WRITING FOR COMMUNICATION
-- A proposal for reform in teaching English writing in China

SYNOPSIS

In the whole English education in China, the teaching of writing has long been under-emphasized, which may account for the unsatisfactory state of the syllabus, textbooks, and methodology currently in use. The objective of this thesis is to put forward a proposal for reform in teaching English writing at the tertiary level in China.

The thesis is composed of two parts: In the first part, writing as a language skill is approached at the theoretical level. It is pointed out the great power of written word lies in its achievement of communication across time and space. Writing is a social act embedded in social and cultural contexts. It has its particular characteristics and functions, which are considerable different from those found in speech. The process of writing is multiply recursive and creative rather than linear.

The second part is devoted to a survey of the current situation in teaching English writing in China with a purpose of formulating proposals. Four areas have been examined: the syllabus, textbooks, prevailing methodology, and evaluation. The syllabus in use is found to be out-of-date and inadequate to meet the social demand for competent English professionals. English writing textbooks are found to be vague in their objectives, neglecting the communicative nature of writing. In English writing class, the traditional product-oriented approach remains dominant, and in evaluation of writing, too much emphasis has been placed on formal accuracy.

After having conducted research and investigations, the present writer has proposed some solutions to the above-mentioned problems. At the syllabus level, a functional syllabus based on needs analysis is suggested. In the writing class, Communicative Language Teaching approach is
recommended, and specific interactive, co-operative classroom procedures are suggested. Teachers are advised to relinquish the role of the controller and to provide warm and supportive atmosphere. In evaluating student writing, teachers are warned against an over-emphasis on formal correctness. The role of the teacher as the reader rather than a judge is suggested.

The thesis is pedagogically oriented as the present writer recognizes the urgent need to address the situation and to improve the quality of teaching English writing in China. This is the prerequisite of developing in the Chinese learners the communicative competence, which has become the more essential in this era of reform and opening-up, when foreign exchanges have become a necessity in the Chinese life.

**INTRODUCTION**

This thesis aims at putting forward a proposal for reform in teaching English writing at the tertiary level in China. The proposal is based on the assumption that writing is a social act for the purpose of communication, a complex cognitive activity involving not merely a command of linguistic skills but also socio-cultural knowledge. Such assumption serves as the premise for making pedagogical recommendations.

The paper is composed of two parts. The first part is devoted to exposition of theoretical assumptions of writing as a language skill. Several aspects are explored: the nature of writing, fundamental characteristics of writing in contrast with speech, and the criteria for good writing. The second part of the paper looks at the situation of teaching English writing in China with a purpose to address the problems. Four aspects are examined: the syllabuses in use, available textbooks, the prevailing methodology and evaluation criteria.

In the first part, attention is drawn to the fact that since writing is an act
deeply embedded in the social contexts, there are several factors to be considered in writing, such as situation, audience, time...etc. To write to different people for different purposes, writers use varied forms of the language. In the absence of a visible audience, the writer has to anticipate the response of the reader, to think about the reader’s needs, interests, values, and the degree to which the reader is able to share the information. Such sensitivity of readership is an important element in writing.

It is also pointed out that the process of writing is far from being a simple matter of transcribing language into symbols, it is a thinking process in its own right which involves intellectual efforts. By comparing two different models of writing process, namely, the linear model and the recursive model, it is identified that writing does not progress logically and sequentially through a set of fixed steps. Instead, it is a recursive and generative process.

In analysing the criteria of good writing, it is maintained that a piece of writing must possess three major qualities to be ranked good and effective: formal accuracy, stylistic adequacy and cultural appropriateness. It is self-evident that all good writing has to be grammatically correct, well organized, and coherent so that the reader can follow easily. Moreover, since writing is embedded in social and cultural contexts, the criterion of cultural appropriateness becomes the more important.

In the second part of the paper, focus is placed on the actual circumstances of teaching English writing in China. In order to have a comprehensive and objective view of the current situation, research has been made to examine whether the syllabuses in use are adequate, whether the writing textbooks available are functional, whether the methodology adopted in the writing class is effective, and whether the criteria for writing evaluation are sound. Efforts are made to trace the roots of the problems, so as to formulate appropriate solutions.

It appears that the current syllabus in use for English writing course is out-of-date and inadequate, and is no longer able to meet the social demands for English professionals. It contains only general remarks, with
no specifications for the contents of the course, and the selection and grading of the materials. The writing textbooks are found to be lacking in clear objectives since most do not specify clearly the kind of learners they are intended for. Furthermore, most of them emphasize the training of academic writing skills only, while neglecting the important skills in practical writing.

