An Action Research on Improving Non-English Majors' English Writing *by Basic Sentence Pattern Translation Drills*

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Abstract

English writing plays an indispensible part in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning for Chinese students, which accounts for a high score in an English test in China. And it is also a comprehensive reflection of students' abilities in L2 application. However, most non-English majors in vocational and technical colleges have great trouble in English writing and writing incorrect and inappropriate sentences ranks number one among all the English writing problems. English writing teaching is always a weak part in English teaching. The researcher conducted an eleven-week action research on basic sentence pattern translation drills among 50 non-English majors from 4 classes who didn't pass CET-3 in a Vocational and Technical College. Before the action research, students' writing problems were identified via questionnaire, sentence test and writing pretest. Then an eleven-week action plan was carried out and one adjustment was made to the plan in the light of results of interviews. Writing posttest was taken and another interview was made afterwards. It was found from data collection and analysis as well as analysis of students' writing samples that students could write correct sentences in English and their English writing scores and abilities improved a lot after the action research.

Keywords: writing incorrect sentences, non-English majors, basic sentence translation drills, action research

1. Introduction

English writing has been regarded as an essential part in English learning for Chinese EFL learners. Writing can help consolidate language materials, internalize knowledge, improve language accuracy and lay a solid foundation for spoken English proficiency (Dong, 2003). However, though teachers and students have devoted much time and efforts to writing, the improvement of students' writing scores and abilities is far from satisfactory. Many sentences and expressions in students' writing are still wrong and English writing is still the weak part in English teaching and learning. As for solutions of these problems, Wilson (1998) proposed that sentence pattern decides whether the writing is good or not and Liu Fang (2004) pointed out that translation exercises can help students distinguish Chinese and English thinking pattern and then analyze and use foreign language synthetically. In addition, Atkinson (1987) referred to translation work as a very important part of second language leaning which is also a learning strategy. Danielson (1965), Dykstra (1964) and Fries (1945) believed that Controlled writing mode or guided writing mode was based on the behavioristic psychology. A good writing is formed by many right sentence patterns and vocabulary. Kaplan (1966), who has done many researches on foreign students' writings, held that wrong and inappropriate sentence patterns might make the writing hard to understand. Thus Sentence pattern learning and translation exercises are both important for students' English writing. And it is feasible to make a combination of sentence pattern and translation exercises in English writing learning and teaching. Although there have been many researches on effective ways of English writing teaching and plenty of studies on sentence pattern practice and translation drills at home and abroad, action research on basic sentence pattern translation drills to improve English writing has never been done before. Since action research is a very effective way of letting teachers reflect on their own teaching and come up with ways to help improve their teaching practice, the researcher who was also the teacher conducted an eleven-week action research on basic sentence pattern translation drills among 50 non-English majors in a vocational and technical college, aiming at identifying students' writing problems, improving students' writing scores and abilities and engaging teachers in a process of development and change in the teaching job.

2. Research Design

2.1 Problem Description

During teaching writing, the researcher has found that students cannot organize sentences and express their ideas correctly in their writing. Students have problems in the Basic English sentence patterns and they are interfered by Chinese thinking pattern. Major mistakes in students' sentences are as follows. (A) Problems in subject 1) The lack of subject 2) Verb being subject 3) Wrong use of subject (B) Problems in predicate verbs 1) The lack of predicate verb 2) Wrong use of predicate verb. (C) Problems in object 1) The incompleteness of the object 2) Wrong use of object (D) Problems in "there be" (E) Redundancy of sentence parts.

2.2 Hypotheses

Speaking of students' writing problems, the researcher formulated the following six hypotheses of the causes. 1) Students don't have enough vocabulary and sentence accumulation; 2) Students have poor knowledge of English sentence writing; 3) Students have poor knowledge of English grammar; 4) Students are influenced by the negative transfer of mother tongue; 5) Students don't have good writing habits; 6) Teachers assign less after-class sentence writing practice and exercises.

2.3 Cause Identification

To know whether the above hypotheses are right or not, to investigate students' writing problems and to explore causes of their writing problems, two instruments were put into use. One was questionnaire and another one was test. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher herself on the basis of related theories (Oxford, 1990; Vandergrift, 1997), which was composed of writing problems and students' English writing habits. The test consisted of three parts, which were sentence identification, error-finding and sentence translation. The researcher made the questionnaire survey among 50 students who didn't pass CET-3 in Vocational and Technical College of China West Normal University within twenty minutes (in Vocational and Technical colleges of China, students who pass CET-3 are regarded as learners with higher English level, while those who didn't are treated as learners with lower level). After that, all of students were given a test about English Sentences and translation. All the questionnaire and test papers were collected and analyzed. The effectiveness rate of questionnaire was 94% and the effectiveness rate of the test was 100%.
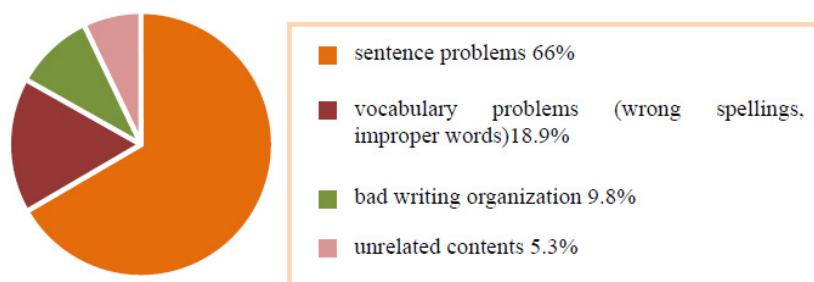

