

An Action Research on CL2 Writing Instruction

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Abstract: Writing instruction is a challenge, esp. for teaching Chinese as a second language. During the writing instruction for international students in China, the research team conducted two rounds of action research in 12 weeks. It was found that: 1) Oral output exercises on the writing topics can significantly improve learners' composition performance and writing skills; 2) Cultivating learners' observing, reasoning and imagining ability through Q & A tasks can effectively improve their writing ability; 3) Decomposition of writing tasks, providing “vocabulary chains” for learners, and laying “small steps” as “scaffolding” for learners can enhance their writing confidence and strengthen their learning motivation; 4) Oral fluency practice is still indispensable in teaching international students Chinese writing.

1. Introduction

Teacher A is an experienced language teacher, however, he accepted a new course -- L2 Chinese Writing. He encountered big challenges in teaching the new lessons. In order to improve his work efficiency and to promote the international students writing skills, he applied action research in teaching.

2. Theoretical Construction

Action research was first proposed by American psychologist Lewin in 1944[1]. It is different from previous comparative teaching experimental research methods and belongs to the student-friendly research paradigm. Teachers participate in research, identify problems in teaching, propose and implement improvement plans, and continuously cycle back and forth. Ferrance (2000) summarized the main steps of action research: finding problems, collecting data, interpreting data, carrying out actions, and finally reflecting on the effect of actions [2]. McNiff (1988) proposed five basic steps of teaching action research: finding problems, putting forward countermeasures, implementing plans, analysis and evaluation, and reflection [3]. On the basis of the existing construction, we summarize the teaching action research method as: defining problems -- analyzing problems -- designing and implementing improvement plans -- evaluating effects and reflecting on new problems -- analyzing problems....., following this cycle, continuously improve teaching. See Figure 1:

The initial teaching plan of the CL2 (Chinese as second language) teacher in this study was to

teach international students to write one article every two weeks. There are two hours of writing instruction each week. In one week, the teacher explains writing methods, analyzes a sample article, and requires students to finish the composition in class. In the second week, the teacher analyzes and comments on students' writing. In the first 4 weeks, the teacher encountered significant problems. This action research was carried out to improve the CL2 writing instruction.

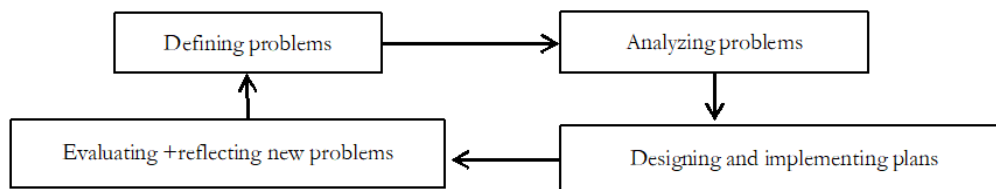


Figure 1: Action research in teaching

3. The First Round of Action Research

3.1 Problem Definition

It was the first time for the teacher to do the CL2 writing instruction though he had been teaching for 30 years. There were 21 sophomore international students, and all of them had passed HSK4. Among them, there were 3 Thai students, 2 from Laos, 2 from Russia, 4 from Nepal, 1 from the Philippines, 2 from Pakistan, 3 from Kazakhstan, 2 from Uzbekistan, 1 from Cameroon, and 1 from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old.

The main problems encountered in the first four weeks by the teacher were:

1) Some students seemed have little interest in the writing lesson. After the break, some students were unwilling to return to the classroom on time; About a quarter of students engaged little in the class and some played with mobile phones; The attendance rate was below 80%.

2) Most students were afraid of Chinese writing compositions. They were unwilling or unable to complete the composition in class. They wrote slowly and tried to delay until the class was over, and then asked to hand in their writing in the next week. Nearly one-third of the students wrote little in class, claiming that they were unable to write. Only 4 students could complete writing tasks of 100-200 words in class.

3.2 Problems Analysis

The researcher (Teacher A) reflected on the 4 times of writing instruction and conducted two group interviews with the international students, three students each time. Meanwhile, a semi-open interview was conducted with 2 teachers of other courses for the same class and 4 Chinese language partners of the international students.

Through the interviews it was found that international students generally thought Chinese writing too difficult and lacked confidence in writing a good composition. Some students admitted that they could not write many of the Chinese characters which were needed in the composition and they admitted that they were a bit lazy, unwilling to look up the characters in the dictionary.

