

Chapter 1

Introduction to an EFL Writing Workshop and Its Research Context

With the development of literacy theory in both first language (L1) and second language (L2), second language writing has gained much attention in on-going research in the field. In the majority of non-English speaking countries, English is taught as a foreign language, and the English instruction is influenced by local or regional teaching approaches and philosophies. You (2004) has summarized EFL writing research in Asia, and stated that the current-traditional rhetoric approach, which was introduced to EFL countries by British and American teachers in the early 1900s, still has great influence in some Asian countries like China, Japan and the Philippines. You (2004) has conducted an investigation on Chinese EFL writing in a northwestern university in China and found that English writing in that university has had some features of current-traditional rhetoric approach and mostly focused on the final product. This teaching approach mostly focuses on the written product rather than the writing process, thus it makes L2 writing more like rigid language formation rather than thought expression and meaning-making, which inevitably causes frustration and increases apprehension toward writing in English among the majority of Chinese students.

Writing in English involves obvious difficulties for Chinese students, and the writing problems faced by Chinese students and the writing apprehension that students have call for language teachers to find effective ways of empowering EFL students so that they can overcome writing apprehension and develop adequate L2 writing competence. This study

explores the possibilities of applying some aspects of North American process writing approach to the Chinese educational context. Will writing instruction that incorporates such Western approaches be helpful for Chinese EFL students? What are the students' attitudes and teachers' perceptions of the application of a Western-rooted writing approach in a Chinese educational context? This study examines the feasibility of applying a contemporary Western approach to the EFL writing context at a university in Beijing, China, by close study of a workshop in which students participated in the kind of activities typical of North American process writing approach. This first chapter contains a statement of the phenomenon under study, research questions, and the significance of this study to university EFL writing instruction in China.

1.1 Theoretical Background of the Study

With the development of second language (L2) literacy research, writing in ESL/EFL settings has also gained much attention in recent years. Scholars and researchers are trying to find ways to teach writing to a growing number of ESL students in English-speaking countries and a large number of EFL students worldwide.

Young (1978) defined the early writing approach as “current-traditional rhetoric,” citing “the emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing process; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs; the strong concern with usage and with style and so on” (p. 31). At the earlier stage of ESL writing, language was regarded as bits of grammar, and so teaching writing is actually “teaching formalities of language” (Leki, 1992, p. 5). In the past two decades, writing approaches in Western contexts have shifted from product-centered to process-centered, and have gradually moved toward contextualized writing. In ESL writing classes in the United States, the process approach has become dominant in L2 writing class practice since the early 1980s, where the cognitive model of writing has been presented as three

subprocesses: planning, translating, and reviewing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). However, the process approach received criticism because teaching writing sometimes is only understood as teaching writing steps.

In second language literacy development, research has led to an ongoing discussion among L2 writing researchers and teachers. Based on the historical account of approaches to L2 writing provided by Raimes (1991) and traced by Matsuda (2003), Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) summarize the major trends in ESL writing theory and practice since the 1960s. Their account highlights the sequential emergence of competing foci during that period. Each period has its own theoretical preference and pedagogical emphasis, ranging from early concerns with traditional rhetorical form to the later emphasis on sociopolitical issues. Those competing foci are not completely separate from each other; instead they overlap to some extent. In recent years, ESL/EFL writing specialists also have begun to address issues of critical pedagogy, thus genre-oriented and socioliterate models have emerged in the L2 writing field. Advocates of socioliterate approaches believe that writing and the teaching of writing always have social purposes.

Among North American process writing approaches, it is post-process theory which echoes this pedagogical emphasis. The post-process writing paradigm strives to transcend the “limitations of the process approach to writing” and advocates paying attention to the “socially situated nature of writing itself” (Sinor & Huston, 2004, p. 371). Post-process writing does not abandon the writing steps originally proposed in the process approach to writing; in fact, modern scholars agree with Sinor and Huston that “working through the writing steps is a crucial component” even as writing instruction must be “centered on the social, political, and contextual forces that surround writing” (p. 371). At the level of classroom practice, post-process theory calls for writing for real audiences, purposes, and contexts, which is one of the key principles applied in the writing workshop under study.

