

Enhance Teachers' Composition Teaching Literacy and Autonomy through Online Interactive Writing Course - "Learning by Doing": An Effective Way of Teacher Training

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Abstract

Composition writing is an important yet difficult component of Chinese language teaching. In the MOE 2011 Syllabus, composition writing is allocated a higher percentage than in previous years. However, both students and teachers were reported to have difficulties in writing and teaching compositions, respectively.

This paper discusses the effects of an online interactive process-writing course. Writing-assessment, which is to make comments on and give suggestions about the draft writings, is the key part of the course design. Hence, knowledge on how to guide the students to give proper feedback becomes a crucial part of a teacher's composition teaching literacy. The teachers are no longer just the knowledge providers but activity facilitators and supervisors. Designed under the idea of "learning by doing", the course helped the teachers to improve their assessment skills in writing as well as their confidence and autonomy in teaching writing.

Collaborative research is an effective way of teacher training. Guided by the researchers, the teachers managed to understand better the theoretical framework and research design of the project. Being the main personnel to fulfill the implementation of the classroom practices and the assessment of students' formative portfolios, the teachers get a rapid professional enhancement in composition teaching literacy and collaborative research skills. The experience of writing-assessment not only helps the students with their writing but also enhances the teachers' teaching skills as well.

This paper shares the course design of this writing project as well as effective ways to promote teachers' composition teaching literacy.

Keywords: composition teaching literacy, collaborative research, professional enhancement, teacher training

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Introduction

In the MOE 2011 Syllabus of Chinese Curriculum Standards, composition writing is allocated a higher percentage in exams now than in previous years. Except for Foundation Chinese and CLB which are considered courses for low achievers, the percentage for writing in other Chinese courses is either 30% or even 45%(Higher Chinese). In this sense, we can say that writing is not only a compulsory language skill that has to be taught in school, but also very important.

For many students, composition writing is a headache. It is especially difficult for many Singaporean students in Singapore's Chinese as a second language (CSL) scenarios since Chinese is neither the medium of instruction in schools nor the medium of communication at home. When they were required to write a Chinese composition, they always complained that they had no idea on what to write and how to write. What's more, the students are always trained to write timed essays in class so that they can finish writing in real exams. As a result, the students do not have enough chances to improve writing skills by learning how improve their writings according to peer and teacher review.

The teachers, however, were also reported to have difficulties in teaching compositions. The teachers we interviewed showed concerns on how to teach writing confidently in a systematic way. Compared to other language skills, the teaching of writing is somewhat random. The teachers don't have a systematic master plan on how to teach writing, instead, they only mentioned about some writing skills in the reading classes when they encounter some. Teaching of writing skills seems to be a byproduct of reading class. When the teachers assess the students' compositions, they could mainly focus on the language use rather than the content, let alone the writing process itself. The feedback from the teachers is either too general or not feasible for the students. Even if the teachers spent much time on giving feedbacks to the students, most of the suggestions turned out to be unread or not being paid enough attention to because the same kinds of mistakes keep appearing repeatedly in the students' writings.

In order to solve this problem, we developed an online interactive process-writing course. This course combines in-class and out-of-class learning, focusing more on students' peer review, teacher review and the self-editing of the first draft with the reviews. Writing-assessment, which is to make comments on and give suggestions about the draft writings, is the key part of the course design. Hence, knowledge on how to guide the students to give proper feedbacks becomes a crucial part of a teacher's composition teaching literacy. The teachers are no longer just the knowledge providers but activity facilitators and supervisors. Designed under the idea of "learning by doing", the course helped the teachers to improve their assessment skills in writing as well as their confidence and autonomy in teaching writing.

Literature Review

1. The literacy of teaching writing

Today, people communicate using a multitude of methods such as messages and emails other than conversing in person or via telephones. This requires more written communicative skills of our students, and better literacy of teaching writing of our teachers. However, in many places writing is usually taught by inexperienced and under-prepared teachers (Johns, 2009, cited in Lee, 2013). Although the skill of writing has always been emphasized with great importance, the teaching of writing has received little attention in most teacher education programs (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011). Regardless of the big amount of second language writing literature that geared towards helping the students to write in a second or foreign language, however, there is a paucity of research on the issue of the professional preparation and development of second language writing teachers. In the many studies of second language writing, more attention has been paid to the needs of the students on how to write rather than the teachers on how to teach (Hirvela & Belcher, 2007).