The prevailing methodology in teaching English writing remains traditional and heavily product-oriented. The teacher is the centre and plays no more than the role of a class controller. Students have insufficient time and opportunities to write for real communication. There is a general lack of purpose in writing. Writing is intended only for the eyes of the teacher and is predominantly judged by the standard of formal correctness.

To address the problems the present writer has conducted comprehensive research and investigations. At the level of syllabus design, after having explored the two approaches, namely, the synthetic approach and the analytic approach, the present writer recommends the functional syllabus for the English writing course.

Based on Munby’s model of needs analysis, the present writer has conducted three categories of ‘needs analysis’in order to find out 1) the needs of English majors who have graduated,; 2) the needs of English majors still studying at school; and 3) the needs of user-institutes concerning their demand for English professionals. The needs analysis has indicated that college students are becoming more and more aware of the crucial importance of English writing as a means of communication. With the rapid development of market economy and foreign exchanges, they have come to realize the important role of English writing in their future careers. Therefore, most students are eager to learn practical writing skills and have training in this area. It is suggested in the paper that one area for improvement of current syllabus is to shift from a predominant academic orientation to an emphasis on the training in students’ ability in practical writing.
At the level of teaching methodology, it is suggested that the principle of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) should be followed. Students should be encouraged to engage themselves more on interactive, co-operative activities. A wider variety of activities should be provided so that students can use the language to fulfill different functions. Students should also be given ample opportunities to respond to a variety of rhetorical situations. In doing so, the teacher should be ready to relinquish the role of the controller and act just as a “facilitator” or a “counselor”. All this is to make sure that a warm, supportive, and non-threatening atmosphere should prevail in a writing class.

Concerning evaluation criteria, it is suggested that the teacher should not remain a judge on the students’ linguistic accuracy; he should assist to cultivate in students a sense of socio-cultural appropriateness, which is the final determinant of the real success of writing. Teachers should respond to the students’ works as a reader, rather than simply as a marker, and since the way the teacher responds to the student’s writing may greatly affect the student’s performance, the teacher must be supportive and helpful in the kinds of comments that are made, accentuating the positive rather than focusing on the negative.

Writing has long been a much neglected aspect in language teaching programs in the world of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. So much so that it was compared to the ‘Cinderella’ by western scholars in the 1988 International English Teaching Conference. (Robinson, 1988) The situation in China is even worse, and this explains why the present writer has chosen the area as his subject of research. The present thesis is pedagogically-oriented, as the present writer recognizes the urgent need to address the situation in teaching English writing at the tertiary level in China.

Part One: Theoretical Assumptions of Writing as a Language Skill

1.1 Nature of Writing
1.1.1 Power of the Written Word

About two thousand years ago, in China’s Jin Dynasty, Lu Ji, the great writer, acknowledged the power of the written word in his essay *Wen Fu* (《文赋》 The Art of Letters), (Lu Ji, 1983):

‘Behold now the utility of letters
It extends over a thousand miles and nothing can stop its course;
It penetrates a million years, the ferry from one to the other.’

It is precisely this capacity of the written language to transcend time and space that makes the teaching and learning of writing such an important exercise. It is this characteristic of the medium of writing that allows valuable and prestigious forms of knowledge, information and literary works to be recorded, stored and handed on from generation to generation in their permanent forms. Writing travels through space and time, and so we can read from the past as well as the present. This is particularly important in our society where the past is often revered as a cultural heritage.

In times and places where modern communication means such as broadcasting and television are impossible, writing may be the only way for people to keep in touch and exchange information. However, one might argue that with telephones, radios and televisions becoming more and more popular, communications at a distance that have to be achieved previously by writing can well be done orally. The rapid development and popularization of the computer science, particularly the Internet, has turned the earth into a ‘large village.’ Even within such an information society, where everything seems to be dominated by modern electronic technology, the medium of writing is still of crucial importance. In most cases, writing plays such an indispensable role that no other media can replace it. Even for scientists and journalists, their findings or reports are first put into written forms and then spread or broadcast by virtue of modern means of communication. Consequently, the wide use of modern media has not undermined the value of writing. Instead writing has been evaluated more highly than before.
1.1.2 Purpose of Writing

Since writing is an aspect of language, we take Halliday’s view of language as a starting point. Halliday proposes that language is primarily used to serve functional purposes. To be exact, language is the way it is because it serves three macro-functions (Halliday, 1994):

