

A Study of Assessment Mechanism and Training Approach of College English Writing through Sharing & Improving Online Learning Community

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ABSTRACT : *The article firstly reviews the main features of four prevalent teaching approaches of English writing, and then introduces a new approach titled Online Four-dimension Assessment Mechanism which fulfills four types of assessment in sequence including self-assessment, peer assessment, teachers' assessment, and public assessment and presentation. The great advantages of this assessment mechanism lie in its timeliness, its multi-dimension interaction, its open and equal dialogue, and its seamless English teaching and learning practice as well. All these assessment procedures are accomplished through Sharing & Improving online learning community. In the final part, the article elaborates on the effective practice of online assessment mechanism by means of a real assessment case.*

KEYWORDS: *Assessment mechanism, college English writing, online learning community, Sharing & Improving, training approach*

I. INTRODUCTION

College English writing in China, for a rather long period, has become the great burden of English teachers who didn't have ample time to fulfill the task of writing assessment with heavy teaching assignments. At present, most of English teachers cannot correct all their students' compositions and provide a timely feedback, which makes them unable to focus on students' writing process and individual writing improvement. As far as the students are concerned, they lose interest in English writing owing to delayed or neglected assessments from teachers; they develop the habit of reluctance to remodify their compositions, even making the same errors repeatedly. In view of this negative situation, English teachers and college students have to reconsider the importance of college English writing and search for the solutions to the difficulties of teachers' assessment in writing and the decline of student's passion for writing. On the macro level, the rapid development of economic globalization and multicultural communication demand the higher linguistic skills of modern talents, and in particular, the skill in oral and writing aspects. In terms of professional point of view, English writing skill is the fundamental basis of other linguistic skills in speaking, listening, and reading. The famous English professor of Beijing University, Li Funing, once said that every course is a writing course. As a result, the college English teachers are absolutely responsible for changing traditional writing patterns and exploring more effective teaching strategies in English writing in order to tackle this severe writing problem.

II. THE EVOLVEMENT OF TEACHING APPROACHES IN COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF NEW TRAINING THROUGH ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

2.1 The evolvement of Chinese teaching approaches in English writing

The Chinese English writing history can be dated back to the 1960s of 20th century. The product-based approach is prevalent in that period, which holds that learning is a kind of operational behavior, and the education is several forceful arrangements to shape students' behaviors. According to this approach, English teachers emphasize the pattern drills training and the rhetoric operation. They pursue accuracy and exactness of vocabulary and grammatical structures, and the proper organization of the whole passage. This teaching method guided by behaviorism goes for standard writing norms leading to mechanic and stereotyped writing products without creativity and individuality. The process-based approach, the second one being popular in the following decade, bases on the communicative theory and stresses the writers' interactive principle. This method is composed of such processes as pre-writing activities, the primary manuscript, self-correction, teacher's correction and public evaluation. All these processes are intervened together, influencing mutually. Teacher is the main character in the whole process, guiding the students' writing directions.

This approach manifests the principle of the writer's subjective status and the teacher's guiding role, which can bring forth the writer's writing potential in some degrees, developing their thinking capability simultaneously. But the weak point of it is that the teacher is still the symbol of standard answer and this will restrict the performance of writers' free creativity partly. The genre-based teaching approach comes to be the main stream in the middle period of 80s which include three processes: analysis of models, imitative writing and independent writing. The approach considers writing as a kind of social activities, but the restriction of the genre-based approach possibly leads to prescriptivism in teaching activity, and at last, the students' writings reflect the embarrassing result that different writings have the similar or the same writing styles. [1] These three teaching approaches have distinguished theoretical bases, possessing different advantages and disadvantages. Based upon their benefits there comes the forth one that is the process-genre approach maintaining the serious requirements for choice of words from the product-based approach, the positive interaction effects from the process-based approach, and the discourse awareness from the genre-based teaching approach. This integrated approach can inspire the writers' hidden active power and writing potential, but it cannot be applied to the students with relatively lower level and in big class more than 40 students. Table 1 elaborates the detailed comparisons among these four teaching approaches.

