

Using Mind Maps to Develop English Majors' Essay Writing in China

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Writing is a kind of creative thinking activity. Essay writing is crucial for Chinese English majors for the requirements of the TEM-4 (Test for English Majors-Band 4) and TEM-8. Many students are weak in essay writing because they use Chinese thinking patterns and structures to express their ideas, and lack frequent and sufficient writing practice. This paper reviews the concepts of mind maps in writing and advocates applications into essay writing from word-level to whole essay structure by visual mind maps to promote their creativity in English essay writing effectively.

Keywords: English major, essay writing, mind mapping, application research

Introduction

English writing is a kind of creative thinking activity and an interactive process. It is difficult for most Chinese English majors to write essays in English because of different language systems, cultural backgrounds, and thinking patterns. Generally speaking, an English essay or thesis consists of three parts: the introduction, body, and conclusion. In each part, there are topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences. They are likely in agreement with the requirements for writings in TEM-4 (Test for English Majors-Band 4) and TEM-8, which is weak for English majors, for writing is vital in English instruction. The main reason is that students do not have the habit of planning nor using mind maps before they write. This paper, based on the problems of students' essay writing, explores the relationship between mind mapping and essay writing, which aims at developing English majors' writing skills.

The Problems of English Majors' Essay Writing

It is hard for English majors to write English essays both in TEM-4 and TEM-8. Essay writing in TEM-4 and TEM-8 is typically "three-part argumentative writings". However, most of students lack frequent and sufficient writing skills. They like to write a draft in Chinese first, and then shift the patterns of Chinese narrative writings into English argumentative writings, and prefer to transfer Chinese thinking modes to express their ideas in English. As a result, there is not a perfect structure nor a cohesion (Fan, 2008, p. 37).

The errors made by students both in TEM-4 and TEM-8 writings can be listed in the following: (1) The argument is not fully expanded; (2) the structure is not rigorous; (3) the beginning and end parts are not in agreement with each other in content or self-contradictory; and (4) the essays lack coherence and logic. The

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prominent problem is that the sentence cannot be regarded as the topic sentence, for it does not contain a theme—rheme structure, which is the “basic form of the organization of the clause as message” (Halliday, 1985, p. 53), and the “basic unit of language in use is not a word or a sentence, but a text” (Halliday, 1970, p. 160).

The author has many years' experience of teaching and research in English Major students' writing, and finds that they have common errors in essay writing: (1) Their writings are not argumentative; (2) their expressions are Chinese-like, without logic, and with many grammar mistakes; (3) the form of their writing is not in agreement with their meaning; (4) the viewpoints or ideas of students cannot be found in their writing (Luo, 2012, p. 140). The reason is that both teachers and students ignore the importance of planning before their writing. Especially, more than two-thirds of his students do not know how to use mind maps in their writings.

Mind Maps and English Essay Writing

Definitions of Mind Maps

Mind maps are firstly put forward by Tony Buzan, a well-known educator and distinguished chairman of the British Brain Foundation in the 1960s. In 1971, he raised the concept of mind mapping that is not only the manifestation of thinking radiation, but also the habitual function of human thinking (Buzan, 1971). That is, there are two different perspectives about mind mapping, the structures as well as the functions.

For the structures, mind maps can be defined as a form of an outline with ideas and pictures radiating out from a central concept (Buzan, 1993), an important research technology that converts information from different sources into diagrams according to the key words related to research topics (Farrand, Hussain, & Hennesy, 2002), or a contour, in which the main category gives out from the chief image, while the secondary category is a branch of the larger branch (Budd, 2004).

For the functions, mind mapping is an effective tool to assist people in thinking and learning (Buzan, 1993), a technology to improve creativity and productivity so that it can improve the efficiency of learning and writing (Mento, Martinelli, & Jones, 1999), or a graph used to generate, visualize, classify, and construct ideas which contribute to learning, organizing, solving problems, and making decisions (Murley, 2007).

In terms of these definitions mentioned above, mind mapping is a very useful graphics technology, which combines both image and abstraction, plays a vital part in the human brain, and can express thoughts completely and clearly. It can be seen as a schematic map radiating ideas from the central concept to function as the externalization of divergent thinking.

