The Application of Comprehensive Imitative Writing Strategy in English Writing Teaching

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Abstract. English writing is an important language skill that college students have to acquire, but it is also the weakest link in English learning. Applying comprehensive imitative writing strategy into teaching can help students master vocabulary, syntax, structure, discourse, and develop a linear logical thinking model. Therefore it is of great significance to the improvement of writing ability.

Introduction

English writing is a practice integrated use of English knowledge. Among the five skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, writing is always the weakest link in English learning, even after a lot of training it is also very difficult for students to achieve decent and idiomatic level. In CET and IELTS examinations, Chinese students always receive less than a perfect writing score, and most of them can only get half marks [1]. Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers should fully analyze students’ writing problems and organize writing exercises following the course of “guided reading--imitative writing--creative writing”. On the basis of that, to help students construct a framework of vocabulary, syntax, structure, discourse so as to improve their writing performances more effectively.

In the practice, teacher should firstly provide instructive reading materials for students, next make a thorough and penetrating analysis of the materials, then assign corresponding writing tasks. This method not only ensures the pertinence of the exercises, but provides students with necessary vocabulary and sentence patterns, and furthermore help students overcome difficulties and cultivate interest in writing. In the light of actual situation of our college, we have chosen the New Concept English as the teaching material for English writing in the past years, and selected 36 classical articles as model essays for students to imitate. These articles covers the narrative, expository, argumentative prose, etc. and provide students a full range of writing templates.

Imitative Writing at Lexical Level

English writing first involves selection of words. According to Wang Lifei and Zhang Yan’s study (2007), the verbs like ‘think’, ‘make’, ‘use’, ‘know’, ‘want’, ‘get’ etc. are used too frequently in Chinese students’ writing, and many of the nouns that collocate with ‘get’ don’t go together; while the use of verbs such as ‘see’, ‘feel’, ‘show’ and ‘believe’ is inadequate [2]. The verb usage clearly shows informal colloquial tendency and monotonicity, which reflects the breadth and depth of verbal vocabulary is not enough [3]. Furthermore, affected by the negative transfer of Chinese, students often run through the whole article with very few nouns or pronouns, and some students even prewrite an article in Chinese, then translate it into English literally without caring about word substitution, context coherence and syntactic changes, thus the Chinglish phenomenon is inevitable.

In order to help students eliminate the negative influence of Chinese thinking on English writing, teachers should try their best to instruct students in feeling ‘the beauty of varieties of English’, and these kinds of examples can be found everywhere in New Concept English. One of the most typical texts is the Lesson 59, Collecting, in book 3.

People tend to amass possessions, sometimes without being aware of doing so. Indeed they can have a delightful surprise when they find something useful which they did not know they owned.
Those who never have to move house become indiscriminate collectors of what can only be described as clutter. They leave unwanted objects in drawers, cupboards and attics for years, in the belief that they may one day need just those very things. As they grow old, people also accumulate belongings for two other reasons, lack of physical and mental energy, both of which are essential in turning out and throwing away, and sentiment. Things owned for a long time are full of associations with the past, perhaps with relatives who are dead, and so they gradually acquire a value beyond their true worth.

In this paragraph, the author pointed out that people inadvertently became collectors no matter whether they realized it. Although the whole paragraph has only 134 words, it has given full consideration to the substitution and change of vocabulary, for instance, verbs that indicate ‘collecting’: (1) amass, (2) own, (3) become collectors of, (4) accumulate; terms for ‘collection’: (1) possessions, (2) objects, (3) belongings, (4) things; nouns indicating ‘value’: (1) value, (2) worth. The use of these synonyms fully avoids the rigidity and tedium of the writing.

Another example is the Lesson 32, A Lost Ship, in New Concept English book 3. In this text, there is a section to describe maritime salvage:

The captain of the Elkor ordered his men to salvage as much as possible from the wreck. Nothing of value was found, but the numerous items which were brought to the surface proved to be of great interest. From a heavy gun that was raised, the captain realized that the ship must have been a cruiser.

To express the meaning of ‘retrieve’, the author used ‘salvage’, ‘be brought to the surface’ and ‘be raised’ three forms of expression. And these different expressions undoubtedly make the article more vivid and readable.

Through the analysis of these two examples, students can find that in the same paragraph or article, if the same concept is repeated, westerners used to dig up and find its synonyms or similar expressions, making them appear alternately in paragraphs or sections. This writing technique can not only make the article more expressive but also bring articles up to a new level. With such examples and guidance, students will consciously do their best to expand vocabulary and gradually avoid the repeated use of a single word.

**Imitative Writing at Sentential Level**

Sentences are the foundation of an article, and a large amount of idiomatic sentences will add color to it. But according to statistics, Chinese students often excessively use ‘make + object + complement’ structure [4], and ‘do + the + V-ing’ structure in their writings [5]. Compared with native speakers’ writings, the average sentence length of Chinese students’ writings is shorter; sentence structure tends to be simple [3]; and the use of the passive voice is obviously insufficient [6]. Meanwhile the compactness of sentence is poor, and the transformation between long sentences and short sentences is monotonous. These problems with Chinese characteristics reflect the cultural and psychological differences between English and Chinese languages. Therefore in the writing exercise teachers should consciously instruct students to compare English and Chinese languages, including grammar, morphology, wording, structure and so on, so that students can better follow the patterns to organize their own language.