1. the ideational function of representing the world
2. the interpersonal function of conducting social relations
3. the textual function of organizing the message

What we emphasize here is the ‘interpersonal function’, which sees language use as being embedded in social contexts. Being a form of social interaction, writing always takes place within the social context of situation and culture. The ‘context of situation’ is what Halliday and Hasan (1985) call ‘the immediate environment in which a text is actually functioning’. It includes the place, the time and the person involved. In different physical situations of time and place, for writing to different people for different purposes, writers use varied forms of the language. On the other hand, the ‘context of culture’ consists of all the values, beliefs, constructions of reality, possible social roles and relationships, conventions for practices, genres and discourses which are available to members of that culture (Ibid.).

Why do people choose to write rather than use other means of communication? Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic (1997) look at the purposes for writing from two perspectives: ‘Firstly, the motivations that drive people to write are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context in which they live, part of which is their own personal or group life story and cultural patrimony. Secondly, the daily social demands of people’s lives construct purposes for writing: writing can often fulfil the desire to get something done, to express a feeling, to make something available for consultation’. What they have observed may be understood as the macro-purposes and the micro-purposes of writing.
Because of its fundamental characteristics, writing can fulfil a wide range of functions: keeping records, communicating with others across time and space, helping to discover what people think and feel, etc. It is always argued that the primary purpose for writing in almost all contexts is to communicate. Most writing is usually undertaken to communicate with one or more readers for a variety of informational purposes. Apart from diaries and personal notes, most recognizable forms of writing are intended for audiences other than the writer. Even when writing for oneself, there is a likelihood that the writing will, at a later point, be used to communicate with others.

Through writing, we are able to share ideas, arouse feelings, persuade and convince other people. Through writing, we ‘do things’: such as apologizing, inviting, praising, threatening, complaining, ordering, rejecting, etc. It may be argued that an enormous amount of personal and official communication is carried out by word of mouth; and spoken interaction is for most people easy and economic since it does not require any materials other than opening the mouth. However, writing as a means of communication has its particular advantages over speech. To quote Clark and Ivanic (1997) again,

‘We suggest that there are at least five factors that cause people to prefer writing as a means of communicating with others: distance between communicators; the need to avoid interaction; the opportunity to take time and care over wording, the opportunity to integrate verbal and visual means of communication; the need to keep evidence of the communication; and finally, in some cultures, to add weight to the message.’

1.1.3 Role of Writing

Writing is more than just a mechanical language skill. It is far from being a simple matter of transcribing language into written symbols. Instead, it is a thinking process, putting performed thoughts into words. It demands conscious intellectual effort, which usually has to be sustained over a considerable period of time. Through writing, we are able to
develop thinking and emotions and define ourselves. The simple reason for this is that it gives us the time and opportunity for reflection, since written words will not disappear as soon as produced, they are fixed before us on the page so that we can consider them. We go back to these thoughts, refine them, discard or develop them in a way that is difficult to do when talking. Without resorting to the written form, thinking in your head is difficult because ideas leak away. As Bacon said, ‘If a man writes little, he had need have a great memory.’ In fact, we cannot hold so many thoughts in our head at one time. It will be very difficult for one to ‘think’ without writing, trying to develop a complex line of thought with no paragraphs, no sentences, no phases, and no mark on paper of any kind.

On the other hand, writing is generative: it is an act of creation. New ideas develop all through the process and writers rarely know at the outset what their end products will look like. Actually the act of writing is one of the most powerful problem-solving tools humans have at their disposal. Sometimes people use writing just for the sake of developing thinking and sorting the ideas out for themselves. For example, a lecturer often resorts to writing to decide what he is going to say in class, and one logic for people who keep diaries is that diaries help them understand what has happened and how to live better.

To sum up, the act of writing is embedded in the social context. No act of writing takes place in a social vacuum. As a major and indispensable means of communication, writing has great power in maintaining contacts with others across time and space, in developing human thoughts and in keeping records of history and heritage.

1.2 Fundamental Characteristics of Writing
1.2.1 Writing in Contrast with Speech

There has been a traditional belief that spoken language is primary and written language is secondary. It is true that spoken language has been a major medium of human communication for at least 100,000 years, while written language has a relatively short history if we consider only the span of human life on earth. However, spoken and written language
For the past decade, linguists have given a higher status to written language. They argued that in some ways written language has developed separately from spoken language and that in ordinary life the two forms of language are more interrelated than we sometimes realize (White and Arridt, 1991). In fact, written language is not merely a transcription of oral language. On the contrary, written language has acquired a number of unique functions which are not shared by the oral form. As we described in the first section of this chapter, writing can serve the function of keeping records, developing thoughts, and above all, communicating with people across time and space. All this is made possible because of its particular characteristics.