The teachers and Chinese language partners of international students thought that the majority of international students liked China and the Chinese culture, and enjoyed traveling to various cities in China. Some students travelled every weekend, which might be one of the reasons for missing the writing lessons on Monday morning. In addition, some international students worked very hard in their first year in China in order to win the scholarships. But after receiving the scholarship, some felt a bit slack off due to lack of learning motivation.

3.3 Design and Implementation of Improvement Plans

Based on the problem analysis above, the researcher (also the teacher) concluded that the main problem was lack of learning motivation and confidence in writing. The following teaching improvement plan was designed to enhance students' confidence in writing and learning motivation:

1) To add a new exercise of joining word into sentences. This is one part of the writing section of HSK4, with which the students were familiar. The exercise can not only consolidate the learning of the main sentence structures in Chinese language, but also enhance students' confidence in learning.

2) To add new motivating tasks in class, such as the appreciation of the excellent sentences and paragraphs in students' writings to boost their motivation, helping students to experience the joy and a good sense of achievement in writing.

3) To hold a 15-minute themed class meeting, to encourage the whole class to overcome the difficulty and to conquer Chinese writing as conquering Mount Everest. The class logo was proposed: everyone should encourage and help each other and no student will be given up, because we are all a big family”.

4) The plan was planned to be carried out in the next 6 weeks (from 5th to 10th week).

3.4 Evaluation and Analysis of the First Round of Action Research

Through the classroom observations, it was found that a 15-minute themed class meeting had a good short-term effect. Most of the students were deeply moved. For example, after the class meeting an international student from Nepal decided to write one more composition per week to improve his Chinese writing skills. However, after 6 weeks' action, the overall progress of the entire class was not significant.

Firstly, there was no significant improvement in attendance rate. 5 students still often missed classes or took sick leave, and they often tried to look for excuses not to write the composition.

Secondly, there was no significant improvement in students' writing skills by comparing the length and the overall scores of their writing. The data of the length and comprehensive scores of the 9th week's writing “I Watered Grandpa's Pipe” and the 3rd week's composition “Netizens” were collected, and paired sample t-tests were conducted by SPSS26. The results are as follows:

The coefficient between the length of two compositions is 0.987, with a significance level of 0.000, less than 0.01, which is very significant and the data are suitable for paired sample t-tests. The length of students' compositions was represented by the number of characters. The number of characters is highly consistent to the number of words in assessing the length of Chinese writing[4].

Table 1: The Paired Sample t-Test of the Length of Two Compositions

sample	means	standard deviation	t	P(two-tailed)
First composition	110.24	111.16	-0.060	.953
Second composition	110.48	107.30		

Table 1 shows that there is no significant difference between the mean length of the two composition writings, with a significance level of 0.953, greater than 0.05. This means that the first round of action research had no significant effect on improving learners' writing length, which implied that their writing fluency was not improved significantly.

Comparison of the general scores of the second and first compositions: The coefficient is 0.959, with a significance level of 0.000, less than 0.01, which is very significant and the data are suitable for paired sample t-tests.

Table 2: The Paired Sample t-Test of the General Scores of Two Compositions

sample	means	standard deviation	t	P(two-tailed)
First composition	51.76	33.47	-1.730	.099
Second composition	55.38	30.96		

Table 2 shows that the mean score of the second composition is slightly higher than that of the first, but there is no significant difference, $P = 0.099$, greater than 0.05. This indicates that the first round of action did not have a significant effect on improving learners' composition grades.

In addition, through random interviews after class, it was found that the instruction began to encounter a new problem, some international students asked their Chinese friends to ghostwrite the compositions.

3.5 Reflection on the First Round of Action Research

By means of the first round of six-week action research, it was found that the themed class meeting had a short-term effect on encouraging international students to study hard, but the long-term effect was not significant. It may be effective for the students with strong learning motivation and outstanding self-discipline, but the effect is not significant for most other students.

Secondly, appreciating the excellent sentences and paragraphs in students' writing played an encouraging role for some students. The enthusiasm for participation in class has increased, but it had no significant effect on improving the attendance rate and general writing level of the entire class. It means that more intervention actions are needed.

Thirdly, through classroom observation and interview, it's found that the exercise of joining words into sentences was welcomed by students. This exercise is tended to improve students' grammar. Most students were able to complete this exercise. This indicates that classroom tasks that are consistent with exam questions and do not exceed the linguistic proficiency of most students are popular among students, however this exercise had no significant effect on improving students' writing skills, either. It means grammatical exercises are not adequate to enhance students' comprehensive writing skills.

