Enhancing an English Writing Class via Integration of Available Technological Resources

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Abstract

The paper has explored an innovative practice in ESL (English as a Second Language) composition instruction in Chinese ordinary universities. By making creative use of the available computer facilities outside the classroom, and by following a process-oriented teaching approach, the writing course proved successful.

Background in China's Writing Instruction

With the increasing demand of English writing ability on the young citizens due to the great need of global exchange of information in science and technology, and with the advent of the wider and deeper integration of the new technology in much of the language classrooms, the appeal for innovation in the ESL composition instruction in Chinese universities is on the rise (Mao Yong gui, 1997).

ESL composition instruction in Chinese universities has been the least developed field compared with the instruction of other language skills (Mao Yong gui, 1997; Sun Li; 1995). The prevailing approach to writing in China now is product-oriented, which is mainly interested in assessing the quality of learner's final work. The process of teaching writing in various classrooms usually follow the same pattern: (1) The teacher talks about the criteria of a good composition, and explains the ways of writing a good composition. (2) The teacher provides samples for learners. (3) The students write either by imitating the samples or by themselves according to the topics given. (4) The teacher corrects each article written by learners. (5) The teacher gives feedback in the next class according to the corrections. The role of the students are passive; and the means of teaching and learning are still the very traditional ones: chalkboard, textbooks and pens. Thus, the result of the teaching is far from satisfactory: Students regard writing as the most difficult skill in their English learning course and the course itself the dullest one; the teachers, too, feel it a headache to deal with the fairly dull class atmosphere and enormous correction tasks. The situation constitutes a great contrast with the fast developing research and innovative practice in the ESL composition field outside China.

Current ESL Writing Instruction Development Outside China

The field of teaching writing to ESL students has changed significantly in the last decade worldwide, and the change continues to be the most predictable aspect of the research and teaching in this field (Reid, 1993). There are two factors contributing to this development in the ESL composition instruction. The first is the research investigating the way writing is taught; the second is the application of computers to the field (Simic, 1994).

Apart from the widely accepted communicative approach in ESL field, which stresses authentic materials, purposeful or real activities, and relevance to learner's need, (Hymes, 1971; Reid, 1993; Widdowson, 1987) one of the most prominent and lasting researching result in ESL writing teachers have discovered is the process approach. Since the middle of the 1980s, many ESL writing teaches have discovered, accepted, and implemented the approaches and philosophy associated with process writing (Reid, 1993, p. 37). Proponents of the process approach maintain that teachers should not only be concerned with the final product of writing, but more attention should be paid to the process a writer uses in creating that product. They believe that writing instruction can be presented as the process broken up into a series of manageable steps of prewriting, writing, revising, that can be mastered by even the least confident students (White and Arndt, 1991; Yarber, 1985).

Along with the innovations in approach and methodology, teaching means represented by the integration of computers have also been developed simultaneously. So, as one of the most compelling areas of exploration for computer use according to Lanham, (1993) the field of foreign language writing has been greatly enhanced by the integration of computers.

What is most closely linked with the process approach is one of the generic tools offered by computers: the word processor. As a widely used authentic tool, its flexibility to generate, develop and make modifications to a text, its convenience to store and retrieve resulting text, its possibility to produce an attractive and professional looking text and the feasibility of screen editing and demonstration, have made it an inextricable tool in process writing approach (Bangert-Drowns, 1993; Neu and Scarcella, 1991; Pennington, 1996; Phinney, 1989, Piper, 1987). In addition to its benefit to writing behavior, Pennington (1996) also asserts that because of its well-proved motivational, effective and process-easier effects on the learners, the word processor can bring, in the end, a product-improved effect on learner's writing.

Apart from the word process, the newly developed networked technology has, too, played their unique roles in writing instruction. Web pages, email, and class websites are all important and basic elements that have received attention from ESL writing

instructors and researchers, and have enriched the ideal language-learning environment required by the communicative approach. "WWW offers an abundance of information resources who utility for language learning is just beginning to be tapped. Using the WWW, students can search through millions of files around the world within minutes to locate and access authentic materials that correspond to their own personal interest" (Kern and Warschauer, 1000, p. 12).