Since teachers are the ones who teach the students, how the teachers teach will have a great impact on how the students learn. Hence, the imbalance between the students' needs and the teachers' preparation on the literacy of teaching writing has to be addressed.

But how? Teacher knowledge is socially constructed and heavily influenced by the contexts in which they first learn as students and then later work as teachers (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). If the knowledge-base of how to write has not been taught enough when they were students, how can we expect them to teach their students well when they become writing teachers?

2. Effective professional development

The purpose of professional development is for the teachers to enhance and facilitate student learning in a most productive way. However, with the focus on students outcomes, too few professional development activities focus on the teacher as more than just a purveyor of knowledge to students (Gallo & Herrmann, 2014). While older literature tended to examine professional development as one-time programs or workshops with a purpose to change the teachers, more recent literature views teachers as active learners and participants in professional development activities (Borko, 2004; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Wayne et al, 2008). Lave and Wenger (1991) claimed that learning is indeed situated in practice by examining how people were engaged in legitimate peripheral participation to increase their knowledge of new practices. As learning occurs everywhere in a teacher's profession (Borko, 2004), teacher professional development must be uniquely tailored to each teacher's unique teaching situation and needs in order to be optimally valuable for the teacher's learning.

Traditional professional development that focuses only on the acquisition of new teaching strategies is not sufficient. Instead, opportunities that are built upon teacher's unique teaching contexts and needs will provide deeper and more valuable experiences to enhance teacher's practice (Gallo & Herrmann, 2014). Towards the researchers, the most common complaint leveled at them is the lack of connection between their research and teachers' practice (Kaestle, 1993). Researchers who studied educational phenomena rarely did manage to control for all the extraneous variables (Kennedy, 1997). Even if they succeeded at that, the findings would "decay" because the social contexts were constantly changing (Cronbach, 1975). Although we will never be able to generate stable findings that can provide the basis for theories about social phenomena, including the phenomenon of teaching and learning, we still need to ask about the research design and to worry about how to know if our designs are yielding reliable knowledge and catering for the practitioners' needs. Ann Brown (1992) argued that, if research is to produce important knowledge, it has to occur within the natural constraints of real classrooms and must accommodate the multiple confounding influences that are there.

Shulman (1970) claimed that research needed to move out of the laboratory and into the classroom because laboratory studies of learning focused mainly on learning nonsense syllabus, while teachers were concerned about teaching subject matter. In recent decades, educational research has indeed moved to the field, yet it is still common for teachers to dismiss research because the classrooms involved in the research differ from their own classrooms (Kennedy, 1997). As suggested by Kaestle (1993), the researchers could collaborate with knowledgeable people from research constituencies scholarly groups and practitioners. To be more specific, Kaestle also suggested that they should collaborate in first-rate in-service training, as well as increase innovative efforts to link research and practice, such as involving practitioners in designing and conducting research, or incorporating training about research into the initial preparation of teachers and administrators. Collaborative research involves upstream engagement of practitioners, introducing diverse knowledges and expertise in ways that can generate new knowledge that is socially robust and publicly accountable (Hinchliffe et al, 2014).

In this manner, collaborative research is an effective way of teacher's professional development. This kind of partnership builds bridges between the knower (the researcher) and the seeker (the teacher), the expert (the researcher) and the practitioner (the teacher). Guided by the researchers' knowledge and expertise, the teachers managed to understand better the theoretical framework and research design of the project and improve their effectiveness. Being the main personnel to fulfill the implementation of the classroom practices and the assessment of students' formative portfolios, the teachers get a rapid professional enhancement in composition teaching literacy and collaborative research skills. The researchers, on the other hand, also benefited from this co-learning process (Wagner, 1997). As described by Delgado-Gaitan (1993, p409) how a field research project led her to understand her

own role as a researcher in a new way, "to counter our own ignorance and biases as researchers, we must integrate into our research rigorous and systematic joint analysis with our participants." Many projects characterized it as "collaborative action research" (Argyris et al., 1985; Whyte, 1991; Winter, 1989).

