Teaching Writing to English Majors at the Tertiary Level in China — Reflections on Material Development and Teaching Methodology

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This paper discusses the teaching of writing to English majors at the tertiary level in China, with a focus on material development and teaching methodology. Based on a close review of the new orientations in China’s national syllabus and an examination of the changing attitude and motivation of the Chinese learners, the paper proposes to select writing materials according to learner needs and to grade them according to a principle of language use. It also proposes a model-based approach that integrates reading with writing. Illustration is given to demonstrate the possibility of incorporating both the top-down and bottom-up strategies, attending to both macro-generic structure and micro lexico-grammatical forms in material development as well as in classroom teaching.

Keywords: teaching writing, material development, model-based methodology

Introduction

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) can be viewed as a process involving inter-related management at three levels: the top level, where government or educational authorities make important policies and decisions; the intermediate level, where syllabus designers, administrators and textbook or material writers work out what is to be taught as well as how and when to teach; and the shop-floor level, where the teacher actually does the teaching, working with the learners to achieve the desired effect. From this point of view, the discussion of teaching writing at the tertiary level in China may be carried out at these three levels. This paper will, however, focus on the intermediate level and the shop-floor level, addressing the issues of material development and teaching methodology in particular.

The paper will look first at what changes have taken place at the top level, specifically at the reform of the national syllabus and its implications. Then it will examine the changing attitudes and motivation of Chinese university students in taking the writing course. This is followed by a brief survey of the history of TEFL material development in China over the past decades. On the basis of this, the paper then discusses how relevant materials can be developed and methodology used for teaching writing at the tertiary level in China. The discussion of material selection and gradation is based on an analysis of learner needs and the consideration of language use, whereas the discussion of methodology is carried out by bringing in the concept of top-down and bottom-up cognitive strategies. Illustration is given to demonstrate how a model-based approach can attend to both the macro-generic structure as well as the micro lexico-grammatical forms when teaching writing.
Overview of New Orientations in Teaching Writing in China

In the recent years, there have been some significant developments in the area of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the tertiary level in China. In 1998, the State Education Ministry issued The Proposals on Reforming Education for English Majors to Meet the Demands from the 21st Century (hereinafter referred as The Proposals). The document contends that the Chinese society’s demand for English professionals specializing in literature and language studies has in effect diminished to zero. As a result, focusing exclusively on training in academic English, as was the usual practice in TEFL in China, will no longer be able to meet the needs of the Chinese society, which is characterized now with a market-oriented economy. The document stresses that, instead of being narrowly specialized in literature and language, English majors should be trained to develop an overall proficiency, capable of handling English for specific purposes, particularly English for business, trade, finance and law.

Two years after the publication of The Proposals, a revised version of The National Syllabus for English Majors of Institutions of Higher Learning (hereinafter referred as The National Syllabus) was issued as a drastic measure to carry out what is required in The Proposals. Among other changes in The National Syllabus, there is one prominent revision made in the course design for English Writing. Writing used to be treated as a skill-based compulsory course, offered in the second year to continue to the third. There was no distinction between Academic Writing and Practical Writing. The normal practice was to incorporate the basic practical writing skill training, such as note-writing and letter-writing, into the second year writing class. The revised syllabus, however, distinguishes Academic Writing from Practical Writing, which is added as an optional term course. The addition of the Practical Writing course is intended as a remedy to make up for the general incompetence of the English majors in writing for business and commerce, a skill usually required after they leave the campus.

The shift from a predominant focus on academic writing-based training to an emphasis on training in practical writing was much welcomed by Chinese university students, who generally have an instrumental motivation in taking a writing course. For them, taking the writing course means more than fulfilling some requirements of a school subject. Instead, it is learning a practical skill that has direct bearing on their careers. As a result of the expansion of China’s cultural and economic contacts with the outside world since the country’s reform and opening up in the early 1980s, the importance of English as an international language has increasingly been acknowledged in Chinese society. The emergence of a large number of foreign companies and joint ventures in Special Economic Zones and open port cities has resulted in an urgent demand for people who can speak and write in English. A good command of English means prosperity and success in one’s career. Take the training of letter-writing skill, for example. Students are eager to acquire the skill, as they fully understand that the first thing they need to do in order to get a job is to write an application letter. Writing well will contribute to their career prospects, while failing to do so will inevitably jeopardize their chances of getting a good job.

