

A Comparative Study of English Writing Instruction Between Chinese and American Universities*

LI Hai-yan

North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China
University of Iowa, Iowa, USA

ZHAO Yu-shan

North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

Based on self-reflection of observation and interviews, the researcher contrasts the English writing instruction at a university in China with that of University of Iowa in terms of the following aspects: the instruction content, instruction plan, feedback content and forms, and evaluation methods. After pointing out the possible problems in English writing classes, such as not enough arrangement for learning different genres, less feedback on the structure and content of essays, and adopting summative assessment instead of formative assessment, etc., the paper finally put forward some suggestions for English writing instruction in Chinese universities: increasing language input amount and exposing learners to a variety of genres, making full use of the formative assessments and exercises, and creating more chances of teacher-student interaction.

Keywords: English writing instruction, input, evaluation, feedback

Introduction

Developing writing skills is important in English as a second language (ESL) learning. Despite its importance, many ESL learners do not learn to write well enough to meet the demands of school or the workplace. One possible reason is that schools are not doing an adequate job of instruction. There are many researches about English writing instructions (Atkinson, 2003; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hyland, 2002). However, most are limited and relatively vague with regard to instructional practices, because they are primarily limited to increasing the amount of writing students do within and outside of school, assessing students' progress in writing, using technology to advance the learning and instruction of writing, and better preparing teachers, but few use learner's own learning experiences as a basis for analyzing similarities and differences between Chinese and American college English writing, and then come up with methods to improve the instruction of College English writing.

The researcher, a college English teacher in China, being a visiting scholar to University of Iowa (UI) for a year, tries to compare two schools' writing courses based on the contents, instruction plans, evaluation, and feedback. After comparison, strengths of English writing instruction in UI are identified and a number of instruction suggestions for China English writing instruction are put forward.

* This research is sponsored by the Program of the Co-Construction with Beijing Municipal Commission of Education of China.
LI Hai-yan, associate professor, master, Foreign Languages Department, North China Electric Power University; research scholar, University of Iowa.

ZHAO Yu-shan, professor, master, Foreign Languages Department, North China Electric Power University.

Methodology

The research used a case study approach, as it enables researchers to do in-depth study of a problem in limited time. As a college English writing teacher in China, the researcher is familiar with instruction and evaluation system in China. Meanwhile, as a visiting scholar in UI for a year, the researcher is able to observe the writing courses for a semester, so that first-hand information is obtained and many beneficial instruction methods are identified. In order to better understand the background and the circumstances of the two schools' writing courses, lesson plans and students' compositions are compared, and some students are interviewed.

Research Questions

The research questions are as follows: (1) Are there any differences in language input and writing course content arrangement? (2) Are there any differences in teachers' feedback? (3) Are there any differences in writing curriculum evaluation system? (4) What are the implications of these differences for Chinese college English writing instruction?

Procedures

First, instruction plans of two schools are collected, and a comparative analysis is done about their content and instruction hours. Then, based on the researcher's own experiences, feedback and evaluation on student writing of four teachers from two universities are compared. Finally, the problems in Chinese writing instruction are identified and possible solutions are proposed. To validate the feasibility of those proposals, 50 English freshmen from two universities are interviewed.

Comparison of the Instruction Content and Instruction Plan

The Chinese university where the author teaches (referred to as CU later) use *English Writing Manuals* as the textbook, which provides a wealth of detailed information on English writing rules. UI adopts two textbooks in 2013-2014 fall semester, one of which is *the everyday writer*, introducing the syntax rules of writing and citations, and the other is a collection of 50 essays written by the famous authors. Through the author's personal experience and interviews, two books adopted by UI are understandable for most students as they are interesting and relevant which can meet students' expectations. Meanwhile, topics are various from race, sex to other social and cultural aspects, which can be more effective in attracting the attention of students and inspire them to read. But *English writing manuals* used by CU tends to be relatively boring to interviewed students as it tries to introduce students the structure and genre norms which most of the students have learned in secondary schools, so that it seems unable to engage students' attention.

According to Krashen (1985), the explanation of grammar rules alone does not help students acquire language, because grammar only plays a role in monitoring language production process. And what can really encourage students to acquire language is comprehensible language input, ie, $i + 1$ hypothesis. In CU writing instruction, there is no reading requirement for students and teachers to select a few examples from the textbook to explain grammar and language points; while in UI, students are required to preview articles in *50 essays* and encouraged to express their views in discussion, which does not only provide students with a more extensive language input, but enriches students thoughts and ideas. Therefore, the *English writing manuals* as the only textbook writing is not enough. During language rules explanation, writing course should also provide students with a lot of interesting and high-quality reading material as a supplement, so that there is more language input to improve students' logical thinking and writing organization.

As for instruction plan, the focus of CU is language, the instruction time of which is more than half of time. Grammar and writing rules are taught in most of the first semester classes while the focus of UI is the analysis of the articles, which occupies 76.7% of the total number of instruction hours. In addition, there is not enough arrangement for learning different genres in CU. They have only 2 hours per semester for learning to write articles for various genres, which is far from enough for students to understand various genres, let alone be able to write appropriately. In order to enhance students' interest in learning writing different types of articles, grammar instruction should be reduced to make room for the variety of genres article analysis.