Email allows language learners with network access to communicate with other learners or speakers of the target language in asynchronous mode, which permits not only one-to-one communication but also one-to-many communication. It, therefore, allows a teacher or students to share a message with a small group, the whole class, a partner class, or an international discussion list involving hundred or thousands of people.

A class website is not only a device for distributing information, but also a way to provide a public domain for the learners to have their compositions, "published," and proves to be a very good stimulus for learners' striving for a high quality work and working continuously at their out-of-class, independent task (Mckenzie, 2000).

Though there is still much to be explored in the field in terms of further investigations of the nature and effects of the new technology, its positive impact and motivational value on the learners is well documented (Bangert-Drowns, 1993; Scrimshaw, 1993; Warschauer, 1996).

Considerations Regarding the Integration of New Technology

However, can the advancement in writing instruction be implemented into the Chinese situation? While teaching approach might be easier to adopt and adapt to the specific writing instruction situation, is it feasible to integrate new technology into the writing course in present Chinese ordinary universities? To answer these questions two considerations regarding the integration of new technology have to be taken as a prerequisite of the writing-instruction innovation. They are: contextual factors and strategic factors.

Contextual factors

Successful contextual factors for integration, according to the researchers, (Hyland, 1993; Pennington, 1996; Slaouti, 1998) at least involve the following two factors: physical, technological environment and level of preparedness of learners and teachers. The contextual requirement in China, once believed to be far from being adequate and once believed to be the main reason for the hindering of the introduction of computer into Chinese writing class has now greatly changed. Glave (1998) reported that the

growth rate of computer users in China, Indonesia and other developing countries is as great as or greater than in the United States. For example, according to Xinwan Heng, (2000.6) by the end of 1999, the number of Chinese internet users had reached 9 million, four times that of the last year, and over one thousand universities (almost all) had had their LANs (Local Area Network) in place.

So, though still limited and varied from university to university, it is possible to begin the exploration of the creative application of new technology for the class-level writing course.

Strategic factors

Doughty (1992) and Owston (1997) cited by Oxford et. al. (1998) warned that though technology is a helpful addition to the L2 classroom technology itself is not a miracle-cure for all teaching problems; proper teaching strategies have to be considered.

The effectiveness of technology integration depends on (1) how well the selected technology deals with students' needs and interests (2) which aspects of L2 learning are addressed by which kind of technology, and how well the technology is exploited in the particular instrumental situation. Thus, a rational and systematic plan-making process is needed to guarantee a successful integration into specific situations.

Practical Curriculum Integration

Description and analysis of the teaching context and learners

The writing course under discussion consists of 27 two-year English majors aged 19 to 21. The 20-hour Practical Writing Course is among the few courses in the last term. Though they have had a 40-hour general writing course in the previous two terms, they still felt it difficult to compose appropriate compositions. The previous writing course has been a very traditional produce-oriented one. From the observation of the first class this term, the teacher found the whole atmosphere of the class study was dull, and unmotivating: Students worried a lot about their future, some already began to quit the class to look for jobs outside the school. In a talent market full of increasingly fiercer competition, a two-year college student really has some difficulties to find a satisfactory job. In addition, students claimed that they could not see the relevance of the course content in their textbooks to their practical needs.

To enhance the effect of the class, I decided to reform the course: Firstly, applying the principles of a process approach as well as communicative approach to our practical class; secondly, meeting students' needs by providing the students with some most needed genres of their practical writing; thirdly, integrating to some degree computer-based activities into the writing course by means of still-limited facilities.

Considerations of integration possibilities

Practical, physical, technological environment in the university

a) Constraints within the classroom

The university had no computer rooms available for our teaching, and the only place that could be provided was an ordinary language lab, with one built-in computer in the front, a large screen for the students, and controlling platform for the teacher.

b) Favorable conditions outside the classroom

The university established its Local Area Network (LAN) last year, with 500 computers connected to it. (In 13 individual-college owned computer rooms). At the cost of 1 yuan each hours, students could get access to the LAN, which leads to the Chinese Educational Research Net (CERNET). The higher fee and the slower speed of the internet have made it beyond the reach of most students. Everyday, according to a survey, each computer room was fully occupied by the students sitting in front of the computer, mostly chatting in their mother tongue!