One of the most obvious differences between the spoken form and the written form of language is that most spoken language is face-to-face communication while written language is not. Conversation takes place in a certain context. There is a speaker, a listener, and the social and physical situation they are currently in. A considerably important feature of conversation is that there is the possibility of immediate interaction between speaker and listener. The speaker can take the listener for granted in a sense because he knows that his audience will be able to intervene to ask for more information or for clarification. Furthermore, the use of body language does help a lot in face-to-face communication. Body language conveys much of the meaning that is conveyed in face-to-face talk.

When people are talking, their tone, their voice and their facial expression convey their attitudes and emotions. Their gestures and postures further contribute to the meaning of their talks. For example, a woman sitting in a restaurant where an amusing incident happened before might say to her friend, ‘You remember the time when .’. and leave the sentence unsaid, but employ a wry smile to evoke her listener’s memory of the incident. It might have been a time when they were having a dinner and realized that neither of them had the money to pay the bill. A slight nod and smile from the listener is enough to show the woman that she has
been understood. The physical situation of the restaurant and the memory of shared experience are sufficient to convey her incomplete suggestion.

In speech, the stress and intonation of voice can also carry certain implied meanings. When someone says ‘That’s very kind of you.’ in the appropriate circumstances with a bitter tone of voice and a stress on the first syllabus of ‘very’, he might quite probably mean, ‘That’s very unkind of you.’ A skilful listener will be aware of this intended meaning immediately.

In the case of writing, things are considerably different. When we write to someone, the tone of voice, physical proximity and the possibility of quick interaction are not available. As we write, we cannot make use of body language. We cannot point to things around us. We cannot see how the reader is reacting at the same time when we are writing. Because of this, we have to make the meaning unequivocal and more explicit than when we are talking.

In writing anything – a note to a friend, a letter of thanks, a composition assignment, or a science report – we have to be concerned about the context, structure and style. Very often, the consideration of the readership plays a large part in deciding on the structure and style of the writing. Since writing is mainly for communicating with others, we have to think about the reader’s needs, interests, personality and values. An awareness of the reader’s previous knowledge is important even in the simplest form of writing. When we write down a telephone message, for instance, we choose between whether to refer to a caller by his/her first name, surname, nickname, or any designation according to our judgement of how well the recipient knows the caller. This sensitivity to what a reader does or does not know is an important element in writing.

The importance of readership in writing is very clearly expressed in the words of Kenneth S. Goodman (1986): ‘Texts are shaped as much by the writer’s sense of the characteristics of their readers as they are by the writer’s own characteristics. That is as true for a shopping-list or a letter as it is for a newspaper report or a novel.’
When judging the audience, a writer often has to bear in mind the following and many other related questions:

‘Who is the intended reader of the writing? Is the reader an abstraction? Is the reader involved equivalent to the reader addressed (intended)? Is the reader a known individual? If the audience is known, how close or distant is the reader? How much shared knowledge exists between the reader and the writer? How much shared specific knowledge of a particular topic exists between the reader and the writer?’

(Grabe and Kaplan, 1996)

At the same time, writers have to consider what is so-called ‘law of communication’ – i.e. unspoken rules or conventions in communicating in any form of language. When writing, people can neither speak to nor see the person(s) they are addressing. All they have at their disposal is the abstract symbol system of written language. With this, they must make explicit every aspect of their meaning; their text must create its own context. As far as the readers are concerned, they expect that writers will give them neither more nor less information than needed for the message to be understood. Readers also expect writers to use language which is clear, unambiguous and appropriate to the context.

In our daily life, we feel so much at ease with the spoken word. In response to a social situation, when the task can be fulfilled by either medium of speech and writing, we easily tend to use the medium of speech, because it comes more naturally to us. We favour speech because it is easier and more economic to achieve our purposes. However, writing does certain things better than speaking. If we miswrite, we can always rewrite and correct our mistakes before someone else notices it. In developing a complex idea, writing ensures greater exactness and better possibilities, which explains why many people resort to writing for serious arguments.