3. Teacher review and peer review in the process writing

Writing is a complex process which involves a lot of cognitive and meta-cognitive activities (Murray, 1972). Unlike traditional product-oriented writing, process-oriented writing focuses on the writing process, not just the final product. For process writing, writing is believed to be a process of discovery in which ideas are generated and not just transcribed as writers think through and organize their ideas before writing and revising their drafts (Lee, 2006). Process writing is reasonable in the sense of cognition because it emphasizes on the revision of the draft as writers need to stop many times during the process of composing as well as to revise many times after the composing. The process approach to writing teaching emphasizes the writers as independent producers of texts, thus requiring the teachers to address how to help the learners to perform a writing task which is a cognitive process to plan, draft, revise and edit in a recursive, interactive, and potentially simultaneous way (Hyland, 2003). Providing productive feedback is one useful way (Hyland, 1990) and group work is frequently a key element in generating ideas, collecting information, focusing priorities, and structuring the way to organize texts as well as providing practical genuine communications at the same time (Hyland, 2003).

The collaborative writing activities provide the learners with the opportunities to engage with the language at a conscious level and to test out their hypotheses as well as receive feedback on their hypotheses (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012). When the learners work on their own, they usually transcribe into written forms what they have on mind or what is verbalized in whispers. As the students need to decide on how to revise their writings, they not only learn to use writing as a way to express themselves, but also learn the content knowledge as well as knowledge about the language (Hirvela, 2011; Swain, 2001; Williams, 2012). When the learners are collaborating together with their peers and teachers, they always construct their meaning making by discussing and negotiating with each other. Swain (2006, 2010) called this involvement and deliberation "languaging". This kind of "languaging" experiences make the learners attend to the problems arising during the writing process, and by doing that, get a deeper understanding of the language use. Because they have the pressure of the output, this process gives the learners the opportunity to not only focus on forms (meaning), but also Focus on Form (Long, 1996). In this regard, writing should not be considered as a solitary activity, but rather as a site for language learning.

Both teacher review and peer review are proved helpful for the learners in the process writing (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Hu, 2005; Kollar & Fischer, 2010; Paulus, 1999; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998; Zhang, 1995). It is not only a way

of collaborative learning but also a way of assessment for learning because the students need to give each other opinions, suggestions, questions and ideas. At the same time they have to understand all the suggestions and questions from their teachers and peers and to decide which suggestions to take and which ones not to by using their judgments of what makes a good writing. Peer and teacher review have a significant effect on the quality of writing and led to more learner autonomy (Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998), as well as aid writing development and encourages critical thinking (Berg,1999). Students were reported to benefit from reading other students' work as they have the tasks to give feedback (Tsui & Ng, 2000).

Teachers suffer from the tedious and unrewarding chore of correcting students' essays (Hyland, 1990). Although teacher review is valued highly by students, the mistakes in the students' essays keep on repeating themselves. If we can manage the provision of feedback in process-writing approach, i.e., the students receive feedback on drafts before they submit the final writing, it will liberate a lot of time and effort in the teachers. Teachers, at the same time, will also benefit in their literacy of teaching writing by providing the students the rubrics and scaffoldings on how to give feedbacks and how to revise the writings according to the writing rubrics and the feedbacks received rather than doing some unrewarding chores such as correcting the students' reappearing mistakes.

The literature provides useful insights on the effectiveness of peer and teacher feedbacks, and collaborative research as an effective way for professional development. However, how to apply peer and teacher review in the writing process to help the students and at the same time focus on in-service teacher's professional development training is not that much reported.

This paper intends to share the implementation model of peer review and teacher review in this writing project as well as effective ways to promote teachers' composition teaching literacy.

For this study, we have formulated the following two research questions:

Question 1: How effective is the wiki-based process writing on Chinese narrative essay for lower CSL students?