Table 1: The Comparative Study of Different Teaching Approaches in Writing [2] [3]

Types of approach	Times	Theoretical foundation	Writing procedures	Training emphasis
Product-based approach	In 1960s	Behaviorism	Familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing, free writing.	The accurate use of vocabulary, sentence structures, cohesive devices.
Process-based approach	In 1970s	Communication Theory	Prewriting, drafting, revising, editing.	To develop the students' writing potential with teachers' guidance
Genre-based approach	In the middle of 1980s	Genre and Genre Analysis Theory	Model essay analysis, imitative writing, independent writing	To introduce different kinds of writing, to master genres of writing and to achieve communicative goal.
Process-genre approach	In 1990s	Integration of above theories	Demonstration and analysis, imitative analysis, skill training, independent writing	To emphasize the usage of the communicative approach in writing, to put writing activity in social context, and to maintain the serious requirements of vocabulary and sentence structures.

2.2 The theoretical foundation of new teaching approach under network environment through online learning community

According to Krashen's points of view, tremendous language input leads to meaningful language transformation, which indicates the significance of adequate information input for writing course. Under the network environment, there are abundant writing resources with so many excellent writing examples for learners to analyze and imitate. Meanwhile, teachers can assign various forms of composition to train students' writing abilities, and this enhancement of information input reinforces the content-centered language activities. [4] [5]

The feedback or the assessment of English writing plays the vital role in EFL. Recently, this feedback has developed to multiple ones including teacher feedback, peer feedback, conferencing feedback and computer-mediated feedback. [6]As the computer and network are applied into the educational field, online learning community and network platform interaction have sprung up across the country. More and more students are accustomed to interact with their teachers and classmates in English to exchange their ideas and share their experiences in English learning. This new training patter of English writing utilizes the network technology into writing practice, realizing the digitalization of learning resources.

III. ESTABLISHMENT AND PRACTICE OF ONLINE FOUR-DIMENSION ASSESSMENT MECHANISM AND TRAINING APPROACH OF ENGLISH WRITING

3.1 The online four-dimension assessment mechanism of college English writing: from theoretical perspective

With the network technology and platform being applied into foreign language teaching practice widely and deeply, the authors begin to consider the establishment of online four-dimension assessment mechanism and training approach of English writing. Sharing & Improving online learning community (that is the name of an English QQ group) is the supporter or the platform to operate this assessment mechanism. This online assessment and training approach is composed of four parts: the first part is learning and drafting including learning the basic theories of English writing, teaching approaches and making the composition models. The project members select 80 compositions in different levels ranging from band 4, band 6 to professional writings from their students. After selection, the project members or online learning community members fulfill the tasks of assessment which is composed of four steps. The first step is self-assessment, the students have to correct their own writings; the second step is peer assessment, the self-assessed compositions will be uploaded to group sharing for peer assessment; the third step is teachers' assessment, the peer-assessed compositions will be given serious and rigid assessment by community teachers. Different teachers will assess the compositions together, giving a more proper and justified assessment from various aspects; the fourth step is the public assessment and presentation.

The final composition will be demonstrated in public, and anyone can put forward the further advice for its improvement. If there is no any suggestion for correction, the composition can be considered as one of the model composition in English Writing Courseware. The second part of this new writing teaching approach is interactive training and practice among students. According to learning from model compositions in English Writing Courseware, QQ group members and other students begin writing practice under the principle of four-dimension mechanism. It takes so long time to fulfill each composition's assessment, but this kind of writing practice will bring forth profound influences on students' future writing. Apart from that, every community member's assessment will be exhibited in QQ group at any moment, which implies that anyone can obtain the meaningful writing education and direction from reading others' assessments. The third part is the reflection and improvement of this mechanism and training approach. Sharing & Improving online learning community should realize its functions of assisting their community members in assessing and improving English writing, adopting flexible and versatile forms to implement the concept of cooperative team learning. Based on three processes of mechanism, the final part aims at reflecting the strong and weak points of the mechanism in order to better this new approach and draw up an appropriate assessment mechanism corresponding to the students' writing abilities and demands.

3.2 The practice of online four-dimension assessment mechanism and training approach of English writing

Sharing and Improving online learning community was established on 19th, October, 2013. Although it was only operated for only a short period, it carried out a series of interactive activities in English writing and English teaching, which helped students go into a new frontier of English learning and writing. For example, Howe Chou (a freshman in Liaoning Police Academy majoring in Criminal Science and Technology) benefited a lot from this online assessment mechanism and training approach. Figure 1 and Figure 2 are the screenshots of interaction between English teachers and him in QQ group. He uploaded his recent writing to Sharing & Improving on November 2, 2013, A Letter to My Best Friend. And English teacher Helen gave him very precise and thoughtful assessment only one day later.