4. The Second Round of Action Research

4.1 Problem Definition and Analysis

The first round of action did not lead to satisfying results. Teacher A consulted Teacher B and they formed a research team. Through classroom observation and interview, the research team concluded that the main causes might be:

(1) The proportion of teacher talk in class was too high, which reached over 90% in the pre-writing stage;

(2) Students' oral output in the class was limited. During the pre-writing phase, they rarely produced any whole sentences, let alone paragraphs;

(3) Some students' Chinese proficiency was insufficient to complete the writing tasks;

(4) Lack of "small steps" (as scaffolding) to help students to complete the writing tasks. After analyzing the sample composition, explaining the writing theme and methods, the teacher directly asked the students to write the entire composition. The gap between understanding the writing tasks and writing the whole composition is too broad for the students to cross by themselves.

4.2 Design and Implementation of the Second Round of Action Plan

On the basis of problem diagnosis and analysis, the research team worked together to develop the second round of comprehensive action research:

(1) The second round of action research will be carried out in the next 6 weeks (the 11th to 16th week).

(2) The teacher-student discourse ratio will be adjusted and students' oral output will be encouraged and guided. Teacher's explanation time will be significantly reduced; "Display questioning" will be reduced and "reference questions" will be used more to expand students' oral output; Oral productive tasks centred on the writing topics will be designed to promote students' productive capacity.

(3) "Length Approach" will be adopted to evaluate students' work and to encourage students to write as long compositions as they can. The concept of "Length Approach" proposed by Wang Chuming is to encourage students to compose as long writing as they can, and it's been tested efficient to promote students' writing ability[5][6][7].

(4) "Small steps" will be paved as "scaffolding" for international students to complete writing tasks through the 4 specific measures:

1) To ask more questions to guide students to observe and think. For example, for the task of writing on a series of pictures, the teacher designs at least 8 questions for each picture to help students to observe them;

2) To increase fluency practice. Retelling exercises will be applied to help students to say long or difficult sentences fluently;

3) To provide "the chain of words" as reminders in writing. Write the core vocabulary and phrases that appear in the discussion of the writing theme on the PPT as a "scaffolding: for students to fulfil their writing;

4) To split the whole writing task into steps. For example, the "Dog Lovers" task has three pictures. The composition task is therefore divided into three packs. After discussing each picture, students are asked to write one paragraph. The task-splitting is to reduce the difficulty of writing, then to ease students' worry in writing;

(5) Accuracy practice will be increased. Classroom exercises of group discussion and correction of the common errors among students will be used to avoid their error fossilization due to repeated occurrences;

(6) The students' ability of observation, reasoning, and imagination will be trained. Taking a picture composition as an example, students are asked to observe the environment, the characters, their clothing, their facial expressions, etc. To infer the weather, the possible season, and character traits, to imagine the character's profession, family background, recent experiences, psychological and verbal activities, etc. For example, there are three pictures of 'A Dog Lover': (See Figure Two)

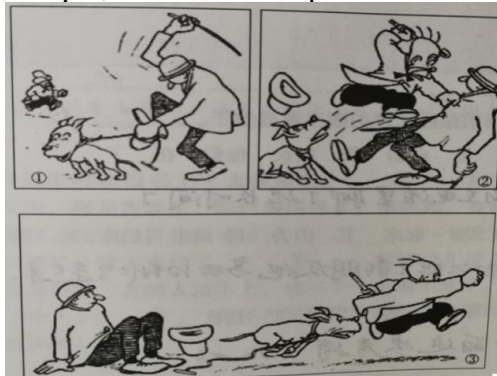


Figure 2: A Dog Lover

For the first picture, the teacher designed 16 questions to guide students in observation, reasoning, and imagination:

A. Questions to cultivate observational skills:

- 1) How many people are there in the picture?
- 2) What else is in the picture?
- 3) What clothes is the man nearby wearing?
- 4) What is the man nearby doing?
- 5) What clothes is the man in the distance wearing?

B. Questions to cultivate reasoning skills:

- 1) What season is it possibly?
- 2) What's the weather like today?
- 3) What place is it possibly?
- 4) Whose dog is this possibly?
- 5) How is the owner of the dog feeling?

C. Questions to cultivate imagination:

- 1) What names do you want to give to the two persons in the picture?
- 2) What is the name of the dog?
- 3) Why is he beating the dog?
- 4) What is he thinking?
- 5) What is he saying?
- 6) What is the man in the distance thinking?

