A Research on the Current Situation and Countermeasures of English Writing Teaching for Junior English Majors

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Abstract. At present, the effectiveness of English writing teaching for junior English majors is not satisfactory, with a lack of interactivity in the classroom, inflexible teaching methods, a deficiency of targeted teaching for students’ problems, and insufficient emphasis on writing training. The main reasons for these problems are that teachers have failed to conduct the student-centered English writing teaching model, emphasizing one-way output, ignoring students’ writing problems, and resulting in the shortage of writing training. In this regard, teachers need to transform the teacher-centered English writing teaching model, consider students’ actual problems, establish common writing goals, construct online teaching resources for English writing course, and apply multi-modal writing teaching methods to boost the effectiveness of English writing teaching.

1 Introduction

Writing teaching is an important aspect of foreign language teaching. For English learners, English writing ability is one of their essential core competencies and an important means of language output to the outside world [1]. However, English writing is a soft spot for most junior English majors [2]. In the Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4), students generally lose more points in the writing section [3], which indirectly reflects the urgent need for improvement in our English writing teaching. Therefore, how to enhance the effectiveness of English writing teaching and promote students’ English writing level has become a focus of increasing attention for teachers and students.

2 Research design

2.1 Research object

This study involved a total of 211 participants, including 32 males, 155 females, and 24 teachers. The participants are 157 freshmen and 30 sophomores majoring in English, as well as 24 English writing teaching teachers from College of Foreign Studies of Guangdong University of Science and Technology.

2.2 Research methods

2.2.1 Questionnaire survey

In order to better grasp the current situation of English writing learning and teaching among young undergraduate students majoring in English, this study carried out a questionnaire survey on the current situation of English writing learning and teaching among 211 participants (students and teachers) from College of Foreign Studies of Guangdong University of Science and Technology in early June of 2022. Students participated in a survey on the current situation of English writing learning among junior English majors, while teachers were engaged in a survey on the current situation of English writing teaching among junior English majors.

2.2.2 Interview

In mid-June of 2022, the research team randomly selected 21 junior English majors (11 freshmen and 10 sophomores) and 5 English writing teachers from Guangdong University of Science and Technology for in-depth interviews. This study first conducted interviews with randomly-selected English majors to understand the situation of English writing learning and satisfaction with writing teaching. Then, interviewing the English writing teachers to perceive their understanding of English writing course design, classroom teaching, and student learning status.

3 Research results

3.1 Lack of interactivity in English writing class

In terms of the lack of interactivity in the writing class, the results of students’ survey show that 66.67% of the participants believe that there is a shortage of teacher-student interaction in the English writing class, while only 33.33% of them state that the interaction in the English writing class is rich. For the classroom
atmosphere, 59.62% of students feel that the English writing classroom is dull, which is confirmed in interviews with 21 students. 66.67% of the interviewees claim that there is insufficient interaction and communication between teachers and students in English writing classes; 61.90% of respondents feel that teachers lack teaching enthusiasm and the content they teach is difficult to understand; and also 30% of students emphasize that teachers should pay more attention to the feedback or opinions provided by students, rather than just relying solely on teachers’ unilateral output. In addition, in the teachers’ questionnaire survey, 58.33% of the tested teachers proclaim that English writing class is a relatively boring course, and the content taught tends to be theoretical, which is not conducive to teacher-student Q & A (Question & Answer), interaction and communication. At the same time, out of 5 teacher interviews, only one of them (taking up 20% of total sample size) designs writing teaching based on students’ characteristics and levels, and focuses on interacting with students. The other four teachers (amounting to 80% of total sample size) indicate that they are more inclined to explain the knowledge and exercises of textbook in writing classes, and then assign relevant writing assignments after class, neglecting classroom interaction and communication.

3.2 Inflexible methods for teaching English writing

Firstly, regarding the teaching methods of writing in the classroom, 62.82% of the students surveyed deem that the current teaching mode of English writing in the classroom is traditional and emphasize a single form; 31.01% of participants reckon the teaching mode in writing class belongs to indoctrination teaching; 41.77% of subjects assume that there is insufficiency for supplementing extracurricular contents in English writing teaching; and also 37.97% of them opine that teachers are wanting in flexible teaching methods. Secondly, in interviews with 21 students, 47.61% of them hold that the form of English writing teaching in classroom is singular. They believe that teachers’ classroom teaching methods are relatively ambiguous, mostly depending on the teaching resources provided by textbooks, and lacking extracurricular expansion. Meanwhile, the results of the teachers’ questionnaire manifest that 50% of teachers consider their teaching methods in English writing classes are not flexible enough, and they fail to design teaching based on students’ actual writing level and existing problems. They mostly complete teaching content explanations according to the course teaching plan. Furthermore, among the interviews with 5 English writing teachers, 3 teachers (accounting for 60% of total sample size) express their dissatisfaction with the current situation of English writing teaching. They assert that many writing teachers apply teaching methods improperly (such as teacher-centered, indoctrinated teaching, lack of interaction, neglecting writing training, etc.), and ignore flexibility and diversity in the forms of English writing teaching.