Question 2: How effective is the wiki-based process writing for the professional development of the teachers?

In this study students improved their writing literacy through rounds of process writings, being provided with more chances to get exposure to input and output in the target language as well as more chances to apply the writing rubrics to both their own writings and their peers'. The experience of writing-assessment not only helps the students with their writing but also enhances the teachers' teaching skills as well.

Online interactive writing course: an effective way of professional enhancement

1. The course design

The course design consists of two parts: the orientation and the main writing activities.

Before the orientation, the teachers should get involved in the designing of the research and understand the whole research framework. Before they start to conduct the research, they need to understand fully how the research is working in each phase and the rationales behind. If they don't understand some part, the researchers can explain to them and even involve them to develop the rubrics and learning materials. Only in this way can the teachers have more autonomy and ownership of the project. For those teachers who have little knowledge in research, it is not an easy process. However, after they made effort to digest how the research is working, they understood and learned a lot more.

During the orientation, the teacher provided a model by demonstrating how students should assess their peer's work and give feedback, using the structure of peer assessment rubrics and guiding questions, covering writing organization, content, and language. The orientation also covered 10 items of writing, such as theme, choice of materials, plot, emotions, consistency, cohesion, deployment, vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric techniques. The purpose of this orientation training is to prepare the students on how to assess writings. In order to do this, the teachers need to first familiarize and internalize the writing rubrics so as to model on how to use the rubrics to assess others' writing.

There were five recursive writing activities in the two years' study. In every writing activity there appears three major steps: pre-writing, writing and post-writing. In each writing activity, the students wrote the first draft and then did revision and editing, with the feedbacks from their teachers and peers.

In order to strengthen the impact of peer assessment, besides the guiding questions, activities such as 'Tell me why this is a piece of good writing' and 'Come, let Dr. Woodpecker treat you' were blended in. In each of these activities, we provided several steps to guide the students in forming standards on how to appreciate good writing, how to break down/deconstruct texts and how to transform bad writing into good writing. All the activities were arranged for students to carry out in groups so as to facilitate discussion and collaborative learning. After some preparations, the students did class presentations using the guiding tasks and questions. With this kind of 'comprehensible output' activity, the students learned to judge texts critically and to refine and consolidate vague ideas into principles to assess writing by doing oral presentations.

2. The subjects

The participants were 60 Secondary One students from a neighbourhood school, forming an experimental class (N=32) and a comparison class (N=28). The whole study lasted for two years. The experimental class was involved in five rounds of recursive writing activities, during which they were given parallel writing instructions and were asked to give group presentations. In the control class, the teacher went about her normal practice but arranged for her students to take the pre-, mid- and post-tests that the experimental class took. Artifacts produced by students from both classes were also analyzed.

3. The teachers' role

In this project, the teachers teach quite little, giving more ownership to the students to study by themselves. The learning materials are on the wiki platform, the students do group presentations and teach each other, they assess their peers' writing and give feedbacks, they revise their writings on their own..... Then what did the teachers do? Each writing activity consists of 11 steps. Together with the training orientation, 12 steps are shown in the table below. The teachers' role at each step is shown in each step.

Table 1. Steps for the writing activities

Steps	Teacher's role during each step
1.training	Get involved and understand in the designing of the research before orient the students about the purpose of the project and learn how to use the rubrics.
2. learn writing techniques	Help the researchers develop the teaching materials on writing techniques for students' self-directed learning via wiki platform.
3.check learning outcomes	Arrange the students to take quiz in groups. Mark the quiz papers and analyze the results.
4.in-class teaching	Lecture about the writing materials, but not all of them. Focusing on the important points and some weak points that the students fail in the quiz.
5. out-of-class study	Arrange the students to study together on the good writing and bad writing activities, prepare enough scaffolding materials, predict and prepare for the common mistakes that the students might make negligently.
6.group presentation	Arrange the students to do group presentation. Guide them to do cross-group feedbacks by using the writing rubrics provided. Encourage on their good performance and emphasize on the weak points.
7.first writing	Read through students' draft writing and analyze them to find out the common mistakes and the good points. Prepare materials to give teacher remarks in class.
8.peer review	While students do peer revision in a given time, prepare some remarks to be given to some students, if not all, after they have done the peer review.
9.second writing	Observe whether the students have done their revision according to the feedbacks given by their peers and teachers. Take note of those who have done well and calculate their personal and group scores.
10.comments	Announce group scores and comment on the common mistakes that the whole class made during the writing activity. Encourage those who have done well during peer review session and analyze the aspects that they have done well.
11.final writing	Arrange the students to finalize their writing after class. Encourage more revisions.
12.reflection	Arrange the students to do reflection on their performance during this writing activity. Preparing the reflection rubrics and guide them through.

