A Blending Approach in Technology Integrated ESL Writing Instruction

Ying Wang

College of Foreign Languages, Chongqing University of Science and Technology, Chongqing, China

Wying775@163.com

Chia-Jung Chung

Department of Teacher Education, California State University, Sacramento, US

cchung@csus.edu

Esther Hattingh

Department of Teacher Education, California State University, Sacramento, US

ehattingh@csus.edu

Abstract: One of the current trends in educational technology is the development of ESL writing software and Web 2.0 tools. The desired process-oriented ESL writing instruction allows learners to establish a good writing habit and develop their ideation and individuation. The process-oriented ESL writing instruction involves multiple and repeated steps that compel the learners to closely consider the topic, language, purpose for writing, and social reality of an audience. However, in the traditional EFL class, the process approach is difficult to implement due to the big class size, limited face-to-face time and teachers' workload. This study aims to solve the problem and improve the efficiency of the process-oriented ESL instruction by applying the blended use of information technologies. A mixed-method approach is applied with writing analysis, survey, and interview used for triangulation. The design and the impact of the model, and the students' perception will be explored and presented in this paper.

Background

Writing skill is one of the most difficult but important skills in ESL. To take Chinese ESL learners as an example, writing skill is the weakest of all English skills (Huang, 2006: 13). Whereas, the output hypothesis (Swain 1995) claims that the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes part of the process of second language learning. Other studies also reveal that writing competence improvement helps improve listening and speaking competence (Wang, 2000: 210; Dong, 2003: 5). Therefore, ESL teachers make great effort in writing instruction and view it as a breakthrough to promote students' English competence. Nevertheless, based on an analysis on Chinese college students' English test paper, Yang (2012: 294) finds that there are still numerous wrong expressions in most students' writing. Logic is lacked between paragraphs and between sentences. Low efficiency is an everlasting problem puzzling ESL teachers for years. To solve it, continual instructional practices are conducted.

The product approach and the process approach are the two major approaches applied in writing instruction. Contrasted with the product approach, which is characterized by direct grammar teaching, imitating model texts, centralization of authority and consideration of only

the final product, the process approach views writing as a recursive mental cognitive process, social interactive process and creative thinking process, laying emphasis on the autonomy and the interaction of the students in the writing process. The process approach advocates that writing should be learned through the writing process itself and the focus is on the development and expression of ideas in order to develop the students' discovering, analysing and solving problems capability, and thereby to improve their writing ability (Zamel, 1976; Raimes, 1979; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Berlin, 1982; Hayes and Flowers, 1983). To implement the process approach, multiple steps are involved. Peregoy & Boyle (2001) proposed five phases: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. These interrelated and repeated phases compel the student to closely consider the topic, language, purpose for writing, and social reality of an audience, which benefits students more in the establishment of a good writing habit and in the development of their ideation and individuation. Since the process approach took on the stage of writing instruction, dramatic changes in writing classrooms have been brought about (Yang, 1995). Some scholars described the shift from the product approach to the process approach as a paradigm shift (Hairston, 1982 in Yang, 1995). However, many teachers find it difficult to implement the approach in their EFL writing instruction practice because in the process-oriented writing classes, multiple drafts of prewriting, writing and revising, a large quantity of student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions have become common practices which demand much more course hours, smaller classes, and more teachers' devotion, which are not always available in reality. The heavy workload caused by grading and giving feedback to the multiple drafts in the process-oriented approach makes some ESL teachers fail to give effective feedback in time, which even enforce them to make a concession to the low efficient tradition approach. In the present study, the researchers attempt to explore the solution to the problem by integrating information technology into the process-oriented ESL writing instruction in an effective way, expecting with the help of technology, the feasibility and efficiency of the process approach implementation are to be promoted, thereby students' writing competence is to be improved and teachers' workload is to be reduced.