The assumption that most university students in China now have an instrumental motivation in taking the English writing course was supported by the findings from a close-structured questionnaire conducted by the present writer among 127 senior students in the English department of a university in December 2005. The subjects’ answers to the
question of ‘for what purpose do you take the English writing course?’ reveal that 89% of
them took the course because of their perceived needs in future work. When being asked
the question of ‘which specific type of writing are you most eager to learn?’ 74 % of them
considered business writing as the most desirable. To the question of ‘which type of
training is more desirable to you, academic writing or practical writing?’ 83% of them
answered that they preferred practical writing to academic writing, as they believe that
practical writing skills are more relevant to their future work.

The students’ general interest in business English and practical writing is related
to their occupational goal. Instead of working as professional translators or interpreters for
research institutes or institutions of higher learning, as was usually the case with English
graduates, a large number of them now choose to work for business companies and
enterprises. Such preferred employment patterns can be seen from the following table of
statistics, collected by the present writer from a university’s student archive.

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<tr>
<td>Continuing education at graduate level</td>
<td>11 (17%)</td>
<td>13 (19%)</td>
<td>12 (17%)</td>
<td>24 (19%)</td>
<td>22 (22%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching at schools or colleges</td>
<td>5 (8%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>5 (7%)</td>
<td>10 (8%)</td>
<td>8 (8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working in government offices or state-owned institutions</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td>5 (4%)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working for private companies/enterprises or joint-ventures</td>
<td>42 (63%)</td>
<td>40 (57%)</td>
<td>47 (68%)</td>
<td>84 (66%)</td>
<td>59 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided (including those expecting to go abroad)</td>
<td>5 (8%)</td>
<td>5 (7%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>4 (3%)</td>
<td>5 (5%)</td>
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As can be seen from the table, working for commerce has remained the biggest attraction
for English majors over the past five years. About 60% of the English majors chose to work
for private companies, enterprises or joint ventures. Such a tendency may continue in the
coming years, in view of China’s market-oriented economy and its opening-up policy.

Most English majors now are eager to have training in practical writing skills, to the
extreme of neglecting academic writing skill training.

Survey of TEFL Material Development in China

To discuss the development of materials for teaching writing, it is necessary to look first at
the general situation of TEFL material development in China.

Owing to China’s specific political and historical conditions, the development of
material for teaching English in China has a rather unusual history. English had no status
whatsoever in the Chinese curriculum when the People’s Republic of China was founded in
1949. For a decade, it was Russian that was predominantly taught in China. English as a foreign language began to gain a place in the Chinese curriculum in the early 1960s, when the Sino-Russian relation deteriorated, but the subject was eliminated from the curriculum in 1966, when the Cultural Revolution broke out. The English language was condemned along with the Western English-speaking countries, being regarded as the language of the bourgeoisie and the imperialists. For six years, from 1966 to 1972, there was no schooling in China. When the country resumed its higher education in 1972, students were enrolled on a recommendation basis. No college entrance examination was required. Instead, students were recommended on the basis of their political soundness by the ‘work units’ they were affiliated with, or by the ‘People’s Commune’, where they were sent to receive education from ‘the poor- and-lower-middle-peasants’. The result was the production of a generation of ‘Worker, Peasant and Soldier Students,’ who took some courses in the university but were mostly engaged in ‘making revolution’. What was taught in the English class was translations of Chairman Mao’s quotations and extracts from his three well-known articles: ‘Serve the People’, ‘In Memory of Doctor Bethune’, and ‘The Old Man who Moves the Mountain’. There were no English textbooks in the real sense.

It was not until 1971, when Richard Nixon, the current American President, visited China that English began to receive some attention from the education authorities. Immediately after Nixon’s visit, Shanghai Broadcasting Station (as it was called at the time) began to run a programme of ‘Intermediate Broadcasting English’. The scripts were published as A Course of Intermediate English, circulated among a small number of people who for different reasons had an interest in learning the language.


Among the English textbooks circulated in the early 1980s, there was a six-volume textbook  entitled English (Beijing: Commercial Printing House, 1962), compiled by Professor Xu Guo Zhang of Beijing University. 1 The textbook was widely used in colleges and universities throughout China, and Prof. Xu was respected as a pioneer in textbook compilation. The textbooks he compiled have educated a whole generation of young Chinese, who were deprived of higher education during the Cultural Revolution but were to constitute the bulk of the political, industrial and academic leadership in the subsequent decades.