From the above table, we can see that, the teachers are no longer sole knowledge providers, but activity supervisors and monitors. As the world is changing and knowledge is multiplying itself every minute, the teachers cannot teach ALL that the students need in class. What our students need is the ability for self-directed learning and the desire and ownership for life-long learning. When the teachers step back from the teaching platform, they give more authorities to the students who are supposed to be the real owner of their learning. When the teachers teach LESS, effective learning activities makes the students learn MORE. It requires more in the teachers, to have more profound literacy in teaching writing and better control in classroom and activity management. In order to teach LESS, the teachers need to internalize all the teaching materials and chose wisely what to teach. During the group presentation steps, the teachers need to improvise prompt assessment and remarks on the spot, which also requires a lot of teaching skills. This gives the teachers many opportunities and space for their professional development.

Findings

1. t-test and effect sizes for the writing scoring

Before answering the first research question of the effectiveness of intervention on process writing, we verified that the experimental and comparison classes were equivalent. This was done by running the independent t-test on the writing scores of the two classes. As shown in Table 1, for the pre-test, there is a mean difference of -2.58 ($t = -1.30$, d.f. 58, $p > 0.05$) indicating that the two classes were equivalent but the experimental class scored lower than the comparison class. The Cohen's $d = -0.34$ indicates a small effect size which is not trivial to be dismissed.

On the post-test, however, the experimental class scored higher than did the comparison class, with a mean difference of 3.06 ($t=1.67$, d.f. 58. $p<0.05$). The corresponding Cohen's $d=0.44$ indicates a small but nearly medium effect size.

Table 2. Mean Comparisons on Writing Scores

	Experimental group (N=32)		Comparison group (N=28)		Mean differences	t-value	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Pretest	57.44	8.89	60.02	5.96	-2.58	-1.30	-0.34
Posttest	61.17	8.27	58.11	5.40	3.06	1.67	0.44
Gain	3.73	7.69	-1.91	5.10	5.64	3.29	0.86

Notes: (1) Effect size Cohen's d was calculated using the web-based Effect Size Calculator of the University of Colorado (<http://www.uccs.edu/~lbecker/>) which uses the pooled standard deviation as the denominator. For gain-scores, $SD = \sqrt{(S1^2 + S2^2 - 2*S1*S2*.6)}$, assuming a $r = .6$ between the pretest and post-test scores.

As noted previously, the initial difference favouring the comparison class is not so small that it can be totally dismissed. To offset this disadvantage to the experimental

class, a gain-score analysis was attempted. As can be seen in Table 1, the experimental class has gained by 3.73 from the pretest to the post-test whereas the comparison class has in fact deteriorated by -1.91. This suggests that, by comparison, the experimental group has gained by 5.64 ($t=3.29$, d.f. 58, $p<0.05$) through the intervention. The corresponding Cohen's $d=0.86$ indicates a large effect size. This leads to an affirmative answer to the first research question: the wiki-based process writing on Chinese Narrative Essay was effective for lower secondary school CSL students in enhancing students' performance.

Effect size is typically used at the conclusion of a research project to ascertain its success or lack thereof (Soh, 2010). The obtained Cohen's $d=.86$ for the gain scores indicates a large effect size. This compares very favourably with the average effect size of Cohen's $d=.40$ recommended by John Hattie (1999, 2009, cited in Soh, 2010) as a benchmark. Hattie's (2009) study, with a large number of more than 800 meta-analysis covering 165,258 studies, helps us look at the average effect size of similar experiments in the same field. This helps us to examine the value of the effect size of our own project in a more objective and comparative perspective without focusing solely on the value itself.