3.3 Deficiency of teaching tailored to students’ problems

According to the results of the students’ questionnaire survey, 55.32% of students acknowledge that the teaching content of English writing in the classroom does not meet their needs. In terms of writing training, 65% of the participants report that the content taught by the teacher lacked writing knowledge related to tests (such as TEM-4), and even 72.5% of testees believe the current English writing class excludes targeted and planned teaching and training to work out their writing weaknesses. Simultaneously, in students’ interviews, 42.86% of respondents relate that in English writing class the teacher cannot consider students’ actual writing problems and situations, resulting in the absence of designing teaching to address students’ existing problems; and 57.14% of students declare the knowledge taught by teachers in the classroom is only focused on textbook contents, and teaching activities are carried out in a copycat manner, ignoring the fundamental needs of students. This is coincidental in the interviews with five teachers. Four interviewed teachers (making up 80% of total sample size) allege that they strictly follow the content of the teaching plan and do not adjust the teaching contents in accordance with the actual needs of students, which leads to content deviation in English writing classroom teaching.

3.4 Insufficient emphasis on writing training

First, when it comes to English writing training, the students’ questionnaire results imply that 89.39% of students feel that teachers do not attach enough importance to writing training in teaching, lack practicality in the class, and have less relevant English writing training, mostly explaining concepts and theoretical knowledge. Then, in students’ interviews, 71.43% of the interviewees indicate that most of their writing training is limited to the writing class, and teachers rarely assign writing training after class (perhaps only 4-5 times in a semester). Finally, in the teachers’ questionnaire survey and interviews, the data results also confirm this point. That is, 83.33% of the teachers in the questionnaire mention they assign about 4 times of writing training during the whole semester, while the rest of the assignments mainly involve previewing textbook content, group presentations in class, and completing textbook exercises. Besides, in the interview, most teachers explain they assign writing tasks based on the school requirements (e.g. at least how many times per semester) for teachers to score students’ assignments, without any mandatory requirements or regulations for other assignments relevant to writing training.
4 Discussion

In the first place, there is a lack of interactivity in the English writing class for junior English majors, which is due to teachers’ failure to achieve a student-centered approach to writing teaching. In the teacher-centered teaching model, there is insufficient overlap and cohesion between the theoretical input of students’ English writing and the output of English writing practice, which makes it difficult for students to solve difficulties in English writing in a timely manner, let alone improving their English writing proficiency [4]. However, the student-centered teaching model requires teachers to complete the transformation from teacher-centered to student-centered, adhere to student-centered teaching, deeply explore students’ interests, and use them to stimulate students’ interest in classroom learning, cultivate students’ ability to discover, analyze, and solve problems, thereby achieving the role of improving teaching effectiveness.

In the second place, as to teaching methods in the writing class, teachers often have a single form of teaching in the writing class, mostly in the shape of cramming or indoctrination. This is because teachers blindly emphasize one-way output and neglect the combination of theory and teaching events. Under this one-way output teaching mode, student feedback shows that the knowledge taught by the teacher is easily forgotten, and learning effect is not satisfactory [5]. Thus, in the teaching of English writing courses, teachers should maximize students’ participation in the class, increase interaction and communication between teachers and students, guide students to indulge into the classroom learning, and utilize flexible and varied teaching methods (such as task-based teaching, communicative teaching, comprehensive teaching, etc.) to elevate teaching quality [6].

In the third place, for English writing classes, teachers lack targeted teaching to address students’ problems, which is because they have not taken into account the current writing level of students and have neglected the problems of students’ writing. In the students’ questionnaire, 57.38% of the participants state they are not able to receive teacher feedback and comment during writing training, and 14.29% of students express that they often encounter difficulties in writing and cannot seek help from teachers. In this way, what they can only do is choose to use translation software to assist in completing writing tasks, which to some extent reflects the teacher’s neglect of students’ writing problems and failure to teach students according to their aptitude.

In the last place, with regard to English writing training, teachers do not attach enough importance to writing training. The key reason is that many English writing teachers currently adopt the traditional teaching method of “teacher proposition-student writing-teacher correction”, which fails to effectively utilize today’s online automatic correction writing software (such as Microsoft Aim Writing, Youdao Dictionary, Grammarly, etc.) or websites (such as Composition Correction Network, Youdao Writing, Aim Writing, etc.) to conduct a large number of automatic correction of students’ compositions. In writing correction, manually correcting students’ compositions by teachers is not only a challenge for teachers, requiring a lot of time and effort to modify students’ writing exercises and assignments, but also brings work pressure to teachers. This is also one of the significant reasons why many teachers do not pay enough attention to after-school writing training.