4.3 Evaluation and Analysis of the Second Round of Action

The second round of action were represented and analyzed as follows:

(1) There was a significant positive change in students' attitudes toward writing classes. Through classroom observation and interviews, it was found that the student attendance was obviously better: from the original 4-6 absentees per lesson to only 1-2 absentees; the involvement of students in the classroom increased: the phenomenon of playing with mobile phones in class disappeared. The number of students answering questions increased significantly; the reluctance to return to the classroom after breaks disappeared.

(2) Classroom efficiency was greatly improved: In the first round of 6-week action research, only 4-5 students were willing and able to complete the writing task in class, while in the 16th week most students were willing and able to finish it in class.

(3) The relationship between teachers and students was more harmonious. Through the interview it was found that the teachers were happy with the students' progress and satisfied with the students' efforts; the students' satisfaction with the writing lessons increased, and they believed that the teaching methods were more flexible and everyone made rapid progress. An introverted female student said, "I like discussing with teachers and classmates. We have different opinions, and it is very happy to speak out."

(4) The length of student compositions has increased significantly. Figure 3 is a comparison of the length of the picture-reading composition assignments in the 3rd week, the 9th week, and the 15th week.

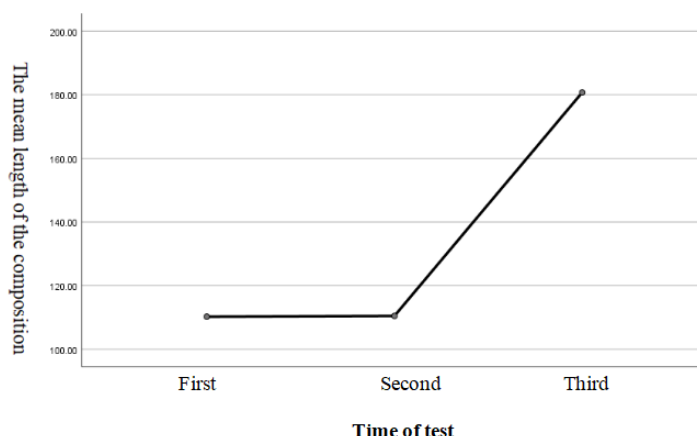


Figure 3: Line Chart of the Length of Three Compositions

The paired-sample t-test was conducted between the third composition and the second. The results showed that the correlation coefficient of the length of the two compositions was 0.959, and the significance value was 0.000, which reached a very significant correlation, and the paired-sample t-test could be performed. The comparison results of the average length of the two compositions are shown in Table 3:

Table 3: The Paired-Sample t-Test of the Second and Third Composition Length

Time of test	mean	SD	t	P (two-tailed)
second	110.48	107.30	-9.211	.000
third	180.71	122.84		

Table 3 shows that the average length of the composition in the third time is significantly higher than that in the second time, and the significance value is 0.000, which is less than 0.01. The length of writing (number of characters) per unit time can reflect the fluency of learners' writing. [4] This shows that the second round of action significantly improved the fluency of learners' writing.

(5) Students' general writing performance has improved significantly. Look at Figure 4:

The paired sample t-test between the third composition score and the second was conducted, and the results showed that the coefficient of the two composition scores was 0.835, and the significance value was 0.000, reaching a very significant level, which is suitable for paired sample t test. Table 4 presents the results of the comparison of the mean values of the two composition grades:

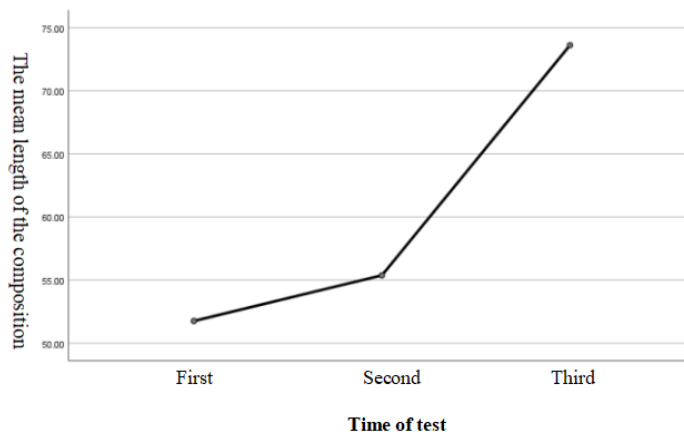


Figure 4: The Comparison of the Three Composition Scores

Table 4: The Paired Sample t-Test between the Second and Third Composition Scores

test	mean	SD	t	P (two-tailed)
second	55.38	30.96	-4.705	.000
third	73.62	20.86		
	73.62	20.86		

Table 4 shows that there was a very significant difference between the average scores of the third composition and the second, and the significance value was 0.000, less than 0.01. This means that the second round of action significantly improved students' general writing ability.