Fig 1: A student member Howe Chou is uploading his writing for assessment to Sharing & Improving (November 2, 2013)

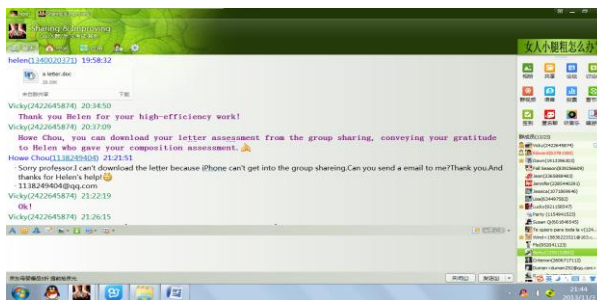


Fig 2: English teacher Helen is uploading her assessment for Howe Chou's writing (November 3, 2013)

The following is the complete assessment from Helen's assessment for A Letter to My Best Friend.

Dear Kevin,

It's not a long time from last we met two years ago. But it's really a long time for me. (Firstly, the two sentences can be combined into one, because the beginning sentence should be a complicated one to show your writing capacity as well as your fluent thinking in English which will leave a good impression. Secondly, the first sentence is typical chin English. My advice: How time flies! Two years has passed since we departed! But it seems a long time for me.) I miss you so much that I dreamed about you many times. I'm sorry that I should have written to you more earlier. (Delete "I'm sorry" OR "I should have written" should be "I didn't write". Also, it's not more earlier, but much earlier) My dear friend, how about your new school life? Do you get used to the new environment? And do you get well with your new friends? There are so many questions I want to ask you. In a word, may the happiness be with you. (The last sentence, which is your best wish, is not the occlusion of the first part. Instead, the emphasis should be on your care to her. So I think the simple sentence *Are you OK* is better.) It's no fun to think the truth that we have go (gone) a (delete) different directions. Every now and then I remember the days that (when) we got ready (were preparing) for the NMET, we hung out on the same corner, we were together bit by bit (hanging out together). I am all choked up. But the life always marches forward. We also should march forward courageously! I firmly believe that no matter how long (far) you go, your friends will watch you and support you silently in the distance. (The subject changes suddenly from the first person to the second person!) The last, give you a word: A man dies often as he loses a friend. But we gain new life by new contacts, new friends. Live in the moment, cherish the present. (The last paragraph is usually used to express the writer's expectations and good wishes, but not serious advice.) Best wishes to you.

Howe Chou

Conclusion: Letters serve different purposes and functions. When writing a letter, you should be clear what your letter is about. This one is only to express your missing the old friend and good old days. So you can recall more details of the past to show your feelings. Perhaps it's really a long time you haven't written in English. Practice more!

After reading Helen's high-efficiency work of assessemnt, we concluded that Helen applied integrated assessment approach to focus not only on the precise usage of the vocabulary and sentence structures, but also on the writing's communicative functions, such as a letter's function. From a professional perspective, Helen's assessment is very qualified, offering other English teachers in Sharing & Improving a very beneficial assessment model. At the same time, the freshman Howe Chou can obtain abundant enlightments concerning English writing. When he uploads his second writing for teacher's assessment, he won't make the same errors with the first letter, and instead, he will consider the communicative functions of his writing and use the proper ways of writing. Here, the authors merely extract this writing assessment as a typical example to prove the effective operation of online four-dimension assessment mechanism. As a matter of fact, more and more students contribute their products of writing to QQ group for peer and teachers' assessment, and they are bound to gain the great harvest in English writing by means of online writing interaction with other members in the near future.

IV. CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

To ensure a high-quality writing product and a high-efficiency writing assessment, online English writing assessment must be paid attention to and applied into the practical use in and after our English class activities. This new teaching and assessing approach inherits distinct merits of four teaching approaches, focusing on the integrant and integral elements of writing, and at the same time, performing the basic communicative function of writing. What's more, this online teaching approach reveals the formidable advantages over the previous ones, such as, its timeliness, its multi-dimension interaction, its open dialogue, its team cooperative spirits, and its seamlessness in English teaching as well. With network being closely connected with our educational space, this teaching approach relying on network and information technology is certain to replace or complement the traditional approaches. As this new mechanism sorts itself out, it will become more prevalent among English teachers in China, and more and more online learning communities will spring up committing themselves to the improvement of College English teaching and writing.

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