A Case Study in Chinese College English Writing by Using Diversified Expressions

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Abstract: English writing is one of the five skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating) in English learning that Chinese college students must acquire. According to the Chinese National Syllabus for College English Test —Band Four (CET-4), the students must be able to write, in 30 minutes, a short composition of no less than 120 words on a given topic, with certain provided guidance. On the basis of the analysis presented in this paper, five major problems in students’ writing are revealed. To solve these problems, the method of Diversified Expressions can lead to improved English writing by Chinese college students of non-English majors. And the use of Diversified Expressions proved to be effective. The theory of Diversified Expression can be practiced and manageable by the students, and an improved performance in English writing can be resulted.

Introduction

Background Information

Before entering college/university, Chinese students have gained various levels of competence in English language skills through their middle school education. According to the Chinese National College English Teaching Syllabus, College English Teaching in China is divided into 6 progressive bands, which are officially called College English Band 1—6 (CEBs1—6). These bands are subdivided into the basic requirements (CEBs1—4) and the higher, or more proficient requirements (CEBs5—6). Those who have successfully completed the first four bands are considered to have met the basic requirements of English language usage. Those who have passed College English Test Band 6 (CET—6) are regarded as having met higher requirements demonstrating a greater level of proficiency.

In certain universities, “a placement test should be given before the start of the course in order to put the students in a suitable band. Whichever band students start from, they must finish the CEB 4”.

[1] Students who have displayed the required competence to satisfy CEB 4 expectations, may take the test to achieve a higher level—Band 6.

In comparison with listening, speaking, reading and translating skills, the Tests (from the author’s experience of grading the students’ testing paper) reveal that Chinese students’ ability in writing is usually weak.

English Writing is one of the important sections in the National College English Test (CET). For this section, the students are allowed 30 minutes to write a composition with at least three paragraphs. The composition should be written in accordance with the given background or outline, concerning subjects with which the students are familiar. The purpose of this writing test item is to evaluate the students’ writing ability to see if the students’ writing keeps to the subject and focuses on the topic. The students are required to express their ideas clearly with proper words, and their writing should be coherent and logical, free from serious mistakes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to make the students’ English writing more readable and smooth with proper coherence gained by applying diversified words and expressions to the writing. The study
tends to achieve a concrete and integrated effect through links and connection, using diversified cohesive expressions in English language writing. What’s more, by applying diversified vocabulary and expressions, the students will be able to perform well enough in any test or examination, with no more lop-sided English writing scores.

**Significance of the Study**

It is generally accepted that the students in colleges and universities in China spend three-fifth of their time learning English with various motives. Based on the analysis of the common problems in College English teaching and learning, this paper offers a practical project where Diversified Expressions were offered as a means of increasing skill in English writing. With the research findings and results reported here, the teacher can solve student writing problems by correcting the assignments done by the students in classes, allowing the students to gain proficiency in writing more fluently, smoothly, and expressively.

**Delimitations of the Study**

This study is confined to Chinese college students who are non-English majors, who learn English as a foreign language in their first two years of college. The study deals with teaching and learning strategies and techniques of English writing.

**A Review of Literature**

Writing is one of the communicative means used by human beings and an effective way of conveying ideas and opinions. “The purpose of writing, in principle, is the expression of ideas, the conveying of a message to the reader; so the ideas themselves should arguably be seen as the most important aspect of the writing.” [2] English Writing is widely studied and discussed in ESL, EFL, as well as in TESOL. It is one of the important aspects in the academy of Second Language Acquisition.

Among them, first of all, is the theory of Cohesive Knowledge, advanced by Zhang Guiju [3] in her article “The Cohesive Knowledge and English Writing Quality of College English Writing”. She has made investigations on the correlation between cohesive knowledge and the quality of English writing of college students. By analyzing the subjects’ errors in using cohesive devices as related to their scores of English writing, she demonstrates that the use of cohesive knowledge can lead to the students’ improvement of English writing.

In addition to the theory of Cohesive Knowledge related to this study, quite a few scholars support the viewpoints of using reference words to improve the writing quality. Gillian Brown and George Yule, professors at Cambridge and Louisiana Universities, have done thorough and deep research on the nature and use of reference in the text in their monograph Discourse Analysis. “The traditional semantic view of reference is one in which the relationship of reference is taken to be between expressions in a text and entities in the world, and that of co-reference between expressions in different parts of a text” [4]

While cohesive devices such as pronoun reference unify writing, there are still other influences impacting writing. Ma Guanghui and Wen Qiufang believe “that there are certain factors affecting students’ English writing ability: Proficiency and competence of Chinese language; Oral English competence; English vocabulary level; Motives of learning, and so on”. [5]

Some scholars focus their research specifically on the problems of English sentence structure and grammar that Chinese students confront in English writing. Deng Yunhua [6] states that “the different way of thinking resulted in the English writing problems of Chinese students. And the Spiral Pattern of thinking of Chinese students led to a misapplication of western culture in Chinese circumstance”.

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Problem Statements and Analyses

Problem Statements

The problem statements are based on the Interviews and Questionnaire Results. During teaching practice, the researcher interviewed numerous teachers and students about the problems experienced in English writing. Based on the analysis of the responses made by students, the following problems are revealed:

*The writing is dull and none interesting.*

Though the students are able to write with a sufficient number of words as required and in sentences with correct English grammar, the writing seems dull and uninteresting.

*Simple sentences with little qualification.*

Very simple sentences typical of beginners prevail throughout the writing. Apparently, the sentences in the compositions are loosely linked by basic subject matter. The students reveal limitations in English vocabulary, not allowing them to express what they want around the topic.

*Lack of cohesive meaning in context.*

Another common problem in the student’s compositions is lack of cohesive words that link sentences or paragraphs that generate an orderly, natural flow of ideas and thus allow the reader to follow the written discourse more easily.