According to Hattie's (2009) research, the average effect size of 566 computer-assisted instruction experiments is 0.31 and the average effect size of 122 studies on peer influence is 0.38. The obtained gain score effect size (.86) demonstrates that the combination of both computer use and peer review can greatly improve the effect of mere computer use and mere peer assistance in language teaching.

2. Teachers' feedback on their improvements

Based on the interviews, self-evaluation surveys and classroom observation, we found out that there has been a lot improvements in the teachers.

They reported that this collaborative research tailors to their teaching needs and is optimally valuable for their learning as a writing teacher. With the project, they not only knew more about the new pedagogy, but also had more understanding of the theoretical background knowledge behind the pedagogy. Being provided with sufficient professional development opportunities that are built upon their teaching contexts and needs, the teachers had deeper and more valuable experiences to improve not only their professional practice, but also the quality of their professional lives. Familiarity with education technology indeed plays a crucial role in implementing ICT-mediated teaching and learning (Alexakis et al., 2014). They have also reported that they have learned more about pedagogies as collaborative learning, self-directed learning and ICT-assisted learning, which gave them more confidence in teaching writing in different ways. Previously, without knowing how to teach writing in a systematic way, they only taught some writing skills when they encountered some in the comprehension passages. Now, they have bigger and clearer plans on how

writing should be taught in a more gradual and systematic way. In order to manage well the group work and collaborative learning, they also had more hands-on experience of differentiated instructions (DI).

The teachers' growth has also been witnessed through the lesser dependence on the researchers and more ownership on the choice and preparation of teaching materials. After digesting the research design framework and getting involved into the project as joint participants, the teachers are observed to be more capable of handling the project with ease. Responding to students' writing is extremely challenging as it takes considerable time, reflection and experience. In order to transform a typical bad writing into a good one, an effective responder need to be equipped with solid principles, useful techniques and thoughtful evaluation and reflections. The teachers reported that they are now more used to deconstruct/ break down the students' writings and give feedbacks. After teaching and using the writing rubrics and scaffolding questions for so long, they are now very fast and effective in assessing students' writings which used to be an unrewarding and frustrating tasks for them. We think it very significant because you can only do well the things that you can really fathom and take pleasure to do in confidence, not the things you are afraid to do.

Conclusion and implications

The study is successful in helping students improve in their overall performance for Chinese writing and the teachers in their teaching of writing. We attribute the improvement to the skills and abilities acquired during the five recursive collaborative process writing activities, especially the peer and teacher review where they mutually engaged with each other in a coordinated effort to raise questions and solve problems together. Peer and teacher feedback does not only help students to improve in overall performance in writing, it also encourages critical reasoning as the students need to consider the validity of the suggestions and make decisions on whether to use them or how to use them.

When their critical reasoning has been enhanced, it will again help students with their writing because writing is an act of discovering meaning. A willingness to engage with students' assertions is crucial, and response is a central means to initiate and guide ideas (Straub, 2000). Hence, teachers could focus more on the ideas that our students produce, rather than dwell on the formal errors (Hyland, 1990; Murray, 1985). This transformation will liberate the writing teachers from endless time and frustration in responding students' writing papers, while returning back a life outside of work and making them feel that they are really helping the students.

Teachers, together with their students, "construct" their knowledge during the process of the project. Teachers who conduct the writing classes not only need to teach specific writing techniques, but more importantly, need to teach students to stand at a higher point to plan and assess writing as well to give them more ownership towards,

confidence in and enjoyment from writing. Only when the teachers have thorough and solid understandings of writing assessment can they transmit that kind of knowledge to their students. As the adage goes, *give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime*. In order to teach them to fish, the teachers must first become an expert fisherman and a proficient trainer as well. Collaborative research is an effective way for teachers' professional enhancement because the teachers learned how to do research with a lot real hands-on experience. Collaborative research is also a positive way to bring researchers and teachers a step closer to each other where cooperation can serve both sides.

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