Over the past decades, information technology has provided strong support to enhance ESL teaching and learning. As for ESL writing, current researches mainly focus on the use of variety of ESL writing software, Web 2.0 tools and course management system. The impact of technology on ESL writing teaching and learning are also examined in the empirical studies. Although the findings are inconsistent, lots of studies suggest that the implementation of technology has positive effect on ESL writing. Grant & Ginther (2000), Jarvis, Grant, Bikowskia, & Ferris (2003) reveal the use of writing software applications in students' texts are positively correlated with the text quality or L2 proficiency. Witte (2007) notes a blog-writing program not only improves students' writing interests, but also helps them acquire some sort of global citizenship. The results of the studies by Yang (2004), and the studies by Elliot and Mikulas (2004) show students' positive attitudes toward the automated essay grader tool. Some researchers note the use of computer programs to enhance learner autonomy in second language learning, particularly in the field of ESL/EFL writing (Milton, 1997; Williams, 2005). Cai (2008) prove that the corpus-based teaching method is superior to the traditional one in terms of

cultivating learner interest in writing and improving their writing ability.

Model Design

Based on the development of technology and the findings of the previous researches, the researchers of this study select information technologies according to the curriculum requirement, students' features and the teaching environment, and blend them to design a holistic process-oriented technology integrated ESL writing model. In this model, the main appliances are:

- English Writing Learning Database (EWLD): a learning database developed by TSinghua University and published by Higher Education Press. It contains 18 genres of writings which are written by excellent Chinese college students and reviewed by professors in a tripartite evaluation model---surface corrections, interactive notes and professor's comments & suggestions. It is an open database with statistic function so it can be used as a self evaluation tool. The user can input their own writing to the database and get the statistics data of the essay, including tokens and types of words, ratio of tokens/types, word classification, sentences, paragraphs, characters, sentence mean length, word mean length.
- Microsoft Word : a word processor developed by Microsoft.
- Automated Essay Scoring Tools (E-scorer, E-commentator)

E-grader: a software developed by TSinghua University and published by Higher Education Press. It helps teachers correct papers written by students and, more importantly, gives students feedback about their work. You click the mouse and E-Scorer will evaluate writing pieces according to the criteria you have chosen. (Source: E-grader)

E-commentator: a software developed by TSinghua University and published by Higher Education Press. It facilitates reviewers' work in paper reading and generates comments automatically. You click the mouse and E-Commentator will generate comments and suggestions according to the criteria you have chosen. (Source: E-commentator)

- Web 2.0 tools such as computer-mediated social communication tools (Tencent QQ, email and blog).

Tencent QQ: popularly known as QQ, developed by Tencent Holdings Limited, provides total solution for Internet-based instant messaging (IM) platform. It supports comprehensive basic online communication functions, including text messaging, video and voice chat as well as online (offline) file transmission. QQ Zone is blog. As of 20 March 2013, there are 798.2 million active QQ accounts, with a peak of 176.4 million simultaneous online QQ users. (from http://www.tencent.com/en-us/ps/imservice.shtml, and from "Tencent Announces 2012 Fourth Quarter and Annual Results". PR Newswire. 20 March 2013. Retrieved Feb. 2, 2014).

The appliances are utilized corresponding to the steps of the process approach, which is demonstrated in Figure 1.

The step of prewriting focuses on input and planning. The teacher presents the courseware which is posted on blog, QQ Zone before class, explains the key points and assigns model essays for students to study, while students get input from the teacher's internet social communication tools such as QQ, the most popular Web 2.0 tool in China, and model essays study based on the