1.2 Statement of the Phenomenon

Since the early 1980s, with the economic reforms carried out by the Chinese government, there has emerged a strong need to communicate with the outside world. Being able to understand a foreign language, especially English, has become an important skill among professionals. Therefore, foreign language education has also gained attention and more and more people have become aware of its importance. Chinese government encouraged learning English by including English in the public school curriculum as a required subject course for Chinese students who enroll in secondary schools, high schools, and universities nationwide. Thus, students are required to learn English from the first grade in elementary school at the age of 6, through the senior year in high school, by the age of 18. If students go to college, they will have the opportunity to continue English learning. This is the basic pattern of English learning in Chinese school settings. Based on my personal learning experience and my general observation of English teaching and learning in China, English instruction in the majority of secondary schools and high schools mostly focuses on English grammar, vocabulary, and basic reading skills, which are believed to be the crucial elements of learning a foreign language. If students want to enroll in a Chinese university, they need to take the National Matriculation Examination, which includes English, as well as Chinese and Mathematics, as its three core requirements. If students are admitted to university, they will continue to learn English throughout their four-year courses. It is very common in Chinese universities that in General English Program for Non-English majors the English curriculum places emphasis on developing reading skills, and a large amount of time is devoted to reading-based courses—Intensive Reading and Extensive Reading are the two most widely offered courses. Very limited time is spent on developing other language skills like writing, speaking, or listening. In some universities, only English majors have the privilege of being offered formal instruction and extensive training in speaking,

listening, and writing skills.

Writing skills, considered a less important element in learning a foreign language, have been neglected in the first two decades of English teaching in China, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. According to Sun's report at the 4th International Conference on ELT in China in May 2004, only a small number of schools offer academic writing courses among the 52 colleges and universities he surveyed (You, 2004). This phenomenon is not unique. In a large number of Chinese universities, writing has not been included in the core curriculum but exists chiefly as a by-product of reading classes. However, having realized that literacy should be developed with equal emphasis, some English departments of foreign-language specializing universities began to offer writing courses to students, calling for developing comprehensive English competence and meeting educational, personal, and social needs.

Though English writing has been included as a part of the reading courses in the Chinese educational contexts, the elements, emphasis and the process of writing are quite different from those in the North American process writing approach. According to my own learning experience in the mid-1990s, a typical English class in my home university operated like this: The teacher usually went through the reading materials first, explained the grammar rules and key vocabulary from the text, then asked students to make up sentences with learned sentence structures and vocabulary. Occasionally, at the end of the class, the teacher assigned certain topics, related to the reading materials, for students to write about, or just asked students to write a summary of the reading text to test their comprehension of the learned sample text. There was very little instruction given to students or attention paid to the writing process after the teacher assigned a writing task. As recently as the mid-1990s, students mostly worked on their own outside of class and experienced very little collaboration or instructional support regarding the writing assignment before they submitted their written essays. They simply wrote for the teacher to get a grade for the assignment. Having very little explicit

writing instruction, many students were afraid to write in English, and they struggled through the writing process characteristically suffering from lack of ideas, writer's block, and low language proficiency. I saw that some students had great difficulty in writing, so they frequently consulted dictionaries and used literal translations from Chinese into English to try to express their ideas in English. The writing resulting from this pattern showed many problems, including divergent text structures and lack of cohesion. It was not surprising that students had to make great efforts to come up with a few short paragraphs, which usually consisted of simple sentences featuring basic words and phrases and little variety in sentence structures. Back then, students were generally graded without having any opportunities to receive feedback or to revise their writing. Once they got a grade, the writing task was over for them. Furthermore, students seldom had opportunities to read their classmates' papers and learn from their peers. Thus, writing functioned more as a language formation exercise rather than as a means of self-expression.

Within the EFL context in today's China, current-traditional rhetoric still has great influence on the writing pedagogy, that is, paying much attention to the written product and neglecting some crucial elements in the L2 writing process. In this traditional teaching pedagogy, writing is nothing more than a means for students to practice what they have learned, for reinforcing vocabulary use and sentence pattern construction. Students are able to combine words and phrases according to given sentence patterns, but anything beyond this sentence-building task will lead to certain problems for them. The product-oriented pedagogical focus, to some extent, increases writing apprehension for most EFL students, as they seldom get help from the teacher during the writing process and do not have adequate language competence nor appropriate writing strategies.

Writing in English involves common difficulties for the majority of EFL Chinese students. Due to traditional teaching beliefs, learning English has been interpreted as learning grammar rules and vocabulary

in order to comprehend English texts. In fact, grammar-translation and reading-translating patterns seem to have a dominant influence in a large number of EFL contexts. The main goal of these patterns is to gather and retrieve information from English texts by requiring students to acquire a large vocabulary and master a set of grammatical rules. Thus, the pedagogical focus is more on receiving knowledge than constructing it. In this educational context, skills for receiving knowledge, such as reading and listening, are given more attention than skills for constructing knowledge, like writing and speaking. After years of receiving knowledge, most Chinese students appear to be quite competent in English grammar, vocabulary, and reading English texts. However, they feel much more apprehension and incompetence when they need to express their thoughts through English writing. In contrast to the EFL context outlined above, L1 writing contexts encourage opportunities to project ideas and positions.