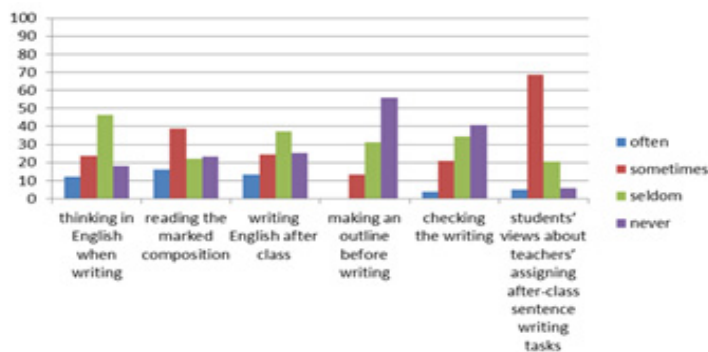Figure 1. The distribution rate of writing problems

Figure 2. The results of English writing habits

Table 1. Distribution of scores

scores		0	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	Above 60
participants	percentage	0.7	35.9	36.8	21.4	1.6	1.3	1.6	0.7

From Figure 1, the researcher identified that students who didn't pass CET-3 had great trouble in English writing. Most of students had poor knowledge of English sentence writing and incorrect and inappropriate sentences ranked number one among all the writing problems. Vocabulary problems lied in the second place, followed by bad writing organization and unrelated contents. It's seen clearly from the test result in Table 1 that 93 percent of students failed in this test and most students' scores were far from pass. Consequently, basic sentence learning and translation drills were in great need. Figure 2 illustrated that another three involved writing problems were as follows. First, students were influenced by negative transfer of mother tongue. Second, students didn't have good writing habits including reading the marked composition carefully, writing English after class, making an outline before writing and checking the writing. Third, teachers assigned few after-class sentence writing tasks and exercises.

2.4 Problem Identification

Nice English writing is the one with right words, correct sentences, clear contents, cohesion and an appropriate style, all of which are main criteria to get good scores in English writing. Correct sentences are fundamental to English writing. However, most non-English majors have a bad command of English sentences and those who didn't pass CET-3 are unable to write five basic sentence patterns and 'there be' pattern correctly. As found in the above questionnaire and sentence test, correct sentence writing in the composition is an area where non-English majors could improve. Since sentence writing is the number one issue among the four writing problems which were concluded from Chart 1, there is no doubt that basic sentence translation drills is of great necessity in improving non-English majors' English writing.

3. Action Plan Design

3.1 Participants

The action research was carried out among 50 non-English majors who were sophomores from 4 classes and didn't pass CET-3 in vocational and technical college of China West Normal University. All of the 50 students made up a class in which the author served as a teacher and the researcher and conducted this action research within 11 weeks.

3.2 Instruments

Questionnaire and sentence test were taken to identify English writing problems before the action plan was implemented in this research. Among all the writing problems, sentence problems ranked first. Then writing pretest was also taken before the research and its writing material was selected from one of CET-3 test papers, whose analysis result was convincing. In course of carrying out the action plan, two interviews were made for the plan adjustment. In the eleventh week, an after-interview was made and writing posttest was taken, whose material was also from one of CET-3 test papers.

3.3 Design of the Plan

Since writing incorrect and inappropriate sentences is in the first place among all the writing problems, the researcher designed an action plan (clearly seen in Table 2) to help them with their sentence problems in writing and improve their writing scores and abilities. Questionnaire and sentence test were conducted to seek out the causes of writing problems and then help to identify the research problem and students were asked to take writing pretest in the first week. The importance of correct sentences in English writing was attached to in the second week. Sentences in high score compositions and low score ones were compared in class. From week 3 to week 8, five Basic English sentences and 'there be' sentence pattern were taught by the researcher. There were lots of sentence practices, such as sentence identification practice and error-finding practice. Besides, sentence translation exercises and comparison between Chinese and English were made in English writing class. Meanwhile, after-class sentence practice and translation exercises were assigned by teachers. In the next two weeks, students were required to do comprehensive practices of all the learned sentence patterns and translation drills, in order to strengthen their sentence writing abilities. Finally, after-interview was made and students took the writing posttest. Especially to be mentioned, eight randomly-chosen students were interviewed by the researcher after the second week and the sixth week, so as to find out problems appearing in research and adjust the action plan in time.