Mind Maps in English Essay Writing

Mind maps are greatly beneficial to students' improvement of English essay writing. Zhang Hong (2017) studies whether mind mapping can arouse college students' interest in writing after using it in English writing teaching. The result is that the use of mind map can improve their interests of English writing and decreases their writing anxiety. Talked from perspective of English writing capability, students are improved a lot with mind map applied in English writing.

Mind mapping makes students' English writing coherent and complete. Vijayavalslan and Dhahi (2016) deems that planning before writing with the use of mind maps helps students write essays more effectively. Naqbi (2011) finds out mind mapping may impact on students' abilities to plan and organize their ideas for writing tasks under exam conditions, because they are able to organize English writing structure and determine

the writing direction. Yu Shu Fan (2016) confirms that thinking maps assist most students in developing well-organized structure and providing more ideas for them to use in their own essay writings.

Mind mapping is a technique which can make the writing process visualize the structure of knowledge. Mind maps actually are like network diagrams which can fully embody the level of the article and context, including the form, the content, and the language schema. In fact, mind maps are a combination of content and form schema. So the application of mind mapping in English writing becomes the visual thinking and the whole shape looks like a neural network diagram (Buzan, 2006).

Applications of Mind Maps Into Essay Writing

Constructing Overall Essay Structure

Mind mapping, a pre-writing brainstorming activity, fairly functions in organizing ideas and creative thinking. The application of mind maps in English writing can improve students' writing layout abilities, help them better support and develop their writing skills, and ultimately promote their process of writing thinking. Students start with a topic at the centre and then generate a web of ideas from that, developing and relating these ideas as mind making associations. The author takes a 5-paragraph essay structure as an example (Figure 1). The introducing paragraph (Paragraph 1) starts with a general statement, and then narrows to the point. The body (Paragraph 2-4) is blocks of organized paragraph with explanation, definition, clarification, illustration, stories, examples, or reasoning, etc. The concluding paragraph (Paragraph 5) briefly restates or summarizes the main points, and final comment. The introduction is like inverted pyramid, developing from the general to the specific, taking up about 10 percent of the essay. On the contrary, the conclusion looks like pyramid, summing up the argument from the specific to the general, covering around 10 percent of the essay.

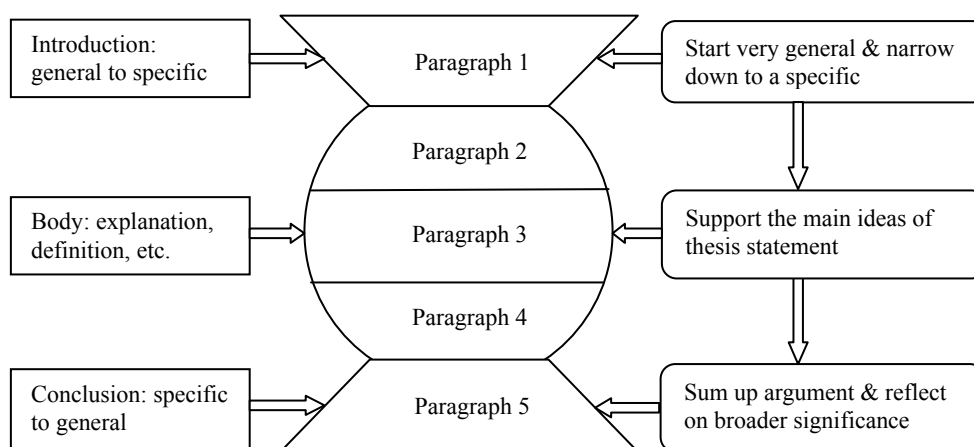


Figure 1. 5-paragraph essay structure.

Generating Webs of Ideas on Mind Maps

Word-level model. Mind mapping, which mainly functions in organizing students' ideas, is the externalization of divergent thinking and creative thinking. Firstly, students should know how to apply mind maps to make notes on a topic, prior to writing. As we know, a mind map, as a structured strategy or a spidergram in essay writing, shows the hierarchical relationship of students' ideas at the brainstorming stage. For instance, if the teacher gives his/her students the essay topic entitled "Is It Wise to Make Friends Online", they usually start the topic sentence with "Different people have different ideas about making friends online". It

is absolutely right but too common or modeled. Factually, the key words in the topic sentence have a very strong controlling idea in their mind to have the following supporting sentences with levels such as “young people”, “middle-aged people”, “old people” (Figure 2). Fortunately, at the draft or editing stage, higher level students can change the “different” into other synonyms like “various”, “individual” in order to avoid repeating the word “different” (Figure 3).