The 1980s saw some further development of textbooks compiled by Chinese scholars. The most influential were the following four series, published respectively by three of the most prestigious publishing houses in China. They are A New English Course (Li Guanyi, Shanghai : Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. 1986), College English (Yang Limin et al, Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching & Research Press, 1985), Communicative English for Chinese Learners (Li Xiaoju, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign
Despite such significant progress that has been made in the development of TEFL materials for English majors in China, there has been a general shortage in materials for teaching writing. It was not until 1982, when A Handbook of Writing (Ding Wangdao et al., Foreign Language Teaching & Research Press) was published, that English majors began to have a standardized textbook for the writing class. The book was so widely used throughout the country that by 2000 it had been reprinted 22 times. The same authors produced in 1998 a similar writing textbook, entitled A Basic Course in Writing (Beijing: Higher Education Press), which has to some extent replaced the 1982 edition as the writing textbook in some universities. Both A Handbook of Writing and A Basic Course in Writing show a skill-based approach in material selection and gradation. They provide students with fundamental knowledge of writing and systematic training in writing skills.

It was not until the beginning of the 21st century that China witnessed the publication of a variety of writing textbooks, compiled with different approaches and targeted for different categories of students: graduates as well as undergraduates, English majors as well as non-English majors. Among such textbooks were Advanced Writing Textbook for Postgraduate Students (Yangfang, Tsinghua University Press, 2002), A Practical Writing Course for College Students (Fu Shiyi, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2003), and Composition (Luo Lisheng, Beijing: The People’s University Press, 2003).

Apart from the textbooks compiled by Chinese scholars, writing textbooks introduced from abroad were also used in some universities, such as Academic Writing Course (R. R. Jordan and E.L.T. Collins, 1980) and American English Rhetoric: A writing program as a second language (Robert Bander, Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1978).


Developing Materials According to Learner Needs and on the Principle of Language Use

In the development of teaching materials, there are some principles generally accepted in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Munby’s model of needs analysis (1978) and Widdowson’s stress on ‘language use’ (1978, 1990) may serve as guidelines in selecting and grading materials. According to Munby (1978), there are nine categories of information for syllabus designers to find out when designing a syllabus.

1. The participant: the learner’s identity, age, sex, nationality, language skills, command of target language … etc.;
2. **Purposive domain**: the purpose for which the target language is required;  
3. **Setting**: the environment in which the target language will be employed;  
4. **Interaction**: the people with whom the learner will be interacting;  
5. **Instrumentality**: the medium, the mode and the channel of communication;  
6. **Dialect**: whether variety or dialect is specified;  
7. **Target level**: the degree of mastery which the learner will need to gain over the target language;  
8. **Communicative event**: the productive and receptive skills the learner will need to master;  
9. **Communicative key**: the interpersonal attitudes and tones the learner will be required to master.

Such information is also necessary for writers of teaching materials. Particularly important is the information about learner needs, as the themes and topics of the teaching materials, as well as the teaching procedures, should all be prescribed by the needs and purposes of the learner. Analyzing learner needs, therefore, constitutes a crucial step in selecting material.

Nunan (1991) suggests two types of needs analysis, ‘learner analysis’, and ‘task analysis’. The first is based on the information about the learner. The central question of concern is ‘For what purpose or purposes is the learner learning the language?’ The second is focused on specifying and categorizing the language skills the learner needs to develop. The central question here is ‘What are the skills and knowledge required by the learner in order to carry out real-world communicative tasks?’ When selecting materials for the writing course, both learner analysis and task analysis are needed. Take practical writing, for example. It would be necessary to investigate what English majors are most likely to be asked to write after graduation before deciding what writing items are to be included in the textbook. One way of finding out the information is to conduct follow-up surveys among students who have graduated, either through questionnaires or interviews, to find out what genres/types of writing are most frequently required at work. Based on such research findings or feedback, it will be possible to decide what to include as teaching items for a practical writing course.

When selecting materials, Widdowson’s distinction between ‘language usage’ and ‘language use’ may serve as another guideline. Widdowson (1978:18) defines ‘language usage’ as ‘the citation of words and sentences as manifestations of the language system,’ whereas ‘language use’ as ‘the way the language system is realized for normal communicative purposes.’ He stresses that ‘items would be selected not because they occur frequently as instances of usage but because they have a high potential occurrence as instances of use of relevance to the learner’s purposes in learning’ (Ibid. 13). Identifying the specific genres or types of writing that are most needed in the workplace through conducting research as mentioned above may provide reliable information about which teaching items to include in a writing textbook. The following table of contents may serve as an example of potential teaching items to be included in a practical writing textbook. It is designed on the basis of some research conducted by the present writer among English majors, both at school and after graduation.
Potential Teaching Items for a Practical Writing Course

Unit 1: Application letters & Curriculum Vitae
   - applying for job vacancies
   - applying for school admissions / scholarships

Unit 2: Secretarial writing
   - meeting notice, agenda, minutes and resolutions
   - memoranda & memos
   - reports
   - itineraries & schedules
   - miscellaneous office slips
   - routine correspondence (enquiries, replies, invitations, thank-you letters … etc.)