Table 2. Action plan

Week	Activity
1	The questionnaire survey and sentence test / Writing pretest
2	comparing sentences in high score compositions with low ones
3	"S+V" sentence pattern translation drills / Interview
4	"S+V+O" sentence pattern translation drills
5	"S+V+P" sentence pattern translation drills
6	"S+V+IO+DO" sentence pattern translation drills / Interview
7	"S+V+O+C" sentence pattern translation drills
8	"there be" sentence pattern translation drills
9	Comprehensive practices of all the learned basic sentence patterns and translation drills
10	Comprehensive practices of all the learned basic sentence patterns and translation drills
11	Interview / Writing posttest

Remarks：*Questionnaire, sentence test*, *Writing pretest, writing posttest* and *interview* are all ways of data collection.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

4.1 Data Collection

In this action research, it has been mentioned that the effectiveness rate of questionnaire was 94% and the effectiveness rate of the sentence test was 100%. As to the writing pretest, 50 pieces of test papers were distributed and 50 pieces were effective. And in the writing posttest, 50 pieces of test papers were distributed and collected and the effectiveness rate was 100%.

4.2 Analysis of Interview

The second week interview showed that everything went smoothly for the plan. After the sixth week, though the goal of writing simple right sentences has been achieved, lacking more nice sentences to enrich the composition was still a problem. Thus the researcher made an adjustment to the plan and gave students other translation exercises around topics like "health", "travel", "sport" and so on from week seven to week ten.

After eleven-week implementation of the action plan, eight students were randomly chosen to be interviewed by the researcher. Six of the eight students thought they have had a good command of Basic English sentence patterns, and they hope to do clause drills as well as complex sentence drills. All of the eight students found basic sentence pattern translation drills profitable in English writing and agreed that they have gained a lot in English writing after basic sentence pattern translation drills.

4.3 Analysis of Samples of Writing Pretest and Posttest

The materials of writing pretest and posttest were both selected from writing of CET-3 test papers. Fifteen means the full-marked writing. All of 50 students took part in the two tests and they were required to finish the two tests within thirty minutes respectively. The same criteria of scoring were used in the pretest and posttest. The pretest was taken before the action research and six students' writings were chosen to be the samples, two good ones, two fair ones and two poor ones. The same six students' writings in the writing posttest were used as samples. Three following points can be concluded from the analysis of these samples. First, all the six students were able to write complete passages, narrate things and express their ideas and attitudes clearly and they made progress when writing simple sentences. Second, the two good students and two fair-leveled ones in the pretest almost got full marks in their sentences and only made small mistakes in the posttest. Third, the two poor-leveled students made the biggest progress in their sentences, though several mistakes in sentences were still found out. Fourth, all the students still had problems in writing, such as the inappropriate use of vocabulary, wrong spellings of words, lack of topic sentences and supporting sentences, shortage of conjunctions and the illogical structure.

4.4 Analysis of Scores of Writing Pretest and Posttest

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of scores of pretest and posttest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Deviation
Pretest	50	3.00	8.00	5..28	1.29
Posttest	50	5.00	10.00	7.24	1.52

Table 4. T-test of scores of pretest and posttest

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	P
Score	Pretest	50	3.00	8.00	-6.944	0.000**
	Posttest	50	5.00	10.00		

To examine whether there is difference in the scores between writing pretest and posttest and whether it is remarkable if there is difference, a t-test was done by the researcher. As shown in Table 4, there is a remarkable and significant difference between scores in pretest and posttest(T=-6.944，p<0.05), which means basic sentence pattern translation drills has positive influence on students' writing achievement. And the scores of writing posttest are obviously higher than those of writing pretest. It is obvious that students' writing abilities have been improved through the past eleven weeks' basic sentence pattern translation drills. Hence conducting the action research on basic sentence pattern translation drills is statistically significant to improve students' writing proficiency.

5. Reflections, Limitations and Suggestions

This action research demonstrates that basic sentence pattern translation drills is of great help to students' English writing. Meanwhile it is beneficial for their reading ability improvement, for some reading materials are easier for them. Besides, translation drills about nice sentences around some topics are able to help enrich the contents of the writing. This action research is related to the idea of reflective practice and the teacher as the researcher takes the initiative in the writing class. The researcher is an investigator of non-English majors' English writing problems and also is one of the participants in it, thereby improving students' English writing.

However, there are still some limitations of this research. Since the research time is short, this research is only about correct sentence writing in compositions, it is impossible to address all the writing problems in chart 1. Apart from basic sentence translation drills, clause translation drills and complex sentences drills are needed in English writing teaching. In addition, the enrichment of the content and the fostering of English thinking pattern are needed to improve the writing. What's more, although students have made progress in simple sentence writing, they still have problems in clause and complex sentence writing.

Data results show that basic sentence translation drills is valuable to develop students' writing ability, which is one of the effective ways of English writing teaching. In addition, there are many suggestions for English writing teaching as follows. First, there is need for teachers to give more exercises like sentence making or story telling in teaching writing. Second, the teacher should assign in-class and after-class sentence writing tasks. Third, students are supposed to learn to form the habit of thinking English directly. Fourth, different genres writing practice is also necessary in writing teaching. And for the next action research, the researcher may help students in these areas.

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