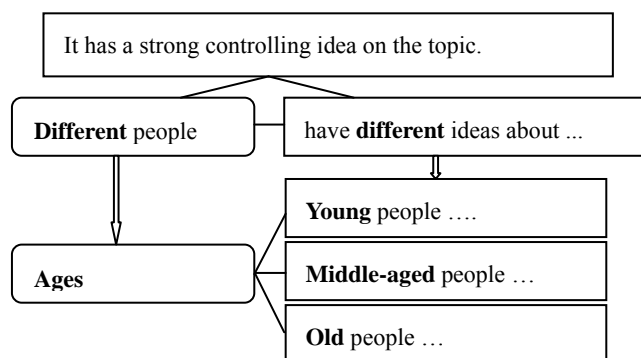


Figure 2. Key words in the topic sentence.

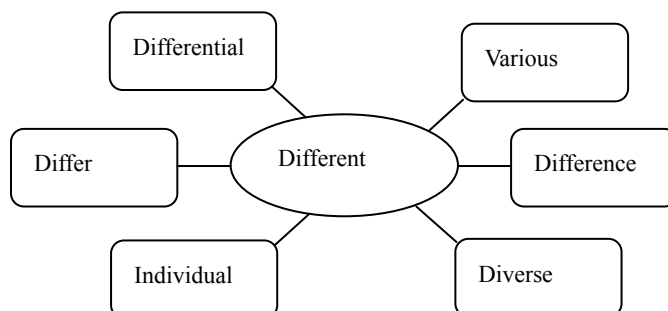


Figure 3. Synonyms words based on “different”.

Sentence-level model. The best way to approach essay writing is to start at the sentence level. Once students have learned to compose simple, compound, and complex sentences, they will have the tools necessary to write longer documents such as essays, arguments, and so on. Students will find this help valuable for them to write a good essay or thesis. Firstly, the topic sentence states what the essay is about and tells what it will argue. That is, the topic sentence consists of three basic aspects: (1) The topic refers to the subject of the paragraph; (2) the controlling idea is the writer’s idea about the topic; (3) it is a word or phrase that the reader can ask questions like “In what ways? Why? What does that mean?” Secondly, transition or link words, as the glue that holds sentences and paragraphs, are also of importance that functions the sequences leading to the text as well as the writers’ attitudes. For instance, most Chinese English majors like to use “first/firstly, second/secondly, third/thirdly, last but not least/in addition, to sum up/all in all/in a word”. Some other students may use “as well as” (Figure 4) to stand for the meaning from most important to less important, and “meanwhile” for the meaning of the same importance.

as well as	from most important to less important
meanwhile	for the meaning of the same importance
as well as Idea 1 _____ Idea 2 _____ meanwhile, Idea 4 _____ Idea 5 _____	

Figure 4. The link words “as well as” and “meanwhile”.

Paragraph-level model. A paragraph is like a mini-essay and should be unified, coherent, and adequately-developed. Each paragraph focuses on a single idea that supports the essay. That is, a paragraph has several sentences to discuss one main subject or to present a single thought, and its point is sufficiently supported by specific details, like definitions, explanations, examples, facts, or evidence. Finally, the conclusion should restate the idea with different words or sentence structure to wrap up the paragraph. In English essay writing, paragraphs have three fundamental parts: the topic sentence, body/supporting sentences, and concluding sentences (Figure 5). The topic sentence will state the viewpoint of the paragraph. The topic is what the writer intends to communicate about it, and is the writer's generalization of the particular details relevant to it. So a valid topic sentence consists of two parts: the topic/subject, and the central/controlling idea. Students can organize their mind maps into linear format to decide the best way to present their points, and think about the overall structure of the whole paragraph. Then, they may focus on the clue and develop the paragraph in their final text.

