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Journal of Second Language Writing 13 (2004) 97–110

JOURNAL OF
SECOND
LANGUAGE
WRITING

“The choice made from no choice”: English writing instruction in a Chinese University

Xiaoye You*

Department of English, Purdue University, 500 Oval Drive, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2038, USA

Abstract

Approaches to writing instruction developed in North America have gradually made their presence felt in other parts of the world during recent years. A curricular evaluation of the local needs, instruction, assessments, teacher preparation, and other pedagogical factors is crucial for the successful transmission and integration of those approaches into the new contexts. Set against the background of recent, exuberant scholarly discussions of the issue of transplanting Western writing pedagogies, this article presents an observational report of a typical college English curriculum for non-majors in China, with a focus on its writing component. The study has found that English writing is taught under the guidance of a nationally unified syllabus and examination system. Rather than assisting their students to develop thoughts in writing, teachers in this system are predominantly concerned about the teaching of correct form and test-taking skills. Because of their relatively low economic status in China, English teachers have to work extra hours and have little time to spend on individual students or on furthering their professional training. However, signs of recent Western writing pedagogies, such as pre-writing and multiple-drafting activities, are identified in classrooms and textbook publishing, which indicate the possibility of successful adaptations of the recent Western writing pedagogies in the Chinese context.

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Keywords: EFL writing instruction; Western approaches; English curriculum; China

1. Introduction

English writing instruction in non-English-dominant countries has been historically marked by the impact of writing theories and pedagogies developed in English-dominant countries. The current-traditional approach, featured by the organizational modes of narration, description, exposition, and argumentation and an exclusive stylistic

* Tel.: +1-765-494-3740; fax: +1-765-494-3780.

E-mail address: youx@purdue.edu (X. You).

emphasis on correct form, formalized English writing instruction in China, India, and the Philippines with the assistance of British and American expatriate teachers in the early years of the 1900s¹ (Faucett, 1927; Gonzalez and Fortunato, 1995; Nesfield, 1901, 1903). Into the 1980s, an array of new approaches to the teaching of writing grown out of the North American context, such as the process approaches, genre-based approach, and writing for academic purposes approach, gradually permeated non-English-dominant countries and areas. They have become so prevalent worldwide that, for example, Cumming (2003) found “writing processes” and “genres” to be two major concepts in the conceptualizations of English writing curricula among 17 experienced writing instructors from Hong Kong, Thailand, Japan, and Quebec.

When writing teachers in non-English-dominant countries adopt these new approaches, oftentimes they have to make some adjustments in order for the approaches to accommodate local needs and constraints. Bradley and Orleans (1989), Erbaugh (1990), Leki (2001), Muncie (2002), Sampson (1984), and Sapp (2001) suggested that when applying Western writing approaches for local use, writing teachers need to heighten their consciousness of the literary practices, educational tradition, student needs, and instructional constraints in the local context. Local adaptations of the Western imports have been reported from various locales. For example, Bradley and Orleans made technological and cultural adjustments when using peer-reviewing activities in classrooms in China and Japan. In light of Arndt’s (1993) finding that Chinese students prefer peer comments to be given in written form in the revision stage, Li (1994) experimented with success using annotations instead of oral feedback in a process-centered writing classroom in Hong Kong. In a South African university, Boughey (1997) chose a group-work approach to teaching academic writing, creating a compromise between exigencies of the process approach and large size classes. In a Turkish university, the process-centered approach and rhetorical approach to academic writing were put into practice, albeit with various reservations due to Turkish teachers’ conflicting attitudes toward Western approaches (Clachar, 2000). In the Ukraine, the process approach was implemented with both failure and success (Tarnopolsky, 2000).

In the globalization of Western/American writing theories and pedagogies, China has been a major beneficiary of the imported knowledge and intellectual products. Graded, controlled composition² and the four organizational modes began to structure writing

¹Although Silva (1990) differentiated controlled composition from current-traditional rhetoric when he was sketching the major approaches to ESL writing instruction in the United States since 1945, controlled composition, in a more general sense, was practiced as part of current-traditional rhetoric in East Asia in the first half of the 20th century. For example, for the East Asian context, Faucett (1927) proposed a syllabus of writing work that would lead to free composition. The syllabus consisted of seven kinds of controlled writing work: copying, dictation, grammatical transformation and conversation exercises, sentence work (question-and-answer exercises), paraphrase work, short themes, and composing original paragraphs.