There were also some internet-bars within the easy reach of the university, which provided fairly fast, though a little more expensive (2.5 yuan/per hour) international on-line service, which also attracted some students everyday. The following table can give a clearer demonstration of the situation.

So the feasibility of using the facilities by the students in teaching would be in the order of the following: 1) word processor, LAN browsing, class website browsing 2) email, international browsing.

	Browsing scope	Word Processor	Email Function	Price (one hour)
LAN	CERNET (Websites of domestic educational institutes)	yes	no	1 yuan
WAL	Internet	yes	Yes, but slow	2 yuan
Net bar	Internet	yes	yes	2.5 yuan (with faster speed)

Level of preparedness of learners and teachers

Level of preparedness of learners and teacher involves both the technological level of equipment and attitude toward the computer application.

1) The teacher owns a computer of her own, with internet access at home and is a fairly skillful operator, not only at word processing, emailing, WWW browsing but even can make a simple website. She is also a strong advocate of computer integration in classrooms.

2) According to a questionnaire, about 27% of the students claimed themselves to be skillful in word processing and email, and most of the students claimed a "fair" level in these skills. Only 15% of them chose "poor."

As for their attitudes towards integrating computer activities into the course 90% of the students "strongly agree" or "agree" with integrating computers in their course, and no one marked "no" on the survey. The most positively answered item in the survey for the reasons of the integration was "Learning how to use the computer is important for my career."

Goal clarification

After a needs analysis, the goal of the 20-hour course was set up: 1) Effectively giving some training to the students for the most often used practical writing genres, namely, job-hunting documents (resume, job application forms etc), and business letters, 2) motivating and enhancing the learning by computer-assisted activities 3) keyboard familiarity as a by-product of the course and a necessity of future work.

Teaching approaches

Principles of the communicative approach were applied to guarantee a meaningful and helpful learning environment: the relevant and authentic materials, relevant and authentic tasks, the changing of the teacher-learner roles etc; principles of process writing approach was also used in order to guarantee a stimulating and effective writing-learning process. That is: practicing writing by the process of generating ideas, focusing, structuring, drafting, revising, and evaluating (see table on page p. 24)

Teaching materials

Relevant and authentic materials were provided, which involved a process-approach-oriented textbook on business writing: Company to Company-Cambridge University press 2000, and relevant and authentic genre-samples on job hunting documentation from the internet.

Computer-related activities

(1) Word processor was used either as an authentic writing tool to be trained on, or as an enhancing tool for easier and better writing. So, except for the drafting stage, which had to be done in the language lab with pen and paper, editing and revising were hopefully done in computer rooms by students themselves. The finished products were to be submitted in a week's time by either emailing to the teacher, or as an alternative, giving it to the teacher in the form of a file-embedded disk.

(2) Email was encouraged, but since the course was short and genre specific, and also, because of the higher cost of it, electronic communication to the teacher and peer students via email was done optionally.

(3) Many of the samples written in relevant and authentic genres were obtained by browsing the World Wide Web from the teacher's own on-line computer, which were to be shown on the screen in the language lab or printed out as handouts to students.

(4) A simple website was established by the teacher to act either as a course content presenter, to be shown on lab screen, or seen via the LAN, or as a bulletin to publish students' works.http://www.sdau.edu.cn/waiyu/writing(index).htm

Students' role as peer teachers

To help students learn word processing, or possibly emailing, learning groups were formed each consisting of 5 or 6 members. The most skilled one acted as a "teacher," who had the responsibility of helping his group members to learn the necessary skills. (We had enough enthusiastic peer teachers living in the same dorms with their "pupils" or at least in the same apartment building). To make the tasks easier, certain word processing teaching software (Microsoft Office 2000 for example) were introduced for the groups.

Flexible requirements for computer use

Since the computer use was "self-paid" by the students, the requirement for computer room use were not very rigid. Those who really didn't want to spend the money because of financial problems could write the composition with their pen as before.

