statement given by the majority of the interviewees. That is why students make Chinglish or English expressions with Chinese characters in their compositions. Although these three factors are the main problems in students' writing, other problems like expression and sentence organization cannot be neglected.

(2) Teachers' ineffective measures toward students' difficulties in writing

Teachers do not take pointed measures to deal with students' difficulties in writing. From Table 3, it is obvious that the main difficulties of students in English writing are vocabulary, collocation and the influence of Chinese. Other difficulties are writing skills, writing content and grammar. From Table 4, it is easy to find out that

teachers' help in English writing is rather unobvious. Teachers seem to overlook the major difficulties of their students in English writing. As for students, they also do not take particular measures to overcome difficulties in writing, according to the information from the interview.

Table 3   Students' difficulties in English writing

A	B	C	D	E	F
Vocabulary	Nothing to write	Writing skills	Collocation	Grammar	Influence of Chinese
147 (65%)	69 (31%)	78 (35%)	138 (61%)	42 (19%)	114 (51%)

Table 4   Teachers' assistance when assign a writing task

A	B	C	D	E	F
Vocabulary	Discussion	Writing skills	Collocation	Some models	Nothing
75 (33%)	48 (21%)	135 (60%)	18 (8%)	18 (8%)	75 (33%)

5. Conclusion

5.1 Major findings

Firstly, college English writing teaching mode is not simply product approach or process approach. In fact, both product approach and process approach are applied in writing class. But product approach takes the relatively dominant place in class. Secondly, students are not content with the present way of English writing teaching. Students' dissatisfaction ranges from the class atmosphere, writing topics to teachers' negligence over their writing problems. Thirdly, as to the main difficulties of students in English writing, both teachers and students do not take effective measures to deal with such problems. For teachers, their assistance for students' major difficulties in English writing is rather unobvious. For students, they know their own weak points in writing English composition, however, they also do not take measures to improve their writing skills.

5.2 Pedagogical implications

Firstly, it is necessary for teachers to arouse students' motivation and confidence of English writing. Teachers should not only foster language acquisition, but more importantly, they should act as a mediator and help create the right climate for writing to take place, thus making the lesson interesting and meaningful. Secondly, Teachers should try their best to encourage students to be actively involved in the class. Group works, discussion, debate and other kinds of activities are favored by students. If a group of students work together for brainstorm topics and ideas, it will be more productive, because their thoughts can be inspired by each other. Thirdly, different approaches to writing are complementary rather than incompatible. Both product approach and process approach to writing have their own advantages and disadvantages.

Based on the research findings and the theory of product and process, the author put forward MAP-CORE framework for English writing class. "MAP-CORE" is the abbreviation of the first letter of each word: (1) "M" stands for motivation: Students' enthusiasm in writing should be motivated in the first place; (2) "A" stands for argue: Groups of students should be arranged to brainstorm topics and ideas; (3) "P" stands for presentation: The leaders of each group are required to present the results of their discussion, thus students can be inspired by each other. More information can be shared; (4) "C" stands for complement: If new ideas are generated, students are encouraged to speak out their ideas and develop them publicly; (5) "O" stands for operation: It means that students begin to write; (6) "R" stands for revision: Compositions are interchanged and the evaluation is done by

other students; (7) "E" stands for enrichment: After peer editing, compositions are returned for further improvement; (8) "Map" is the activities before students setting out to write, mainly the cooperation between each other. These activities are designed to guide students to write, just like the function of a map; (9) "Core" is the procedures when students began to write. Writing is the main purpose of the whole writing procedures and it is the core of the course. After the author proposed this writing procedure, it has been tested in Zhejiang Normal University for about two months, which proved is to be useful and effective. Both the students and teachers were in favor of this writing procedure. It is hoped that this paper can shed some light on English writing teaching both at home and abroad.

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