5 Countermeasures

5.1 Changing the model of teacher-centered writing teaching

In English writing teaching, teachers should transform the current model of teacher-centered writing teaching into a student-centered teaching model. The traditional teacher-centered teaching model, where teachers basically carry out teaching according to pre-designed contents. However, the student-centered teaching model requires teachers to have a clear understanding of students’ English writing proficiency, writing needs, course objectives, and output results [7]. In the meantime, teachers need to pay attention to emotional communication with students, encourage students to actively participate in classroom interaction, and help students solve writing problems. Writing is actually a communicative activity, with participants including the author, peer-reviewers, and teacher-reviewers [8]. In order to make peer evaluation become scientific and meaningful, teachers should provide related training and demonstration for peer reviewers. In addition, the student-centered writing teaching needs to be combined with networked teaching tools (such as essay correction websites, Chaoxing Learning Platform, etc.), and process writing ought to be integrated into English writing course teaching to improve the effectiveness of writing teaching. For example, teachers can make full use of the Composition Automatic Correction Network to supervise the entire process of students’ writing, including conception, discussion, drafting, revision and feedback, gain a deep understanding of the main problems in students’ writing, and provide writing feedback through various evaluation methods such as self-evaluation, student evaluation, teacher evaluation, and teacher-student interaction through the correction network system. This not only effectively reduces the burden of review and helps students solve common errors in writing, but also makes students get involved in writing activities and enhances the interaction and communication in the process of writing teaching.

5.2 Emphasizing students’ writing problems and establishing common writing goals

In writing teaching, teachers should center on students’ actual writing problems, clarify whether students have problems with vocabulary scarcity, weak grammar, discourse structure and writing strategies, and then establish common writing goals with students together. First, teachers have the responsibility and obligation to
inform students of the learning objectives of the writing course, so that students can have more planning and motivation in their after-school learning. Second, teachers need to adhere to the teaching philosophy of “student-centered and teaching according to students’ aptitude”, constantly update their teaching concepts, enhance their sense of belief as the “guide” role, and cannot simply ignore students’ actual needs and problems only for the sake of completing teaching tasks. Third, teachers should have clear teaching objectives, sufficient teaching preparation, establish a harmonious teacher-student relationship, and construct a writing evaluation and feedback mechanism. Clarifying teaching objectives and fully preparing for teaching require teachers to inform students of areas for improvement after writing classes, and to assess students’ English writing abilities, in order to adjust and better suit students’ writing classroom teaching, thereby improving teaching effectiveness and students’ English writing level.

5.3 Constructing online teaching resources for English writing course

Nowadays, the application of online teaching platforms can effectively solve the two major problems of limited writing hours and difficulty in correcting essays. The Internet has become the main carrier of massive amounts of information, and the convenience brought by the Internet has led to a high degree of acceptance of online resources by students. The construction of online teaching resources for English writing course is also an unstoppable trend. Taking “Chao Xing Superstar Learning Platform” as an example, the teaching functions of the platform include: message chat, live streaming, question answering, classroom voting, course creation, attendance, grades, academic situation, mobile library, mobile lesson plans, personal notes, and assignments, etc. Teachers can directly create online teaching resources for English writing course in this platform. For instance, teachers develop online course syllabuses, exam outlines, teaching plans, teaching courseware, and lesson plans based on the contents of English writing textbooks, accompanied by videos explaining the knowledge points in each chapter, corresponding exercises, and tests. Concurrently, teachers can also upload relevant knowledge points and video explanations based on students’ actual needs to satisfy their diverse and differentiated learning needs. What is more, teachers are in a position to regularly distribute questionnaires to collect students’ problems in English writing, and create relevant online learning resources based on their feedback, and provide students with a high-quality English writing learning platform.

5.4 Applying a multi-modal writing teaching model

Multi-modal teaching refers to the use of language, images, sounds, actions, and other modes by teachers in teaching to coordinate them into effective ways of expression, providing more authentic contexts for English learners, making students willing to participate in learning inwardly, and thereby improving teaching effectiveness [10]. In other words, English writing teachers can use a multi-modal teaching model, based on their own teaching objectives, combined with the textbooks set by the school curriculum, and select appropriate multi-modal teaching materials to carry out appropriate teaching activities, in order to increase the fun of English writing class. Meanwhile, in English writing teaching, teachers can use multi-modal teaching materials to set up group cooperative activities such as “connecting multi-modal materials to tell stories” [11]. In this kind of activity, teachers should first of all set activity requirements on the basis of learning contents to achieve the purpose of reviewing what students have learned. Then, group cooperation can promote communication and mutual learning of creative ideas among students. Next, after completing the storytelling, the teacher can build up a session of student evaluation to allow students to provide feedbacks on any inappropriate connections in the story. Lastly, the teacher makes some supplemenations and summaries. After completing this activity, students are able to receive writing thinking training, as well as how to make the transition and development, and how to add up details. These similar writing learning processes are obviously more interesting than single-text teaching, not only increasing teacher-student interaction, but also making it easier to capture students’ attention, which is beneficial for improving the effectiveness of English writing teaching.

6 Conclusion

In summary, English writing teaching is important for improving the English writing ability of junior English majors [12-13]. However, improving English writing ability is a relatively lengthy process that requires the joint efforts of students and teachers. On the one hand, students have to determine their own learning goals for English writing, accumulate knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, discourse structure, writing strategies, and practice more to achieve the level of proficiency. On the other hand, teachers need to first establish a student-centered teaching model in English writing teaching, attach importance to students’ actual writing problems, establish common writing goals with students, actively guide students to conduct writing training, construct online learning resources, and use multi-modal writing teaching models to promote students’ English writing proficiency.

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