Unit 3: Foreign trade correspondence & documents
   - making enquiries
   - making offers
   - placing orders
   - notifying
   - lodging complaints/claims
   - follow-up letters
   - Letter of Credit (L/C)
   - Shipping documents

Unit 4: Contracts & agreements
   - Sales Contract/Confirmation
   - letter of appointment
   - letter of intent

Unit 5: Publicity materials
   - overview of a city (an institution, organization, … )
   - company profiles
   - school prospectus
   - hotel brochures
Based on such a list, reading models and writing tasks can then be prepared closely relating to each item, following the principle of authenticity and meaningfulness.

Similarly, material can be chosen to demonstrate how language is used for a particular purpose in academic writing, such as building up a description of a character or place, expressing an opinion or conveying information, and interpreting and analyzing data and statistics. Texts can be selected from classical readings to highlight how a particular writing skill or a rhetorical device is used and how learners can develop it for meaningful writing purpose. The writing textbook will be structured in such a way that the study of reading passages and the practice of different modes of expression are combined. Here is an illustration of the structure of such a writing textbook that the current writer is working on, to be published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing.

Potential Teaching Items for an Academic Writing Course

*Contents*

**Unit 1**
Theme: Memories and Changes  
Writing focus: Narration through Illustration  
Text A: Early Efforts at Writing (Robert Louis Stevenson)  
Text B: Why I Write (George Orwell)

**Unit 2**
Theme: International Developments  
Writing focus: Narration in Chronological Order  
Text A: The History of the European Union  
Text B: The Development of the Olympic Games

**Unit 3**
Theme: People I know  
Writing focus: Sketching People in Miniature  
Text A: Kant the Man (W. Somerset Maugham)  
Text B: Helen (Dawn Sanders)

**Unit 4**
Theme: Places where People Live  
Writing focus: Describing Countries and Cities  
Text A: The United Kingdom  
Text B: New York City

**Unit 5**
Theme: Nature’s Wonder  
Writing focus: Sensuous Description  
Text A: First Snow (John Boynton Priestley)  
Text B: The Storm (Charles Dickens)

**Unit 6**
Theme: Great Personality  
Writing focus: Comparison & Contrast
Adopting a Model-based, Reading-assisting Methodology for Teaching Writing

Two opposite approaches are often referred to when discussing teaching writing in the TEFL context: product orientation and process-orientation. The basic difference is whether writing should be taken as a planned route to reach a final objective or a ‘non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning’ (Zamel 1987: 165). This is also a debate about whether form or the communicative needs of the learners should be given priority; whether the learners should be regarded as passive mimickers or active initiators.

Using models in teaching writing is associated with the product-oriented approach, and has been subject to considerable challenges in recent years. The model-based methodology has been criticized for ‘stultifying and inhibiting writers rather than empowering them or liberating them’ (Escholz 1980: 24). Using models is said to encourage students to ‘see form as a mold into which content is somehow poured’, resulting in ‘mindless copies of a particular organizational plan or style’ (Ibid., 55).

However, the model-based methodology may yield optimal results in teaching writing in the Chinese context. There are two main reasons. First, it seems to be the best way to meet the purpose of the practical writing course, which is defined in the revised National Syllabus (2000:26) as follows:

The purpose of the Practical Writing course is to familiarize students with features of practical writing, and to help them further acquire the ability to write in English for practical purposes. Through exposing students to varieties of practical writing as well as providing writing practice, it is expected that students should learn the linguistic features, the organizational pattern and the format of different kinds of practical writing, and consequently be able to write correspondence and practical writing of various types.

To meet the objective of the course, one may argue that reading texts of different genres of practical writing and doing actual writing practice will constitute two reciprocal processes, and the model-based methodology is one that can best integrate writing with reading.

