Functional analyses of the problems in non-English majors' writings

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Abstract: Problems in generating and organizing ideas, in coherence and language competence are common in non-English majors' writings, which decrease non-English majors' ability to use English as a tool to realize its pragmatic functions and meta-functions. The exam-centered objective, the product-oriented approach, the inefficient mode of instruction, the ineffective feedback and the lack of creativity in teaching are responsible for the problems in non-English majors' writings. To avoid those problems, teachers need to improve their ways of instruction.

Key words: problems in non-English majors' writings; causes of those problems; a functional perspective

1. Introduction

According to Functional Grammar (FG), there are three meta-functions in a language: ideational, interpersonal and textual. The three meta-functions are the abstractions of infinite pragmatic functions. First of all, writing is a way to realize the more concrete pragmatic functions in written form, and at the same time to realize the more abstract meta-functions. However, Chinese non-English majors are incapable of writing in English to realize its pragmatic functions and meta-functions effectively. This can be learnt from the current state of their writing proficiency, which is indicated by the average scores of CET-4 (College English Test Band Four) compositions fluctuating around 7 points (YU, 2000, p. 661). The following table is provided by the Committee of CET-4 and CET-6 (College English Test Band Six) (see Table 1).

Table 1   Average scores of CET-4 compositions for all and key colleges from June 2000 to June 2004

Group	6/2000	1/2001	6/2001	1/2002	6/2002	1/2003	6/2003	1/2004	6/2004
All colleges	7.59	7.48	7.58	6.82	6.50	5.86	5.86	6.50	6.20
Key colleges	8.19	8.38	8.29	7.78	7.28	7.01	7.01	7.72	7.16

The average scores of CET-4 compositions in all and key colleges tended to decline in the past few years. None of them reached the passing point (9 points). This means that many college students cannot use English well enough to realize its pragmatic functions and meta-functions. The teaching objective specified by the College English Syllabus is not fully realized. The author shall analyze the various problems existing in non-English majors' writings and try to find the causes from the functional perspective.

2. Problems in non-English majors' writings

2.1 Problems in generating ideas

The most foregrounding problem in students' writing is the poverty of content (WANG, W. Y. & WANG, L. F., 2004, p. 54). The limited word requirement of CET-4 writing leads to emptiness in the content of students'

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compositions (HAN, DAI & YANG, 2004, p, 21). When scoring CET-4 or CET-6 compositions, scorers find that some examinees copy the writing requirement or reading materials to fill in the blank of the writing. All these show that non-English majors do not know how to generate ideas. This means that they cannot use English to realize its ideational function.

2.2 Problems in organizing ideas

The scoring of CET-4 compositions shows that illogical development of ideas is a common problem for compositions at the 5-point and 2-point levels. Even though many compositions are long enough to cover all the writing space, it is very difficult for the scorer to comprehend what is being talked about. The main reason for the failure of communication between the examinee and the scorer is that the examinee does not know how to organize his ideas clearly and logically. This indicates that non-English majors cannot use English to realize its textural function.

2.3 Problems in coherence

Coherence is an important part of the scoring criteria of CET-4 compositions. According to the criteria concerning coherence, the compositions at the middle (5 and 8 points) and low (2 points) levels have some problems in coherence. The lower the score is, the more serious the problems are. Since most compositions get scores at the middle and low levels, incoherence is a common problem in non-English majors' writings, which shows that non-English majors are incompetent in realizing English textual function. Incoherence appears in the following forms: misuse of tense and aspect causes disorder in temporal order and harms coherence; unclear reference of pronouns causes misunderstanding and leads to incoherence; misuse of conjunctions and conjunctive structures damages coherence; and improper switches of topics cause disorder in the flow of thought and harm the logical relations of text (JIAN, LU & PAN, 2003, pp. 359-363).

2.4 Problems in language competence

English is a foreign language for Chinese learners. They do not have many opportunities to use it in their daily life. So writing in a foreign language is still a big problem for many non-English majors. Preliminary mistakes, such as disagreement between subject and predicate, misuse of tense and aspect, Chinglish expressions, spelling mistakes, etc. are common in their compositions (YU, 2000, p. 661). Language incompetence decreases non-English majors' capability of using English to realize its various pragmatic functions and three meta-functions.

3. Causes of the problems in non-English majors' writings

3.1 Exam-centered objective

As CET-4 has a minimum requirement of 6 points for the writing part, the first goal in teaching is to enable students to get at least 6 points. The exam-centered objective leads to the exam-centered approach. This causes the following result: except for 3-paragraph short articles, non-English majors cannot write anything else (HAN, et al., 2004, p. 18). The guiding role of CET-4 writing test may stop the writing teacher from different teaching genres. If the objective of the writing course is not adjusted in time, it is difficult to improve non-English majors' writing proficiency. The most important objective is to reform the genre of CET-4 writing and make it more authentic to reflect the pragmatic function of language in people's daily life.