To sum up, spoken and written language serve separate functions
and achieve different effects in social contexts by their respective characteristics. As Bacon said, ‘Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.’

1.2.2 Writing as a Creative Process

The issue of the writing product versus the writing process in composition research and instruction was perhaps the controversy of the 1980s. Now the writing process approach is widely recognized as a more acceptable and reasonable approach in the field of composition research.

In the 1960s, the research of the psychological and philosophical foundations of human skills began to shift in the direction of what is now defined as cognitive psychology. Its major underlying assumptions are as follows:

(i) that the inner workings of the mind can be studied;
(ii) that complex skills are made up of interacting components working together in complex process; and
(iii) that learners are creative hypothesis generators.

(Gardner, 1985)

The rise of cognitive psychology led teachers and researchers to reassess the nature of writing and the written medium, and the ways in which writing is learned and taught. Among many outcomes of this reassessment is the rise of the writing-as-a-process movement.

Writing-as-a-process approach views all writing as a creative process. It maintains that writing is far from being a simple matter of transcribing language into written symbols; it is a thinking process in its own right which involves intellectual efforts. Furthermore, because cognitive skills are involved in writing, proficiency in language does not necessarily make writing easier. People writing in their native language frequently confront exactly the same kinds of writing problems as people writing in a foreign or second language. As a result, it is of vital
importance to find out what actually goes on when people write and hence think of effective ways to solve these problems.

To look into the writing process and the nature of writing, a comparison of two different models, based on different views on what is involved in writing, may serve for the purpose.

The first is the ‘linear model’. Much of the early research on composition focused on the assumption that writing progresses logically and sequentially through a set of discrete steps or stages. These steps or stages, as can be deduced from the teaching materials and method proposed, could be presented as follows:

1. Choose a topic,
2. Write an outline,
3. Develop the outline,
4. Edit and proofread

(Clark and Ivonic, 1997)

The linear model entails the pedagogy which is product-based. Learner writers are usually instructed to plan carefully before they begin writing. It is still a common practice to ask the students to follow such a model in composition classrooms throughout the world. In fact, this undermines the concept of writing as a thinking process and encourages students to think that writing is simply a translation of their thinking into words on the page.

In comparison with the idealized picture reflected in the linear approach, there is the ‘recursive process model’, a model of seeing writing as a cognitive process. This model was first proposed by Flower and Hayes in 1980 and has been popular for the past fifteen years in composition research. Flower and Hayes (1983) have greatly influenced the writing-as-a-process movement. They have asserted that:

(i) composing processes are interactive, intermingling, and
potentially simultaneous;
(ii) composing is goal-directed activity;
(iii) expert writers compose differently from novice writers.

The model divides the composing processes of a writer into three major components: ‘the composing processor, the task environment, and the writer’s long-term memory.’ Within the composing processor, three operational processes generate the written text: ‘planning, translating and reviewing.’ The three processes are managed by an executive control called ‘a monitor’. Finally, in the planning process, there are ‘three subcomponents – generating ideas, organizing information, and setting
goals.’ In the actual generation of text, the ideas in planning are translated into language on the page, which is then reviewed and revised. (Flower, 1994)

This theory of the writing process has aroused much excitement in writing research, though it has generated criticism at a number of levels. Among the many criticisms is that it concentrates only on the psychological processes of the individual mind, without relating the writer to the social context in which he is writing. However, this model may serve as a guide to penetrate into the nature of writing. One contribution that Flower and Hayes have made in writing research is the notion of interaction among processes in writing practice.

The approach of writing-as-a-process has now been well accepted in the field of composition research. To quote Grabe and Kaplan (1996), ‘as a reaction to the earlier common practice, it freed instruction from simplistic assumption about the organization and ordering of information and the linear composing model based on outlining, writing and editing. On the other hand, in terms of writing practice, it encourages meaningful writing on topics of importance (or at least of interest) to the writer; the need to plan out writing as a goal-oriented, contextualized activity; and the idea that writing is multiply recursive rather than linear as a process – tasks are repeated alternatively as often as necessary.’

The process approach has captured certain important truth about language, such as that writing is multiply recursive rather than linear as a process. Since it allows teachers and students more meaningful interaction and more purposeful writing, it has been gaining more and more ground in the writing classrooms throughout the world.

1.3 Criteria for Good Writing

Whenever writers put down something on the paper, even on the most casual or personal occasions, they have the desire to successfully fulfill their intentions. Good writing is effective and does what writers want it to. There are three major criteria for good effective writing:
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