Postgraduates’ Writing Improvement from Reading Accumulation

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Abstract. This paper gives an analysis on the development of writing skill and presents a suggestion to develop students’ writing competence through reading. The author proposes some strategies to change the present situation. One is to rearrange teaching time, letting reading and writing take more occupation in English study activities, mainly focusing on reading and making useful notes. The other is to stipulate what to read and how to read. At this point, graduates are advised, purposely, to read as much as possible to enrich their writings. Based on the systematical analysis, there comes to a conclusion that it is significant to accumulate enough materials through rich reading for graduates’ writing to be improved.

Introduction

Reading is the major approach to improve writing ability. Specifically, reading is the base of writing while writing activity is sublimated by reading process. However, writing ability cannot be pushed without enough materials from reading. But the accumulation for writing is a long way---by digesting, cutting, sorting and summarizing to apply those excellent sentences or paragraphs into one’s own writing, the article would attract readers for its brilliant word-usage, cheerful language or great structure.

Through reading, one not only can learn something from society and life, enrich his/her thought and feelings, strengthen analytical ability, but also can broaden the field of vision, practice good writing skills and have a deeper knowledge on a foreign language. The ancient Chinese once believed that “If one has read over 10,000 volumes one, when writing, would be guided by the spirits”. This showed a close relationship between reading and writing long before. Meanwhile, in Hong Lou Meng, a Chinese classic by Cao Xueqin, Lin Daiyu is called a genius in composing poems. When Xiangling asks her for help, Daiyu advises her to firstly read 100 five-word-poems by Wang Mojie, then 120 seven-word-poems by Dufu, and one or two hundred poems by LiQinglian, …, thus in less than one year she must be an excellent poet. This also mirrors the old Chinese saying “After having read 300 Tang poems, one at least can chant”. However, this is the author Cao Xueqin introducing his own writing experience by his heroine’s mouth. Therefore, to obtain understandable input through reading is the important way and source to develop linguistic competence. [1]

Present Situation

Non-English major postgraduates, after two-year-study of basic English and the penetrated study before the entrance examination for the would-be postgraduates, have mastered enough to overcome the difficulties in grammar and vocabulary. They also can have an effective way in social and academic communication.

But the urgent need for postgraduates to improve is their writing ability. Of course, the most important way is to read, which is not the ordinary reading, but a purposed, directive and practical one---since writing is always learnt from reading. It can be found that in almost all textbooks for undergraduates there are two parts, i.e. Reading Skill and Writing Practice planned in each unit. This class design, a common recognition by scholars and experts on their experience for years.
The author of this thesis had a condensed questionnaire on 53 people short after their becoming postgraduates. Among which six questions are concerned with writing:

1. I am in fear of writing.  A) No.  B) Usually  C) Sometimes
2. It’s unnecessary to improve my writing ability which is enough powerful to deal with kinds of exams.
   A) Agree     B) Disagree     C) Not clear
3. I can express myself in writing by using different sentence structures, antonyms or synonyms.
   A) Yes       B) No        C) Seldom
4. When writing, I can apply proper quotations to support my viewpoint strongly.
   A) Yes        B) Never     C) Occasionally
5. My writing has distinct point, clear structure, persuasive arguments and powerful conclusion.
   A) Yes        B) No      C) Sometimes
6. Reciting fine writings, reading famous works or magazines & newspapers are great helpful for my writing.
   A) Yes        B) No      C) Indefinitely

The Result is in the Following Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q</th>
<th>Ch</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Q: questions   Ch: choices   Total: students)

The choices of each of the six questions are in the “Affirmative—Negative—Indefinite” order, among which “A” is shown the highest value expectancy, while “B” is the lowest, “C” is an uncertain one. The three choices share a wide swing range. As is shown in the table above, except Q6, the higher the value expectancy is, the fewer students choose, and the lower the percentage it takes. The reasons that cause such inverse proportion between value expectancy and the percentage mainly lie in two aspects: students themselves and teachers.