For example, in the Lesson 71 of New Concept English Book 2, there is a passage to describe the Big Ben in London: When you visit London, one of the first things you will see is Big Ben, the famous clock which can be heard all over the world on the B.B.C. If the House of Parliament had not been burned down in 1834, the great clock would never have been erected. Big Ben takes its name from Sir Benjamin Hall.

After analyzing the grammatical points in this sentence, it is not difficult to extract such a set of sentences: When..., one of the first things...is..., which can... If...had done..., ...would have done...takes its name from...

With this pattern, students can combine their own experience to produce a new version. And one of them goes like this: ‘When you visit Shanghai, one of the first things you will see is the Oriental...
Pearl TV Tower, which can be seen from the whole city in clear days. If the Shanghai World Financial Center were not erected in 2008, the great tower would rank the tallest building in Shanghai. The Oriental Pearl TV Tower took its name from the classical poem of Bai Juyi, Pipa Xing.

Another example is the first paragraph of Lesson 29, Funny or not, in New Concept English Book 3: ‘Whether we find a joke funny or not largely depends on where we have been brought up. The sense of humor is mysteriously bound up with national characteristics. A Frenchman, for instance, might find it hard to laugh at a Russian joke. In the same way, a Russian might fail to see anything amusing in a joke which would make an Englishman laugh to tears.’

It is inescapably clear that the main trunk of the paragraph is ‘whether…or not largely depends on…bound up with…for instance…in the same way…fail to…’. On the basis of that, students can easily make sentences like ‘Most drinkers believe whether a type of beer tastes good or not largely depends on water quality. While the water quality is bound up with geographical environment. For instance, the world-famous Tsingtao Beer is made from Laoshan mineral water. In the same way, Suntory fails to go further in China market because it just used purified tap water.’

Through the imitation of typical examples, students can gradually develop a skill to extract key points from complex information, and then prefabricate a large number of language modules in their mind. When encountering with similar topics or environments, they can rapidly generate a number of new sentences in different contexts. And with the accumulation of such language modules, students can easily transfer them into spoken language, and thereby promote their comprehensive language ability.

Imitative Writing at Textual Level

The highest level of imitative writing is discourse writing. At this stage students are required to produce idiomatic sentences that conform to the thinking and expression habits of English people, and take notice of the cohesion between sentences and paragraphs. Meanwhile, they should try to master the linear logic thinking mode in English language, and create a psychological model of English writing on the basis of genre knowledge.

In CET and IELTS examinations, the argumentative writing has always been the main type of composition. Therefore, it is an important task for teachers to help students master the style of argumentative writing and the pyramid structure to demonstrate their ideas. In the New Concept English, there are many typical passages for students to imitate and learn, such as the following section in Lesson 23 Book 3, One man’s meat is another man’s poison:

**Topic sentence** → People become quite illogical when they try to decide what can be eaten and what cannot be eaten.

**Supporting sentences** → If you lived in the Mediterranean, for instance, you would consider octopus a great delicacy. You would not be able to understand why some people find it repulsive. On the other hand, your stomach would turn at the idea of frying potatoes in animal fat—the normally accepted practice in many northern countries.

**Concluding sentence** → The sad truth is that most of us have been brought up to eat certain foods and we stick to them all our lives.

The author puts forward his central idea at the very beginning of the text, then supports his idea with two specific examples, after that summarizes his point with a concise conclusion. From this example, students can gain a hint of the tightness of logical thinking and the structural coherence of English language. On the basis of that, teachers can expound the thinking mode of westerners and the format of five-paragraph essay. When students get familiar with the pyramid model of argument, they can easily apply it into the CET and IELTS tests. For example, the composition title of CET-4
test in June, 2014 is the importance of reading literature. Students can unfold their discussions after
the above model.

Topic paragraph → Literature is acknowledged as the most precious product of human
civilization and wisdom. So teachers always ask their students to
read as many as literary works.

Supporting paragraph → It is of great significance for us to appreciate literature due to the
following reasons. Firstly, a good literature can get you to know a life
experience through the eyes of someone other than yourself. The
more experience you gain, the more knowledgeable you are. Secondly,
a good literature allows you to learn about history in a personalized
way. The stories told in the works can act as mirrors and help you
adjust your own behaviors.

Concluding paragraph → In short, literature is indispensable in our life. We, students, should catch
our time to read more literatures.

Conclusion

The great master of English language, Lin Yutang, once said, "The only way to learn English is to
imitate and recite. That means to rewrite the whole sentence after model and recite it over again
until get it off by heart." From here we can see imitative writing is an important way to promote
language proficiency, which learners must attach importance to. Meanwhile, imitation exercises
must combine with reading and reciting. And only after internalizing English thinking patterns and
expression habits can students produce high quality English compositions.

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