Comparison of Feedback and Evaluation

Effective feedback can promote students' writing progress. The feedback difference in the two universities is mainly reflected in the content and the form.

Comparison of Feedback Content

On the basis of the author's instruction experience and interviews of freshmen in CU, Chinese teachers usually do not give feedback to each composition. As for the feedback, teachers only comment on common errors in writing, which mainly focus on the precise of specific language and format instead of the structure and content; while in UI writing class, structure and language receive the same attention.

Language errors should be concerned with, but logical structure and the content are equally noteworthy. Williams (2007) suggested, feedback should focus on the communicative intent, the content, and organization of the article. Especially in the initial stages, feedback should focus on general point rather than tangle in thus a word or sentence structure. One common problem of Chinese students' English essays is being not logical so that it may give rise to confusion to readers. Another one is bad organization and lack of sufficient evidence to support their view. Therefore, Chinese teachers need to pay more attention to structured format and content of the essays. Otherwise, students may focus more on surface errors than on the clarity of their ideas, and it will only stress the negative.

Comparison of Feedback Forms

There are two major categories of feedback forms: One is collective feedback in classroom, and the other is written or oral individual comment. The difference in two universities is the lack of face-to-face student-teacher conferencing in Chinese university.

Written feedback has been found to be effective when it is coupled with student-teacher conferencing (Fregeau, 1999). Conferencing allows both students and teachers a chance to trace the causes of the problems arising from student writing and feedback, and to develop strategies for improvement. During these sessions, teachers can ask direct questions to students in order to gain a deeper understanding of student writings. Also, students are able to express their ideas more clearly in writing and to get clarification on any comments that teachers have made. Finally, teachers can use conferencing to assist students with any specific problems related to their writing. In UI, in addition to student-teacher conferencing, students can also consult in the Writing Centre, which helps correct and improve essay writing, staff of which are generally made of English teachers and native students good at writing.

When interviewed, some Chinese students reflect the written feedback does not help much, since they may not read the annotations at all, may read them but not understand them, or may understand them but not know how to respond to them. Teacher comments on content are of little use if students do not know what they mean

or how to use them productively to improve their skills as writers.

Comparison of Evaluation Methods

CU English writing achievement is summative assessment, composed of the class participation (20%) and final exam (80%); while in UI, formative assessment is adopted, with the final score integrated by 12 quiz and seven essays. In CU English writing class, students' classroom performance accounted for a small proportion in final score, so students may lack motivation to practice in the course of the semester. Instead, they cram textbook knowledge before the exam. While in UI, formative assessment used effectively increases the students' language input and writing practice.

Experts and educators agree that using formative assessments can significantly increase student achievement, especially when used to improve student writing. By varying the type of assessment you use over the course of the week, you can get a more accurate picture of what students know and understand, obtaining a "multiple-measure assessment 'window' into student understanding" (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006). Formative assessment gives students a reason to read and understand the instructor's comments on their writing, aids students in applying the instructor's comments to the same or a very similar writing assignment, thus aiding them to become better writers, builds more time into the students' schedules for thinking and writing about assigned topics and results in better thinking and writing and helps students become better critics of their own writing, hence better revisers of their own writing.

Implications

From the above comparative analysis, the practice of UI writing class gives us the following revelation. First, the amount of language input should be increased, and students should be given access to different genres, themes, and templates. Teachers should consciously develop students' critical reading skills to enhance students' logical thinking. Second, we must make full use of the formative assessments and exercises to monitor learning. Teachers should study carefully tests and assignments of each student to identify those who need extra help, and help them learn through face to face guidance. Third, create more chances of teacher-student interaction. Small classes are more desirable for English writing. If a class is big, then the teacher can break it into several groups and differ their time of assignments so that he can have sufficient time for feedback on students' work. Finally, try to set up the tutoring centre, and teachers of writing classes can take turns on duty.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has given a comparative analysis of Sino-US University writing instructions and provided some suggestions for English writing teachers, such as increasing language input amount, making full use of the formative assessments and exercises, and creating more chances of teacher-student interaction. Further studies are needed to prove that those can be effective.

References

- Ainsworth, L., & Viegut, D. (2006). *Common formative assessments, how to connect standards-based instruction and assessment*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Atkinson, D. (2003). L2 writing in the post-process era. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12(1), 49.
- Bell, J. (1999). *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in education and social science*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Ferris, D. R., & Hedgcock, J. S. (1998). *Teaching ESL composition: Purpose, process, and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Fregeau, L. A. (1999). Preparing ESL students for college writing: Two case studies. *The Internet TESL Journal [On-line]*, 5(10). Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Fregeau-CollegeWriting.html>
- Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and researching writing*. New York: Longman.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. New York: Longman.
- LI, Y., & WANG, Z. (2006). Implications of Krashen's input hypothesis on China's foreign language teaching. *College English*, (1), 38.
- Williams, J. (2007). *Instruction writing in second and foreign language classrooms* (p. 116). Beijing: World Books Publishing.