

A Study on the Current Situation and Optimization Path of Junior English Majors' English Writing

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Abstract: English writing, as an important output of English learning, fully reflects the comprehensive ability of English learners. In this study, 227 junior English majors in Guangdong University of Science and Technology were studied on their English writing by means of questionnaires, interviews and writing tests. The study finds that the English writing level of junior English majors is relatively low, with problems such as lack of vocabulary expression, weak grammar knowledge and shortage of discourse construction ability and writing strategies. Meanwhile, students are insufficiently engaged in learning English writing, neglect the importance of English writing, have less interest in writing, and are dissatisfied with English writing in classroom teaching. In view of these, this study analyzes the causes of English writing problems among junior English majors, and then proposes ways to optimize the English writing level at three levels: students, teachers and schools, in order to improve students' English writing level and overall language application ability.

1. Introduction

English writing is a vital part of English language learning, as students express their ideas and demonstrate their mastery of English language through writing ^[1]. However, writing is a practical output activity that needs a combination of English language knowledge and is a difficult skill to master in English learning, and this is no exception for junior English majors. In the process of writing English, a student's writing level and the solidity of his or her English language foundation can be judged from a short composition of about 200 words ^[2]. In other words, the level of students' English writing directly mirrors their comprehensive ability in English words, phrase collocation, grammar knowledge and language expression. Therefore, English writing, as a key indicator of learners' comprehensive ability, has been paid great attention to by teachers and students.

2. Current Situation of English Writing among Junior English Majors

In this study, 227 participants of freshmen and sophomores (the percentage of male and female is 19.82% and 80.18% respectively) from College of Foreign Studies of Guangdong University of Science and Technology were surveyed by questionnaires and writing tests, and 15 students (9 freshmen and 6 sophomores) and 5 teachers teaching English writing were randomly selected for interviews, focusing on students' English writing level, writing learning status, interest in writing, perception of the importance of writing, confidence in writing, and students' satisfaction with English writing class. The results of the questionnaires, interviews and tests show that there are some unsatisfactory problems with English writing among junior English majors.

2.1 Low English Writing Level of Junior English Majors

First, the results of the questionnaire survey indicate 80.82% of the students deem that their English writing level is poor, and even 96.32% of them mention they have a poor grasp of the basics of mechanics (i.e. spelling, hyphenation, case sensitivity, numbers, abbreviations, italics) in English writing. Second, in the interviews of 15 students, 6 interviewees (taking up 40% of total sample size) suggest that they cannot handle English writing well and do not know how to apply relevant writing strategies (e.g. universal sentence patterns, three-paragraph ideas, question-argument-conclusion, etc.) for discourse construction in writing. Third, 87.68 % of the students score less than 70 out of 100 in the English writing test. Fourth, four (making up 80% of total sample size) of the five teachers interviewed feel that students have problems with their English writing in terms of lack of vocabulary, weak grammar and writing strategies. In particular, in the field of vocabulary, junior English majors are prone to some ludicrous Chinglish (Chinese-English), such as “stupig” (a fool), “god words” (myth) and “sexretary” (female secretary). Besides, 3 teachers (achieving 60% of total sample size) state that students are short of a sense of outline when writing in English, do not construct a discourse before writing, and just take up the pen to do the beginning and lack an idea for their writing. All of these above manifest that the current level of English writing among junior English majors is worrying and needs to be improved.

2.2 Junior English Majors' Insufficient Time for English Writing Learning

When it comes to English writing learning, the questionnaire results demonstrate that only 13.3% of students are willing to spend time learning English writing after class. 86.7% of students' English writing training is focused on writing classes, and after class, students are not able to carry out the practice and training in various exam types such as TEM-4 (Test for English Majors-Band 4) and TEM-8 (Test for English Majors-Band 8). At the same time, students' English writing training channels are limited (such as writing classes), and they have not fully utilized internet resources and platforms for English writing training and learning (such as writing online diaries and blogs, which account for 7.88% of students). In addition, among the interviews with 15 students and 5 teachers, 33.33% of the students proclaim that they would engage in English writing learning after class, while the remaining 66.67% of the surveyed students believe their English writing learning only stay in the class and is a passive form of learning. Meanwhile, five interviewed teachers (100%) unanimously announce having two periods of English writing class per week is difficult to ensure that students have enough time to learn English writing, which depends on students' conscious learning and improvement after class. All these data results to some degree prove that junior English majors have significantly insufficient investment in English writing learning, and need to invest more time and energy in English writing training and learning after class.

2.3 Junior English Majors' Lack of Interest in Writing and Negligence for the Importance of English Writing

In the facets of writing interest and awareness of the importance of English writing, the questionnaire results reveal that 72.91% of students urgently need to improve their English writing level only to pass the TEM-4 and TEM-8, not out of their own writing interest and awareness of the importance of English writing. The remaining 27.09% of students are not eager to enhance their English writing level because they are not interested in English writing. In the meantime, among the interviews with 15 students, 53.3% of the surveyed students relate that English writing is a headache and they lack interest in writing, thus they rarely invest too much energy in learning and training of English writing after class. This is also confirmed in the interviews with 5 teachers. Three surveyed teachers (60%) declare that most students in English writing class have a low interest in writing and do not have a long-term and comprehensive understanding of the importance of English writing. In their eyes, the most important thing for students is how to pass the English writing final and make breakthroughs in the writing section of various tests (such as TEM-4 and TEM-8). Here, it can be seen that junior English majors are wanting in interest and motivation in English writing, and their awareness of the importance of English writing should be boosted.