Besides the traditional teaching pedagogy, the experience of learning English for Chinese students is also test-bound. In many school settings, tests are widely given on a frequent basis. Students study hard to pass all types of tests, from regular semester finals to the TOEFL and GRE exams. According to the institutional requirements released by the Chinese Ministry of Education, Non-English majors are required to take the nationwide College English Test-Band 4 (CET-4) as the proficiency test for the foundation stage of learning English (usually freshman and sophomore years). English majors are also required to take the nationwide Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4) after two years' college English instruction, which demands more proficiency in listening and writing skills besides adequate knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and reading competence. Although writing is usually included in these proficiency tests, the nature of the writing portion is still a test-oriented timed essay exam. The purpose of this essay exam is to assess students' ability to write short essays with correct form in a timed period. Under the test-oriented syllabus, students tend to memorize English grammar rules and vocabulary lists in order to get high scores. It is said that some teachers

recommend that students memorize many sample essays in order to be able to use correct phrases and accurate sentence structures in their exam essays to achieve high scores. This test-bound writing assessment hinders students' potential to express their own ideas and develop critical thinking as individuals perceiving the outside world.

Upon university graduation, the majority of students end their formal English schooling. They are supposed to have a certain level of English language competence to fulfill the needs of professional careers and further education. In fact, based on my observation as an EFL teacher in China, it appears that the majority of university graduates can recognize English words and phrases they have learned, can use English grammar rules to understand sentences and paragraphs, and can comprehend reading materials within their reading capability, but they nevertheless have difficulties writing in English, even writing short essays. This phenomenon is the outcome of a complex combination of traditional teaching and learning, and educational and institutional reality in the Chinese context.

According to Creswell (1998), for a case study, the researcher should focus on “an event, process, or program for which we have no in-depth perspective” (p. 95). Conducting the case study provides “a picture to help inform our practice or to see unexplored details of the case” (p. 95). Creswell (1998) suggests that research questions should be “open-ended, evolving, and non-directional [and] restate the purpose of the study in more specific terms” (p. 99). Stake (1995) suggests that the researcher can present a few issues as subquestions that address the major concerns and perplexities to be resolved.

Growing out of a quest for effective methods of teaching English writing in the Chinese context, this dissertation project seeks to answer the central questions of this pedagogical inquiry:

- 1) How would students react to specific activities if some aspects of North American process writing approach were applied to a college-

level writing workshop at a Chinese university judging from their own expressed views?

- 2) What would be the students' attitudes toward this writing workshop experience? Which activities would they favor, and which would they find problematic?
- 3) What would be the Chinese English teachers' perceptions toward incorporating some aspects of North American process writing approach in college-level writing classes?
- 4) How could such an approach, if found to benefit students, best be integrated into the Chinese educational context (judging from students' reactions to the workshop referred to in the first question)?

These research questions are concerned with students' experiences in traditional English classes as supplemented by aspects of North American process writing workshops. The research questions would also allow for the analysis of specific aspects, which may be related to the L2 writing process and L2 writing pedagogy in an EFL context using Silva's ESL writing model and other aspects of North American process writing approach.

Since writing in English has been a major hurdle for Chinese students, English writing has gained more and more attention in the L2 writing research. Therefore, there is a need to inquire whether the current L2 writing instruction in China is effective or beneficial to the large number of EFL students. This study explores Chinese students' experiences with North American process writing approach, and students' attitudes and teachers' perceptions toward aspects of a North American process writing approach applied in a Chinese educational context. The ultimate goal is to gain insights about L2 writing in this EFL setting, and to better increase educators' understanding of L2 writing behaviors and strategies that would lead to better practice in the future.

Silva (1990) suggests that ESL/EFL writing instruction needs to address the roles of audience, writing purpose, and social and cultural

context of L2 writing. In keeping with these needs, this study tried to seek ways to facilitate students' efforts in the writing process through collaborative learning and to develop students' social, cultural, and contextual language awareness. The motivation behind this study is the desire to empower EFL students in their L2 writing and to help them build adequate competence in expressing thoughts with adequate language competence and appropriate L2 writing contextual knowledge.

The key factor for successful EFL writing classes is that students become aware of the interaction among writer, reader, text, context, and the interaction between their own thoughts and the sociocultural contexts among which they operate. In summary, it is expected that this study would be able to broaden views of teaching and researching on English writing in China, the country with the largest population of EFL student writers in the world. Moreover, I hope this study would be a helpful addition to current L2 writing research, and to provide an opportunity for ESL/EFL teachers to rethink the nature of L2 writing and gain insights from the application of contemporary Western pedagogy for future L2 writing research and practice.

1.3 Current Educational Context of the Study

The concepts of the process approach and the genre-based approach, growing out of the North American context, are gradually permeating non-English speaking countries and areas (You, 2004). In China, Wang (1986) formally introduced the process approach into the Chinese English Language Teaching (ELT) circle, emphasizing the recursive nature of writing. Since then, some Chinese ELT teachers and researchers have explored the implementation of the process approach and genre approach in a few Chinese educational contexts (You, 2004). Therefore, English writing instruction and research in China have begun to be influenced by ESL writing research in North America. According to You (2004),