(6)The content of students' composition was more imaginative. For example, in the third picture-reading composition, the students presented 6 different imaginations on the reasons for beating the dog: 1) The dog was too naughty and ran desperately, so the owner couldn't keep up and got angry; 2) The owner just got scolded by the boss , so he was in a bad mood; 3) The owner lost his wallet and was in a bad mood; 4) The dog kept barking, and the owner was angry; 5) The owner didn't really beat the dog, but just wanted to frighten it; 6) The owner had a bad temper. Such rich imaginations were rarely seen in the previous picture-reading compositions during the first round of actions.

4.4 Reflection on the Second Round of Action Research

The general effect of the second round of action was significantly better than that of the first round, and the reflection is as follows:

(1)The most effective and lasting way to improve students' learning motivation is to help learners experience real progress, achieve more confidence in their abilities, and experience a good sense of accomplishment;

(2)Oral output around the composition topic can effectively improve learners' written output. Language productive ability is different from language comprehension ability, and comprehension does not necessarily lead to production[8][9][10]. Oral productive exercises can effectively promote writing skills.

(3)Writing ability is the superposition and blending of basic writing abilities (such as observation, imagination, thinking, etc.))[11] Therefore, guiding students to observe, reason and imagine is the key point of writing instruction.

(4)The writing process is generally divided into pre-writing stage, writing stage and revision stage. In the pre-writing stage, the teacher's guidance is critical for learners to discover themselves [12]. Model composition reading and appreciation are effective teaching methods in the pre-writing stage [13]. However, for international students in China with limited Chinese writing ability, it is more effective to conduct question-and-answer exercises in the target language to help students conceive their writing in the pre-writing stage. Wu Shuang (2011) also found that pre-writing activities in the target language can promote writing [14].

(5)Providing "small steps" as "scaffolding" and for students in carrying out the writing tasks for international students is the key to the success of teaching

5. Conclusion

Action research has the outstanding advantages of strong pertinence and student-friendliness. Through two rounds of teaching action research in four months, the problems encountered in the

teaching of the “Chinese Basic Writing” course for international students in China have been well resolved. According to the results of this study, the following conclusions are reached for the teaching of CL2 (Chinese as a second language) writing: (1). Research-team-based action research is more effective than self-reflection-based action research. New teachers usually encounter difficulties due to lack of rich practical knowledge. In addition to teaching reflection and literature review, the most effective way to improve classroom teaching effectiveness is to proactively invite expert teachers to diagnose their problems and jointly formulate action plans. In this way, new teachers can quickly absorb the practical wisdom of expert teachers and improve their teaching ability. (2). For international students in China, guiding them to conceive the ideas orally before writing through Q & A tasks is an efficient process. The oral Chinese ability of international students in China is usually strong due to the exposure to the Chinese context. In the pre-writing stage, teachers can guide them to produce oral output by constantly asking questions on the writing topics, and at the same time help learners collectively retrieve relevant vocabulary, phrases and sentences. Clear and accurate oral output can lay a good foundation for writing. (3). Fluency exercises are necessary in L2 Chinese writing lessons. Some new teachers mistakenly think that fluency exercises are only used in comprehensive courses, and the teaching goal of writing is to cultivate the written output skills. Skill development follows the law of transforming declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge through extensive practice [15]. Fluency practice is the key to the success of composition teaching. (4). “Small steps” as the scaffolding in L2 Chinese writing lessons are helpful for international students. The whole writing task can be divided into small paragraph writing tasks, which will help to enhance the writing confidence of international students. (5). The cultivation of the cognitive skills such as observing, thinking and imagining is the key to promote L2 Chinese writing skills. When designing classroom tasks, teachers should consider not only the objectives of practicing language skills, but also stimulating students’ thinking and imagination through colorful pre-writing activities and well-designed questions. Once students’ thinking and imagination become active, writing is no longer a hard labor, but an interesting artistic experience.

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