2.4 Junior English Majors' Dissatisfaction with Classroom Teaching of English Writing

In the aspect of English writing teaching, 81.45% of students surveyed in the questionnaire are dissatisfied with it. 50% of students hold that the writing contents in classroom teaching are boring; 30.8% of respondents feel that the teaching methods of the teacher are not flexible, lacking classroom learning activities, teacher-student interaction and communication links; 19.2% of the students also consider 2 periods of English writing class per week is too limited to ensure practice and training in writing. At the same time, in students' interviews, 53.33% of interviewees directly express dissatisfaction with English writing teaching. They reckon that English writing class is a relatively boring course, and the learning outcomes in the classroom teaching are not ideal. Some students (reaching 26.67% of total sample size) even possess a negative attitude towards the effectiveness of English writing class, feeling that the teacher is offering a wishy-washy course. What is more, the majority of students surveyed (achieving 86.67% of total sample size) voice the hope that teachers can make full use of the compositions of TEM-4 and TEM-8 as examples in English writing teaching to teach and apply writing knowledge, in order to appropriately improve students' English writing level and application abilities. Hence, it is not difficult to see that there are still serious problems in the current English writing class of junior English majors, and its teaching and learning effects are not as good as students' expectations, which need promoting.

3. Cause Analysis of English Writing Problems among Junior English Majors

Firstly, the English writing proficiency of junior English majors is comparatively low, mainly due to the shortage of solid basic English knowledge (including vocabulary, grammar, discourse, etc.), which is reflected in students' limited vocabulary, poor spelling ability, weak grammatical concepts, deficient English expression ability, and lack of discourse construction ability, etc. In other words, only students with a solid foundation of English knowledge will be able to excel in learning and improving English writing. Simultaneously, cultural differences between Chinese and English, as well as the influence of the form of Chinese language, also constrain the improvement of English writing proficiency among junior English majors^[3]. Some students have significant traces of native language transfer in their English writing, with a lot of typical Chinglish expressions appearing, indicating that their English writing thinking has not yet been truly

established. What is worse, certain expression structures in English that are different from Chinese language thinking are not easily acquired by students due to negative transfer interference of the mother tongue. They require specialized and purposeful training to be established in the mind (i.e. internalization), which are also the most easily overlooked contents in English writing class ^[4].

Secondly, as for the phenomenon that junior English majors have insufficient investment in learning English writing, which is because many students, after entering university, fail to adapt to the changes in university learning methods, have no learning goals, and are unable to elevate their English writing level. At the same time, the transformation of college students' learning methods involves several issues such as learning planning, pace, content and method. For example, how junior English majors plan their own learning, how to keep up with teachers' classroom teaching progress, how to understand and master knowledge points in class, and how to systematically control the knowledge points and contents of the entire unit as a whole, all these issues require students to conduct the reflection and summary in their learning process, and be willing to invest a lot of time and energy in conscious learning and improve their knowledge level.

Thirdly, junior English majors have a fear of difficulty, lack confidence in English writing, and fail to correctly understand the importance of writing, which are also one of the important reasons for their loss of interest in English writing. Some students opine that learning English writing is not as significant as practicing oral English, and this lack of cognitive thinking can to some extent lead to insufficient motivation for learning English writing, which affects the effectiveness of students' English writing learning ^[5].

Finally, the current English writing teaching for junior English majors is dull and lacks teacher-student interaction and communication. Certain teachers blindly impart theoretical knowledge to students in writing classes, lacking practicality ^[6]. Concurrently, some teachers cannot effectively stimulate students' learning enthusiasm in their teaching. Teachers concentrate on output unilaterally, but students fail to absorb and digest the knowledge they have learned ^[7]. These factors will directly affect the effectiveness of English writing learning for junior English majors.

4. Path to Optimize the English Writing Level of Junior English Majors

4.1 At the Student Level

In the first place, Krashen (1982) pointed out that "reading is a form of writing and an output activity. Adequate input leads to natural output" ^[8]. For junior English majors, engaging in extensive reading and writing will help upgrade the reading and writing skills. Reading can help students construct writing logic, in which students gradually improve their English writing logic by regularly reading English articles and learning from others' writing ideas. For instance, reading foreign journals is beneficial for students to enrich their language use, as the language expression in journals is formal and standard. Long-term reading accumulation will be able to increase the vocabulary and thus perfect the language quality of English learners ^[9]. At the same time, reading can uplift one's thinking. Through extensive reading, students will understand the viewpoints of others' articles, and only then can they have something to express and have a certain idea when conducting English writing.