writing corpus, and then plan the content and structure of their essays. As Krashen (1984, p61) stated, "According to current theory, we acquire language in only one way: when we understand messages in that language, when we receive comprehensible input", effective input is supposed to be comprehensible input. This is the reason why EWLD developed by TSinghua University is adopted as the resource of input----it contains the advanced contemporary learners' essays carefully revised by the professor, which are just right the comprehensible input.
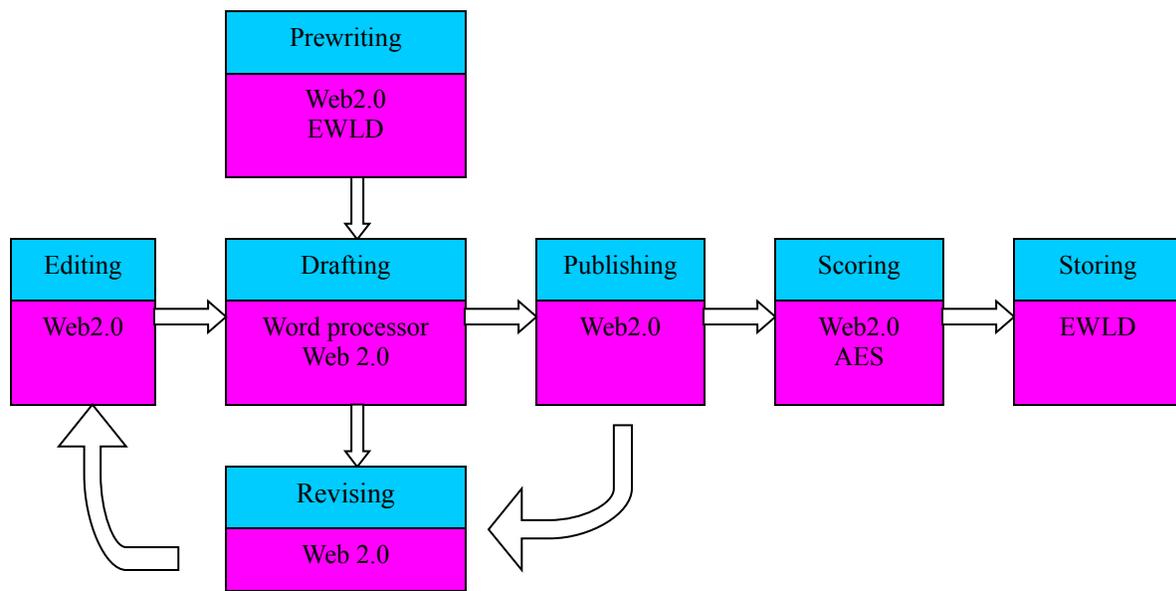

Figure 1: A Technology Integrated ESL Writing Model Based on the Process Approach

In the step of drafting, students apply word processor, Microsoft Word, to finish the first draft. The functions of word processing, such as spell-and-grammar-checking, block moving, block deleting, formatting, storage of information, facilitate text generating, revising, and editing more than pen-based writing. During this session, they also utilize synchronous social communication tool, QQ Chat to ask the teacher or the peers for help.

When the first draft is finished, students publish it on the blog, QQ Zone, for peers and the teacher, mainly for peers, to revise and get feedback, as according to the theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed by Vygotsky, which is defined as, "…the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978: 86), the peer assistance is important in the solution of tasks and in the development of cognition.

In the next step, editing or redrafting, students draft an optimized essay based on the peers' and the teacher's feedback.

Then they publish the second draft. Revising and editing are repeated. The final draft is emailed to the teacher, who applies automated essay scoring(AES) tool to grade students' work. Finally, students put their essays into the open EWLD, using it as an e-portfolio to store and self-

evaluate their own development in writing class.

Methodology

The present study is proceeding in Chongqing University of Science and Technology (CQUST). Three classes, about 150 Chinese undergraduates, are the subjects. A mixed-method approach is applied with writing analysis, survey, and interview used for triangulation. The process-oriented technology integrated ESL writing instruction model is implemented in the writing classes. Writing analysis is conducted to detect the impact of the model implementation on the students' writing development. Quantitative survey and qualitative interview are conducted to explore the learners' and instructors' perception of the instruction model.

Current Findings and Future Directions

Although the study is in the process, the following findings are obtained from the preliminary analysis based on the researchers' observation and the students' and the teachers' response in interview: (a) students' learning motivation in writing class is promoted, they are more interested in writing class and try their best in fulfilling every writing task since they're required to publish their writing in the blog, QQ Group Zone for peers and the teacher to review and get instant feedback from them, (b) via Web 2.0 tools, students are given more opportunities to exchange ideas with peers and the teacher, and to give or get feedback to or from peers and the teacher directly and conveniently, both in class or out of class, without time or place limitation, (c) students write more in the writing class as all students have more than two drafts for one writing task, instead of the only final draft, (d) students read more and get more comprehensible input through reading the sample writings in EWLD and the peers' writing in the blog, QQ Group Zone, (e) revising peers' writing facilitates students' comprehension of the writing skills, such as the structure design, the rhetorical devices, the correct form of sentences and words as they're required to review peers' writing considering all aspects of writing skills, (f) teachers save much time and energy in revising and scoring students' essays so that they devote more time and energy in course planning, and (g) students' autonomy is improved as the writing class shifts from teacher-centred to students-centred, from centralization of authority to collaborative learning, and students have more introspection and evaluation on their own writing development with EWLD.