Second, the model-based methodology is helpful in developing students’ awareness of both top-down and bottom-up strategies, which are essential to develop writing proficiency. Top-down strategies play the role of schemata in writing and provide a top level framework for learners to structure the discourse, while bottom-up strategies help learners to acquire knowledge of linguistic forms, allowing them to fill in the top-level framework with
appropriate words and expressions. Gaining control over a particular genre of writing requires, by definition, an awareness of the top level format and content schemata for structuring it, and of the lexis and syntactic forms, which realize it. The massive exposure of the learners to the target genre through reading models will no doubt contribute to their good understanding of the top-level formal characteristics of the target genre.

There is no denying, though, that the teacher should be discreet when using models in a writing class. There are at least two points to consider:

1. What role should the model play? Should it receive the primary attention in teaching or should it serve as a subsidiary frame of reference?
2. When should a teacher introduce the model? Should it be shown to learners as the starting point in the teaching sequence or should it be used as a resource to draw upon after having engaged the learners in sufficient communicative activities?

According to White (1988: 5-7), there are two different procedures to using models, which he illustrates as follows:

1. Study the model → Manipulate elements → Produce a parallel text.
2. Task specified → Communicate as far as possible → Study the model → Practise as necessary → Recycle.

The crucial difference is that in the first procedure, the model comes first in the teaching sequence, functioning as the primary dominating influence on learners; while in the second procedure, learners are not exposed to the model until they have had enough communicative activities, such as group discussion, pair work or brain-storming, to explore what they know about the subject and what they have to say about it. In other words, the model is used as a reference rather than an inhibitor.

Following the second procedure, here is an illustration of how the teaching item “writing to make enquiries” could be handled.

Stage 1: Discovering situations
Students explore circumstances under which enquiries are made, in social life as well as in professional areas such as business and diplomacy. Such exploration will help to develop awareness in students that writing is a meaningful social action. The discussion will also help to motivate students.

Stage 2: Specifying writing task(s)
Select two to three typical situations for students to write, such as making an enquiry about school admission (personal) or making enquiries about credit/product information (business) to involve students in meaningful writing tasks.

Stage 3: Brain-storming
Students work together, either in class/group discussion or in pair work, to search for useful linguistic forms, such as vocabulary and sentence structures, which will be needed in fulfilling the writing tasks.
Stage 4: **Studying the model**
Students study model letters of enquiry, which are authentic materials printed in full, and compare them with their own work. The teacher calls students’ attention to the differences between the different types of enquiries, in format and in style. The teacher also draws attention to the generic structure of the enquiry letter and the key language expressions.

Stage 5: **Practice writing**
Students are given new writing tasks for further practice, using models for reference if necessary.

Stage 6: **Summary and assignment**
The teacher sums up the gist of writing to make enquiries and assigns tasks for after-class practice.

Such a procedure has been followed by the present writer in teaching practical writing to third-year university students for a succession of three years, with very positive feedback from students, who claimed that they had much clearer ideas of what to write and how to write through reading models.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined some significant developments in the area of teaching writing to English majors at the tertiary level in China. It is noted that:

1. There has been a shift of emphasis from academic writing skill training to practical writing skill training, at both the government policy level and the emotive level of college students in general. This reflects the social demands from a fast-developing economy; but it also indicates an instrumental commercial motivation of the students in general. Though it is necessary for English majors to acquire some skills in practical writing to facilitate their work after graduation, an over-emphasis may result in the negligence of training in academic writing, which should always remain the most fundamental for English majors.

2. For selecting and grading material for teaching writing, there has now arisen a theme-based, content-focused approach, in contrast with the traditional skill-based approach. This reflects the current concern of associating language learning with humanistic education. Writing through reading helps not only to cultivate in students a sense of form, but also contributes to their moral adequacy.

3. Textbooks for teaching writing at the tertiary level in China now show some variety in categorization and focus. The targeted readers include English majors as well as non-English majors, graduates as well as undergraduates. Some textbooks are more advanced and research-focused; others more elementary and pedagogically-slanted. Some are designed in modules, others in traditional linear
order. This marks a tremendous progress in material development in China.

In general, however, research in teaching writing in China still remains inadequate, as compared to studies in other areas, such as teaching reading and listening. It is still the “Cinderella” in TEFL in China, an area much neglected. The illustration given in the present paper for the selection and gradation of writing material, as well as for the adoption of a model-based approach in teaching writing may serve as a pedagogical guideline for further research in the area.

References


Notes


6 The title in Chinese reads: 《英语写作手册》(丁往道等, 外语教学与研究出版社, 1982).


8 The title in Chinese reads: 《研究生英语写作教程》(杨芳, 清华大学出版社, 2002).