3.2 Product-oriented approach

The Chinese writing class is still adopting the "pure" product approach, which emphasizes the result, not the

process. This leads to the phenomenon that the teachers are predominantly concerned about teaching correct forms and test-taking skills rather than assisting students to develop thoughts in writing (YOU, 2004, p. 97). The common practice in the college English writing class is like this: the teacher teaches skills about CET-4 writing, and then he/she assigns a topic for the students to write about. Later, he/she collects the students' products and gives each of them a score, often without written comments. As feedback, the teacher may explain some common problems in general, especially language problems. At last a sample article is provided for the students to compare and recite. Then the cycle repeats. From the above procedures, people can see that the writing stages, such as, pre-writing, in-writing and post-writing are not involved here. Even though students may have written quite a few articles, they still do not know how to generate and organize ideas. Lack of relevant training may be the cause. Sentential and textual coherence and strategies of establishing coherence are not emphasized in the writing class. Students need to be taught how to develop their ideas in such ways that their compositions will be well-organized and easy to comprehend. The structure of a composition is just like the frame of a building. Without a good structure, the composition will be a mess of words and ideas.

3.3 Inefficient mode of instruction

Hillocks identified four modes of instruction: presentational, natural process, environmental and individualized. "The presentational mode is a teacher-centered approach in which students are the passive recipients of the rules (grammatical and rhetorical) and examples of good writing. Students imitate a pattern, or follow rules, which are given through teacher lecture. In the natural process mode, there is no presentation of criteria or models; the instructor facilitates students to write for their peers and revise their drafts from peer feedback. In the individualized mode students receive instruction through tutorials, computer instruction, etc. on an individual basis. In the environmental mode the instructor plan activities that result in high levels of student interaction concerning specific, structured, problem-solving activities, and tasks with clear objectives; multiple drafts and peer revision are a part of the classroom activity, but explicit criteria for evaluation are considered. Teacher lecture is minimized as much of the class time is spent in small group or individual task completion…the least effective mode examined was the presentational mode, third effective was the individualized mode and second best was the natural process mode. The environmental mode was responsible for significantly higher gains than the other three modes" (Dyer, 1996, p. 314).

Among the four modes of instruction, "the least effective mode examined was the presentational mode, third effective was the individualized mode and second best was the natural process mode. The environmental mode was responsible for significantly higher gains than the other three modes" (Dyer, 1996, p. 315).

Judged from the features of the above 4 modes, the common practice in the college English writing class in China belongs to the presentational mode, which turns out to be the least effective. Teachers need to change their modes of instruction to improve their teaching efficiency. The environmental mode may be recommended because it has been proved to be more effective than the other three modes.

3.4 Ineffective feedback

With the expansion of enrollment, college English teachers have to teach large classes. Overwork and the large number of students make it difficult to give specific and detailed written comments to each composition. The general feedback to the whole class mainly involves language problems and the content is somewhat ignored. This kind of feedback is not very effective, because correcting or pointing out mistakes sometimes cannot improve writing proficiency. It may lead to students' timidity in using new expressions. Commenting on the content and rewriting the draft can improve writing proficiency (ZUO, 2002, p. 356). But these effective measures have been

ignored by many writing teachers. Even if written comments are provided occasionally, they are often too general and appear at the end of the composition. This is not as effective as writing down specific comments in the margin, for more students refer to the comments given in the margin than those appeared at the end of the composition for the simple reason that they know where the problems are (ZUO, 2002, p. 357).

3.5 Lack of creativity in teaching

As the writing part of CET-4 requires examinees to write a 3-paragraph article with hints provided and this form of test has not changed a little since it appeared for the first time in 1987, the 3-paragraph composition becomes the main teaching content of the writing class. This kind of writing does not encourage students to imagine and gradually students' thinking pattern becomes fixed. They get so accustomed to this form of writing that they can not write anything else. Writing becomes mechanical and there is no fun in doing it. The writing class becomes a place without creativity and vitality. It is not strange that non-English majors cannot use English to realize its various pragmatic functions.

4. Conclusion

The analyses show that there are various problems in non-English majors' writings, such as, problems in generating and organizing ideas, in coherence and language competence. These problems make non-English majors unable to use English as a tool to realize its pragmatic functions and meta-functions successfully. Improper writing instruction should be blamed for those problems. The objective of the writing course is exam-centered, and this is far away from realizing the pragmatic function of English through writing. The approach is product-oriented and the presentational mode is adopted to instruct writing, but this mode is found to be the least effective. The feedback offered by teachers is also not effective. What's worse, the writing class lacks creativity and vitality. All these pedagogic factors are responsible to some extent for the problems in non-English majors' writings. To avoid those problems, teachers need to improve their ways of instruction, so that students can learn how to generate and organize ideas, how to improve coherence and language competence in their writings. Only when the writing instruction is improved can students learn how to realize the pragmatic functions and the meta-functions of English effectively.

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