Detailed Computer Embedding Process Writing Activity

Task	Method	Tool	Activities	Reason	Constraints	Solution
Generating ideas	A suggested test for a writing task in a specific com-municative situation	Powerpoint/ off-line class-web display - used to present the test or task	Students brain-storming or/speed-writing about the possible ideas	To get some ideas according to the purpose and audience	Have to do in language lab	Write with pen
Focusing	Samples provided	Powerpoint/ off-line web display	Students read the sample	To establish the style of a particular kind of writing	No computer for the teacher to browse the WWW for samples	Teacher use the computer of her own/and prepared before-hand
Structuring	Recog-nizing organ-izational patterns and typical express-ions of the type	Powerpoint/ off-line web display	Direct the students to find out and copy down the organ-izational patterns and typical expression s from the samples	To get familiar with the specific format and typical expres-sions in order to use in their own writings		

Detailed Computer Embedding Process Writing Activity (Cont'd)

Task	Method	Tool	Activities	Reason	Constraints	Solution
Drafting	Drafting the given task in class individually and get individual help from the teacher when necessary	Paper and pen	Students write the beginning-given task on their own in class equipped by the newly learned knowledge			
Revise the draft and do further practising task as the assignment	Revising of the draft and finish the further practising task in computer rooms by word processing	Word processor /computer room	Students revise and practice in computer rooms by themselves or by peer help and submit the assignment in a week's time (emailing or handing in floppy disks)	Benefit both writing and improvement of computer skills	No available computer for students	Students to to college-owened computer rooms/inter-net bars at a small cost

Detailed Computer Embedding Process Writing Activity (Cont'd)

Task	Method	Tool	Activities	Reason	Constraints	Solution
Evaluation and further revising	Teacher gives evaluation as well as revising-process demonstration for students' further independent revising after class./ *or return email to give individual guidance about the assignment	Off-line computer in the lab	Teacher shows certain compositions on the screen and correct it together with students	Better demonstration of revising process and method		In language lab
Reinforcement of the independent practice	Put the students' assignment in the class website	Computer and University network centre		To further motivate students to do the assignment well outside of the classroom	On-line class website can only be seen outside the classroom in computer rooms	Inform them to browse after class; or demonstrate it in the lab off-line

Results

After a term's practice, students followed the course enthusiastically and completed many satisfactory assignments (see the class website).

100% of the students handed in computer-mediated compositions, either by handing in the disk, or by emailing. No one submitted any paper-written work, and most of the assignments were written clearly and tidily. The following is a feedback from a questionnaire after the course:

Questions (Q) and summary from the answers (SA):

1. Q: The assignment can be handed in, in three forms: Emailing/floppy disk/written. Which one did you choose, why?

*Summary from the answers:

SA: 37% students chose emailing, reasons:

It can help to practice useful skills

Quick

Convenient

fashionable and popular

37% students chose handing in file-embedded disk, reasons:

it is cheaper and easy to save

it can practice typing

help correct mistakes later

practice file management

not familiar with email

23% students use both mode alternately, reasons:

First learn email well and then convert to disk to save money

2. Q: How did you manage the assignment if you do not know how to use word processor and email before? By self, student, or by the help from your classmates?

SA: 33% students claimed to use both methods; 33% said they learnt it by the help from the classmates; and 18% students had already known how to use it;

3. Q: How long did you spend to accomplish one assignment? First time? Now?

SA: First average time is about one hour, and now, in average, 10 minute to finish a short letter.

4. Q: Where did you do the assignments?

   SA: 37% in the Bar outside the university; 62% in the computer rooms on campus.

5. Q: Do you think it worth the time and money to learn in computer rooms, why?

   SA: 100% think it is rewarding. Some one says: "The method of teaching is the best way, for we cannot only learn writing, we can also learn computer, it can correct what we have learned with practice. So after graduation, we can put the skill to use immediately."

Conclusion

A motivating and successful English writing instruction is possible by the innovation of both methodology and teaching-means in ordinary Chinese universities. The integration of computers into the course can not only improve the course, but can also enrich the teaching result by the training of an authentic writing tool. Though at present there are still limitations to wide-scale computer application in classrooms, the factors deciding the successful integration can meet the needs of integration to an increasingly greater degree. So, by applying principles of appropriate teaching approaches and suing a systematic planning strategy, flexible and creative methods of teaching and technological integration can be achieved, with great success.

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