As for students, there are about four factors:
1) Not think highly of writing. Since the writing part takes only ten percent in the variety of exams on postgraduates. No specific requirements are listed in their textbooks so that writing practice and teaching occupy lower proportion.
2) Lack interest and motivation in writing. As in Q2, most students are satisfied with their present situation and have no initiative perhaps because of the less emphasis on writing in teaching task.
3) Not be able to combine writing and reading effectively. What they write are only a collection of some unrelated sentences, which are empty in content.
4) No confidence for an improved writing. Usually teachers give negative marks on a student’s writing which is considered very good by him/herself. At this time, students should not think about those corrections actively and exchange their thoughts with teachers, but take a laissez-faire attitude. Later on, their confidence dies away.

For teachers, there are also four factors:
1) Teaching task is too heavy and writing teaching is not properly adjusted.
2) Too many students to be cared of. At least in the first semester, teachers can hardly know well about each student in teachers’ homework correction.
3) Not scientifically guide students to apply what they’ve read into writing.
4) No outstanding textbooks for postgraduates to follow.
Attempt Strategies

In accordance with the above problems lying in teachers and students, English teaching need to be readjusted in content and time so as to enforce students’ writing competence by effective reading.

1) Teaching time: postgraduates studying English is much different from undergraduates, in which certain ability in listening and reading comprehension has been achieved. The original 50-hour-intensive reading and the 30-hour-listening are rearranged to be 30-hour-reading, 25-hour-writing, 15-hour-listening and 10-hour-speaking and 20-hour or more after class study (shown in the following figure). Thus in strengthening reading ability, the teaching key point moves to writing.

2) When reading is focused, teach students what to read and how to read efficiently. From the view of the author, to read some famous works, writing models, current news & magazines as well as some typical texts is helpful to apply what one has got from reading into one’s writing unconsciously. Since a well-known dictum is usually powerful than one’s own argument. For example, “Practice makes perfect” is prior to “I think practice is the most important to make things better”. Since the idiom here is not only concise and attractive, but also applies the rhetorical device “alliteration”, which sounds rhythmical and interesting.

Besides, after deciding what to read, teachers should plan the reading activity scientifically in class and lead students to reading skills out of class. The variables, such as passage length, students’ interest, their cultural background, and self-cultivation etc, would influence teaching effect. So teachers’ predictive in planning reading time and content is a chief point.

For the efficient reading, three methods are recommended in the following:

Learning by Heart

This is a traditional approach to literacy education which puts emphasis on verbatim memorization of text. In Chinese teaching it has also long been practiced because of its obvious benefits in cultivating students’ oral communicative competence and writing ability. It is believed that those who do well in learning texts by heart understand the texts better and are more capable of employing the words and phrases learnt into all their speaking and writing activities. Looking in our mind don’t we still clearly remember the poems and essays we recited before?

Taking Notes or Lists

This is also an important way to collect or accumulate materials for writing, including digesting, summarizing, cutting or reading-comment. If these notes put in a proper order, it is convenient to have a fast retrieval; or if necessary, some notes or transcripts are to be memorized for the future use in writing.

Getting Information from Listening

At present, it is easy for students to get access to many auditory materials. And one research project found that auditory presentation of stimuli shows memory superiority over their visual presentation, and that dual-modality presentation can result in superior learning over single modality presentation.[2] That is to say, listening to the recording of a passage will enable students
to learn something by heart more quickly. For example, the famous speech—I have a dream by Martin Luther King, gives a deeper impression when listened to the vivid original record.

Conclusion
After one-term-attempt, a second research is held on these 53 postgraduates. The focus is put whether they have achieved improvement in writing from reading. 34 of them answered YES, and whose compositions are distinctively enhanced both in word-choice, sentence-structure, and rhetorical device applying. This proves the affirmative function of reading in developing writing ability. The next step is to persevere by both teachers and students.

References