²Granted that the eight-legged essays practiced by Chinese students as late as the very beginning of the 20th century for the civil service examinations should be considered as controlled composition (at the discursive level), however, the imported approach of controlled composition from the West emphasizes the systematicity and gradation of writing practice dealing with various levels of the language. As detailed by Yi (1912), the graded writing work started from having students practice connecting words into phrases, filling blanks inside sentences, constructing sentences, writing paragraphs, and finally converting classical Chinese passages into modern Chinese, and vice versa.

instruction in Chinese secondary schools and colleges a century ago. The new North American approaches to teaching writing were also introduced into the country and experimented with by researchers and teachers during the last two decades. Based on discussions among American writing researchers such as Ann Raimes, Joy Reid, and Vivian Zamel, Wang (1986) formally introduced the process approach into the Chinese ELT circle, emphasizing that writing is a process of discovery, and that writing is a complicated, recursive process. Chao (1991) and Wu (1991) discussed how to apply the process approach and genre approach in teaching business English to non-English majors. Yu and Zhang (1996) analyzed both the strengths and weaknesses of the product approach, process approach, and writing for academic purposes approach for implementation in the Chinese context. You (1998) integrated the process approach and discourse analysis when teaching an Intensive Reading course to non-English majors. Wu and Zhang (2000) explored the feasibility of pre-writing activities for English majors. A few questions worth asking about China at this point — when the new North American approaches are dominating discussions of English writing instruction in both international and Chinese ELT journals are — How is English writing being taught in China now under the century-long influence of Western approaches to the teaching of writing? How well have the new Western approaches been adapted in the country? What are the facilitating and constraining factors for the local adaptation of these approaches?

To investigate these questions, I will present an observational report on some aspects of writing instruction in a typical English curriculum for non-English majors in a Chinese university.³ I chose to observe an English curriculum because language teaching and language program development constitute “a dynamic system of interrelated elements” (Brown, 1995, p. ix), and the impact of the new Western approaches to writing instruction might manifest in these “interrelated elements.” For the English curriculum of the present study, some important elements include a nationally unified syllabus, student needs, instruction, teaching materials, testing, and the availability of qualified teachers.

2. A college English curriculum

The English curriculum that I chose to observe is housed in the Foreign Languages Department of a large national university in the Midwest of China, a university where I had taught English for five years before I left to pursue a doctoral degree in the United States. I hoped that this connection would lend me some insider perspectives when conducting the research. The department was composed of four teaching and research divisions, that is, the graduate English division, the English major division, the college English division, and the division of Russian, Japanese, German, and French, with each running a different curriculum. The curriculum for my study was run by the college English division,⁴ dedicated to teaching over 7,000 non-English major freshman and sophomore students.

³This is a report of personal observations; as such, it makes no claim to comprehensive or definitive coverage. Other researchers studying exactly the same site might uncover other important aspects of the curriculum that this report fails to elaborate.

⁴College English refers specifically to English taught to non-English major students in China, who constitute the majority of English learners in the university.

Under the curriculum, students attend English classes four hours a week for two years, with an hour allocated to the Listening class, and three hours to the Intensive Reading class, a class that covers speaking, reading, writing, and translation practice. They complete their general English study in college by taking the nationwide College English Test Band 4 (CETB-4) usually at the end of the sophomore year.

I went back to the university in May 2002, a month and an half before the CETB-4 was scheduled. While I was there, I observed the Intensive Reading classes taught by 10 teachers, interviewed them and their students at different locations, attended a teacher's meeting, and collected teaching materials used in the curriculum.⁵ Of the 10 teachers that I observed and interviewed, five had MA degrees in English linguistics and applied linguistics, and two had MA degrees in curriculum and instruction.

3. Writing instruction in classrooms

Of the various elements of the curriculum, I was most concerned about classroom instruction, especially how my former colleagues taught English writing in their classes. When I first asked some colleagues whether I could observe how they taught writing in the Intensive Reading class, quite a few young teachers told me, "I didn't plan to teach writing today" — which I did not consider a refusal of my request to observe but rather a clear indication that writing was taught as a discrete skill in their classes, separate from speaking, reading, and translation. After the division director had informed the teachers at a division meeting that I would like to observe some Intensive Reading classes, 10 teachers agreed to let me sit in their classrooms.

Most of the teachers that I observed devoted varying amounts of time to discussing English writing in their classes. As the CETB-4 was drawing near, all sophomore classes focused on practicing writing for the test. Of all the Intensive Reading classes I observed, one of Mrs. Zhang's⁶ early morning classes represents well the procedure of classroom writing instruction followed by my former colleagues. Mrs. Zhang was in her early thirties and had taught in the program since her graduation from college seven years before. At the time of this study, she was taking some graduate courses in English linguistics and applied linguistics.

I was sitting in an old lecture room with twelve descending rows of seats, some broken. The front nine rows were filled with more than 50 students. A student was copying a model essay on the blackboard entitled "Holiday Economy." This term refers to people spending money intensively during some extended holidays, a trend started by the Chinese government in an attempt to foster consumer demand a few years ago. Mrs. Zhang was walking around the classroom; some students were copying the model from the blackboard. A student sitting in front of me was copying a lab report from one of his classmates.

⁵ At the very beginning of the study, I obtained permissions from the teachers who would be involved. They were informed of the purposes of the study, and they agreed to let me sit in their classes and to be interviewed later. The three teachers that I am going to quote extensively in this article read an early version of this piece in the late summer of 2002.

⁶ The names of the English teachers used in this report are aliases.