*Influence of Chinese native thinking on English language usage.*

By reading the students’ writing, the researcher found that the students’ works are affected by the Chinese native way of thinking, which is generally considered as improper Chinglish (Chinese English). The students have limited awareness of the difference between Chinese and English language words, forms, syntax, and style.

*Frequent repetition.*

It is necessary that writing should be concise and readable, though repetition properly used can be a rhetorical device. Undoubtedly, unnecessary repetition will make the writing overstuffed and spoil the reader’s interest in the work.

Analyses

Causes on the Teachers’ Side

First, most of the English classes are “teacher-centered”, which is very common in China. The class is from the teacher’s side, as he talks all the way through the period while the students are passive, seldom having chances to practice. Second, the teachers lay stress on teaching English grammar rules but not on the lively use of English language. Third, the students don’t have enough writing assignments because the teacher is overloaded with teaching tasks and doesn’t have time to correct them.

Causes on the Students’ Side

First, the students’ English vocabulary is comparatively small, which restrains them from expressing their ideas and thoughts freely. Second, the Chinese native way of thinking is a fatal obstacle to the Chinese students. The writing seems awkward and not smooth in most cases.

Theory of Diversified Expressions

Definition of Diversified Expressions

*Diversified Expressions* is a method used in English writing to describe the same thing or idea in a text, using different expressions to avoid unnecessary repetitions so that the writing reads naturally and smoothly. It is not only a device that ties sentences or paragraphs together but also attends to
the whole composition. *Diversified Expressions* achieves an efficient and integrated effect using links and connections composed of different words and expressions so that the writing is expressive and proper in language.

“English is characterized in *Structure.* It makes it difficult for the Chinese students to write proper English, for Chinese language accentuates in *Meaning*” [7]. Coherence in context can also be achieved if *Diversified Expressions* is used properly. Paragraph coherence is especially useful and necessary to produce a natural flow of the writing and help convey explicit and implicit information to the readers; because the structure is tightly connected, the ideas are cohesive.

**Derivation of the Theory**

**Inspiration of a Fable**

The researcher of this study was first inspired by the fable of *Six Blind Men and the Elephant*.

In the story, the six blind men wondered what the elephant is really like. They, respectively, came to it to touch and feel. In the story, six different expressions are used, *to put his hand on; came forward to feel; to catch; reached out his arms and closed around; happened to take hold of; seized.*

This is a typical use of *Diversified Expressions* to make the writing varied and expressive.

**Diversified Expressions — by Guided Practice**

Another means of bettering writing skill with *Diversified Expressions* can be gained by Guided Practice. The teacher can do this either by assigning the students homework or by doing activities in class.

One of the examples is displayed hereafter:

After the oral test, the students waiting outside ①______ me a lot of questions. They ② _____what the teacher ③_____ at the beginning of the test. Many students ④_____ if the questions were difficult to answer. One of my classmates ⑤_____me to write down some of the questions the teacher ⑥______.

The scene described above is outside of an oral English test location, and has been created by the researcher as an exercise involving *Diversified Expressions* practice. In this paragraph, the word or phrase that denotes the meaning of “ask” has been omitted and replaced with blanks. The students are then asked to fill the blanks with proper *Diversified Expressions*. The students try their best and manage to avoid repetition. One of the student’s answers is as follows:

① asked, ② were eager to know, ③ said, ④ wondered, ⑤ wanted, ⑥ raised.

When doing the practice, first, the students are obliged to enlarge their English vocabulary and enrich their expressions in case they are needed in English writing. Second, the students find it necessary to synthesize and assimilate their knowledge of English learned and make it comprehensible. Only in this way, can they compose a creative, original and fresh writing.

**Checking for Diversified Expressions in Writing**

In order to achieve the full effect of *Diversified Expressions* in English writing, the following aspects should be paid attention to upon finishing the composition:

① Verbs and verbal phrases, acting as the predicates in sentences, are often boring repetitions. They should be given special attention while writing or checking. Just as described in the example above, redundancy of verbs will result in a non-interesting work.

② Make certain that the cohesive links are diversified. In doing this, try to use different cohesive words to obtain a writing unity both in structure and in ideas. Keep cohesive words and expressions in mind. (Refer to Appendix 2)

③ Avoid “Chinglish” expressions in English writing because Chinese and English are two different languages in nature. English language lays great importance on form, while Chinese emphasizes meaning.
④ Improve the whole writing by using *Diversified Expressions*, especially during the final checking stage. Final polishing-up is a stage at the end of writing. That is when to check your writing for mistakes and correct them. This includes: (1) Checking your spelling and grammar correctness. (2) Reading your work again to see if the writing is readable as well as understandable. (3) Making sure that the sentences and paragraphs are well connected. (4) Seeing if subjects and verbs agree with each other and have the proper verb tenses in each sentence. (5) Making certain that the sentences make sense. (6) Making sure that your writing has a topic paragraph, supporting paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph.

**Conclusion**

Through the above analyses and study, it can be concluded that there is significant correlation between applying *Diversified Expressions* and the improvement of English writing for Chinese college students who are non-English majors. The data provided in the above tables reveal the fact that the experimental group of students scored higher in English writing than those taught in a traditional way. With the use of *Diversified Expressions*, the quality of students’ writing can be improved.

The theory of *Diversified Expressions* can be practiced through coaching by the teachers. Teachers may design diversified exercises that can lead to an improved performance of the students in English writing so that the students can perform significantly better in a test or examination by avoiding redundant, non-cohesive English writing. Furthermore, the improvement of English writing for Chinese college students includes more comprehensive measures and solutions. The method of *Diversified Expressions* is only one out of many.

**References**