In the next spring semester, further studies on the effectiveness and the efficiency of the blending technology integrated approach in the ESL writing are to be done. The following research questions are expected to be answered with the data got in the empirical study: 1) does the blending technology integrated approach help ESL learners improve their English writing capacity more effectively than the traditional paper-mediated model in the same instruction duration? 2) what is the impact of the technology integrated approach on learners' learning autonomy development? 3) What are the teachers' and the learners' perception about the approach. In addition, some challenges or problems arisen in the research need to be further researched. For example, how to supervise students' free topic-irrelative chat via QQ chatting tool in writing class? Should more Web 2.0 tools be applied in writing classes?

References

Berlin, J.A. (1982). Contemporary composition: The major pedagogical theories. *College English*, 44(8), 765-777.

Cai, S.L. (2008). An empirical study on corpus-based English writing instruction. *Foreign Language Education*, 29(6), 61-68.

Dong, Y. F. (2003). Giving priority to reading and writing in Chinese English class. *Foreign Language World*. 1, 2-6.

Elliot, S., & Mikulua, C. (2004). The impact of MyAccess! use on student writing performance: A technology overview and four studies. *Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, C.A.*

Flower, L. & Hayes, J. R. (1981). Plans that guide the composing process. In C. H. Frederiksen & J. F. Dominic (Eds.), *Writing: The nature, development and teaching of written communication. Volume 2: Writing: process, development and communication* (pp.39 - 58). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Grant, L., & Ginther, A. (2000). Using computer-tagged linguistic features to describe L2 writing differences. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 9, 123-145.

Hayes, J.R. and Flower L.(1983). Uncovering cognitive processes in writing: An introduction to protocol analysis. In P. Mosenthal, L .Tamar and S.A. Walmsley (eds.). *Research in Writing: Principles and Methods* (pp. 207-220). New York: Longman.

Huang, Y.S. (2006). The good essay is"written"out. *Foreign Language World*. 5, 13-16.

Jarvis, S., Grant, L., Bikowskia, D., & Ferris, D. (2003). Exploring multiple profiles of highly rated learner compositions. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12(4), 377-403.

Krashen, S. D. (1984). Immersion: Why it works and what it has taught us. *Language and Society, Special Issue*, 12, 61–64.

Milton, J. (1997). Providing computerized self-access opportunities for the development of writing skills. In P. Benson, & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 237-263), London: Longman.

Peregoy, S. F. & Boyle, O. F. (2001). *Reading, writing, & learning in ESL (3rd Ed)*. New York, NY: Addison. Wesley Longman, Inc.

Raimes, A. (1979). *Problems and Teaching Strategies in ESL Composition*. Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Swain, M. (1995). Three Functions of Output in Second Language Learning. In Cook , G. & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.). *Principle and Practice in Applied Linguistics* (pp. 125-144). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wang, C. M., Niu, R. Y., Zheng, & X. X. (2000). Improving English through writing. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 32(3): 207-212.

Williams, J. (2005). *Teaching writing in second and foreign language classrooms*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Witte, S. (2007). That' s online writing, not boring school writing: Writing with blogs and the talkback project. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. 51(2), 92-96.

Yang Y. L. (1995), "Trends in the teaching of writing" . *Language Learning Journal*, 12(2), 71-74.

Yang, H. Z. (2012). Views on college English teaching in China. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research.* 44(2), 293-297.

Zamel, V. (1976). Teaching composition in the ESL class room: What we can learn from research in the teaching of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 10: 67- 76.

"Tencent Announces 2012 Fourth Quarter and Annual Results". *PR Newswire. 20 March 2013.* http://www.tencent.com/en-us/ps/imservice.shtml, retrieved Feb. 2, 2014.