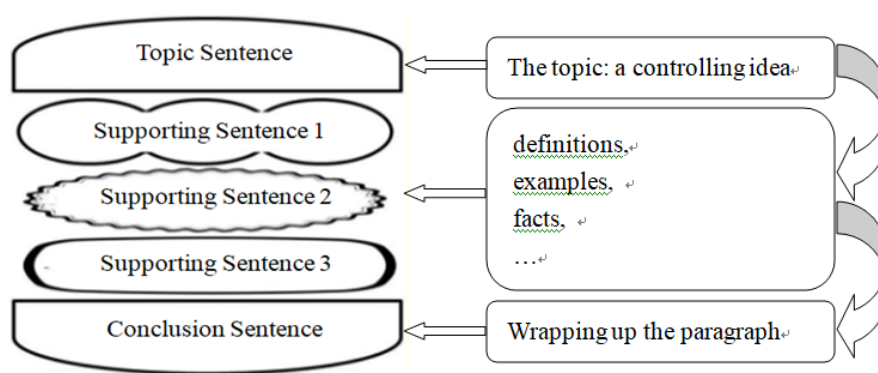


Figure 5. Paragraph-level model.

Using Mind Maps to Develop Essay Writing

Mind maps work well as their visual design that enables students to connect the central idea with supporting ideas, and encourages them to group certain ideas together as they proceed. Firstly, they need to radiate ideas on a certain writing topic as they receive new information. Secondly, the process of radiating ideas on the topic with mind maps can let them brainstorm and extract existing knowledge. Then, they can draw a structure of the essay with their own cognition and experience. And finally, they can easily write the

article according to the mind map. If students have built the essay structure, they can finish it with referring the mind map. The teaching steps are just like the procedures in the Figure 6.

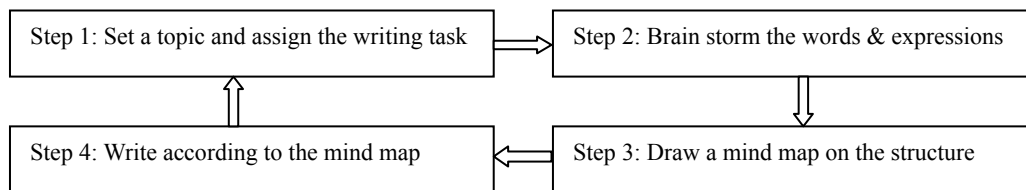


Figure 6. Procedures of essay writing with mind mapping.

Take the writing task entitled “My Understanding of Friendship” as an example, the following schema (Figure 7) can stand for the application of mind map into essay writing. The Onion Head Model shows the framework of the essay, and the key words in different paragraphs from the general to the specific “all human beings→familiar people→close friends” used as supporting the topic “Friendship exists everywhere”.

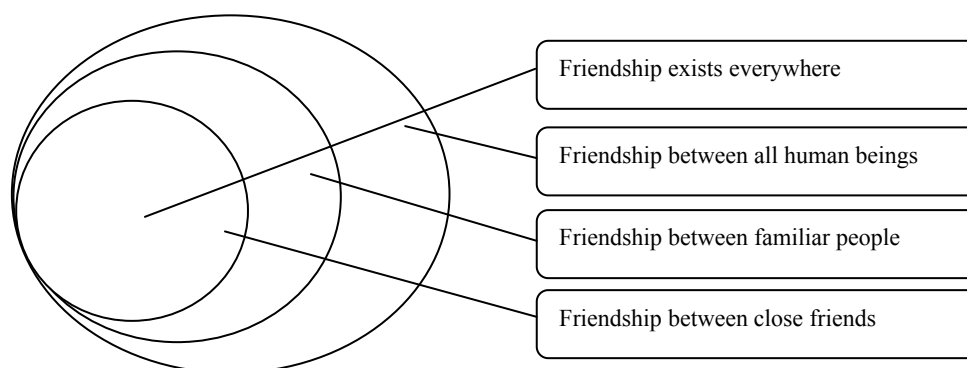


Figure 7. The framework of an essay structure.

Conclusion

English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in China. The prominent problem with EFL writing for English majors is that they do not know how to write effectively. For a long time, more Chinese students have got the habit of thinking as well as drawing a draft in Chinese. Because of the advantages about the essay writing through visual mind maps, English majors can foster awareness of mind mapping before they write. Such mind maps training can promote their development of English essay writing from the form to the content, from low level to higher level, from mechanical imitation to meaningful construction.

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