In the second place, related researches have shown that vocabulary learning can directly promote the improvement of students' English writing proficiency ^[10]. Therefore, junior English majors should memorize and accumulate English words through various ways and means (such as fun repetition, situational memory, contrastive memory, logical memory, etc.), for the sake of expanding their vocabulary, mastering the correct methods of using words, and applying them flexibly, which can ensure the transfer and application of vocabulary in English writing and improve the writing level.

In the third place, many junior English majors have undergone changes in their learning styles after entering university, transitioning from passive learning in high school to active learning in university, without the supervision of teachers and parents. Therefore, for students who cannot adapt well to this change in learning style and are still stuck in the passive learning stage, they will not consciously spend time on learning and find it difficult to enhance their English writing level. In this regard, junior English majors should cultivate self-discipline, improve self-learning ability, change learning attitude, and actively undertake the learning of English writing.

At last, a number of junior English majors in a way have a resistance towards English writing and are not content to engage in writing practice, which will lead to certain quantitative changes and inevitably cause qualitative changes^[11]. From a cognitive perspective, extensive writing training is essential for students to polish up their English writing level. To achieve good output, students need to continuously accumulate knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and writing in the early stages, so as to fulfil the proficiency of English writing.

4.2 At the Teacher Level

Firstly, teachers ought to pay more attention to students' English writing training. For experienced teachers, their writing teaching will not only stay at the textbook level, and the entire approach will not be limited to textbooks. They are more concerned with getting students to take actions and testing their mastery of relevant knowledge in writing practice. Teachers cannot form a skill by simply imparting knowledge without training. In this regard, teachers should combine the contents learned in the English writing class to assign some relevant essay assignments on the online writing platform such as Composition Correction Website (<https://www.pigai.org/>) or Chaoxing Learning Platform (<https://i.chaoxing.com/>), allowing students more opportunities for writing training and practice. Afterwards, the teacher can explain the sample essay to the students, require them to compare their own writing, and then have a collective discussion in class to analyze which students' composition are worth learning and which areas need improvement, which will invisibly promote the students' English writing level greatly.

Secondly, teachers should attach great importance to interactive communication and writing feedback in English writing classes. In the process of writing teaching, teachers should not blindly follow the textbook, but rather focus more on interactive communication with students, understanding their writing weaknesses and conducting targeted and purposeful writing teaching. At the same time, teachers need to emphasize on providing students with writing feedback, after all, teachers' comments on essay writing are more professional and relevant than peer reviews. To some extent, teachers' feedback and comments on students' compositions not only provide students with more learning motivation, but also help them better comprehend their own English writing strengths and weaknesses, which has a positive impact on improving students' English writing proficiency.

Finally, giving more encouragement and praise to students in their creative process is necessary. Writing, as one of the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), is challenging for students to master in mind. A good many of junior English majors turn pale when it comes to writing, and they develop a sense of fear. They believe that English writing is not just about words, grammar, and discourse, but more about a person's writing ideas and textual polishing. For this reason, teachers should encourage students to get involved in English writing in the daily writing teaching. They can enhance students' confidence and courage in English writing by encouraging them to participate in writing competitions or other forms (such as group cooperative learning, teacher feedback, helping students set appropriate learning goals, and attempting to achieve moderate difficulty in English writing tests)^[12]. At the same time, for students' creative works, teachers need to identify the shining points, providing praise and encouragement, so that students

can experience the joy and sense of achievement in writing, and stimulate their motivation for English writing.

4.3 At the school level

For improving the English writing level of junior English majors at the school level, the specific measures are as follows.

First of all, appropriately increasing the English writing learning periods per week and expanding the relevant English writing courses are prominent. These not only guarantee that students have sufficient time to learn English writing, but also supply students with various types of English writing courses for elective learning in order to improve the English writing level.

The second is to set up learning resources related to English writing courses on the online writing platform such as Composition Correction Website (<https://www.pigai.org/>) or Chaoxing Learning Platform (<https://i.chaoxing.com/>), fully utilizing online resources to enlarge students' learning channels for English writing, and achieving an organic combination of on-line and off-line learning. This is of great benefit to students with different English writing levels. After all, online learning resources in today's society can provide effective services for autonomous learners to the maximum extent, meet their personalized learning needs, cultivate their learning abilities, and stimulate their learning enthusiasm ^[13].

The third is to organize more English-related competitions to create a good English learning environment. These competitions are not solely limited to English writing, but can also be related to English listening, speaking, reading and writing competitions (such as speech competitions, debate competitions, drama festivals, reading competitions, etc.). By participating in these competitions or activities, students are in a position to receive sufficient opportunities for English output and input, which will imperceptibly and greatly advance their English proficiency and writing level.

Finally, the school should put more emphases on the English writing level of junior English majors, furnish students with platforms and opportunities to practice their English writing, enhance teachers' focus on students' English writing, and practice the English writing thinking of students, truly improving students' English writing level.

5. Conclusion

In summary, with the development of global economic integration, the writing of English business correspondences and e-mails has become increasingly important. One of the educational goals of English majors is to cultivate students with solid English writing ability and be competent in business communication work. Meanwhile, for junior English majors who have just entered university, writing will be a challenge for them, which requires the joint efforts and devotions of students, teachers, and schools to accomplish the improvement and advancement in the English writing level of junior English majors.

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