Mrs. Zhang walked over to me and we started chatting. She told me that her sophomore students wrote one essay every week. The essay was assigned on Tuesday and turned in on Friday. She spent about an hour and a half for each class commenting on all the students' papers, unable to spend more time as she was teaching three classes of more than 150 students.

After about 20 minutes, the student finished copying on the blackboard. Mrs. Zhang started talking to the class. She spoke with a lapel-microphone attached to her blouse. From two black loudspeakers hung on the ceiling, her voice sounded quite clear. She told her students, "I scored your writing according to a 15-point scale. If your writing could not pass (did not get a passing score), here is the *fanwen* (model essay) on the blackboard (for your reference). As you can see, this is a typical *sanduanlun* (three-paragraph format): introduction, disadvantages and advantages of holiday economy, and the author's own opinion." Apparently, she already had the "correct" writing in her mind before she asked her students to write.

After showing the model on the board, she pointed out areas of students' writing that they should heed. First, the structure of the text must be clear and well organized; second, the students should use exact words.

She also offered some suggestions to her students for the upcoming CETB-4. "Students with lower proficiency should try to memorize some model writings, so you can write with much more ease. There are 34 model writings in this booklet. It would be better if you could memorize all of them." She waved a 200-odd-page exercise booklet in front of the class.

To help sophomore students prepare for the exam, the teaching division printed the exercise booklet and offered four hours of supplementary CET prep courses every weekend, for which each student was charged 80 yuan (US\$10). The writing tasks in the booklet suggested that students practice writing on topics currently popular in China, such as holiday economy, lottery fever, cell phones, sand storms, and other similar topics.

For the following week, Mrs. Zhang assigned the students a writing task, "Lottery Fever." She put an outline and some keywords on the blackboard as follows:

Paragraph 1: Introduction

Paragraph 2: Its advantages

Paragraph 3: Its disadvantages

Paragraph 4: Conclusion

Key words: lottery ticket, lottery stations, issue, social welfare program, make a fortune, raise funds, swarm into, flood into

During the 10 minutes remaining in the first period, she lectured in Chinese about a passage from the textbook. Lecturing in Chinese is sometimes seen in the English classrooms, especially when the CET is coming soon, because teachers find it easier for them to explain some language points in their native language. She lectured most of the time; there was little teacher–student interaction. She read the passage and explained it sentence by sentence. At least a quarter of students chatted with each other, paying little attention to her lecture.

During the break, I asked Mrs. Zhang a few questions. I was curious about having students spend 20 minutes copying a model essay on the blackboard instead of passing out

some handouts since it was not uncommon for Chinese teachers to give students handouts. Mrs. Zhang explained that first there were financial constraints, and second it was impractical to give students handouts. “After all, if the students have copied the whole text, they will have memorized it better. And also, if you give students handouts, they will not read them carefully, nor try to memorize the text,” she said.⁷

If there had been no pressure from the CETB-4, Mrs. Zhang said she would have let the students write on all the topics in the textbook. But she would only collect the writings from 4 to 10 students instead of from every student. She would note down all the problems and make detailed comments in the class because she thought the students had similar proficiencies in English and made similar mistakes. “It’s no use to read and correct all the students’ writing — they will not read (my correction) carefully. They think they have finished their job! . . . They are very lazy,” she said.

Before I left Mrs. Zhang’s class, I talked to a male student sitting close to me. I asked him how he wrote in English and what he thought his biggest problem in English writing was.

“I write according to my instinct. I think of Chinese sentences first, and then translate them one by one into English. I feel the biggest problem I face is my small vocabulary. In terms of grammar, we have learned all of it in high school,” he told me.

When I asked him whether he had enough time to learn English in his spare time, he replied, “I cannot spend all my spare time on English only! I’ve got many other courses.”

Most of the teachers I interviewed told me that they had read about the process approach, genre-based approach, and writing for academic purposes approach. But they could hardly use them in their classes because “We teach the students examination writing,” as one of the teachers remarked. Three teachers said they required multiple drafts from their students on a regular basis, which might be called a process approach. But as the writing tasks they gave to the students were almost all simulations of the writing section of the CET, which in most cases was a form of guided composition (i.e., students develop essays on topic sentences provided), the students’ revisions and the teacher’s feedback were predominantly concerned about grammatical and lexical errors rather than exploring and discovering meaning.

Since most teachers attributed their pedagogical choices to the CET, it is the moment to take a close look at this nationwide test and what it supposedly works for, that is, the College English Syllabus.

4. College English Syllabus and CET

English is taught under the guidance of nationally sanctioned syllabi in Chinese universities. The most recent version of the syllabus for non-major students was written and released in 1999 by the Higher Institution Foreign Language Teaching and Learning Guidance Committee, authorized by the Ministry of Education. It was expected that points articulated in the syllabus would be used as benchmarks for curriculum development, teaching materials compilation, and teaching evaluation ([College English Syllabus Revision Team, 1999](#)).

⁷All interviews were conducted in Chinese, and the translation of the interviews is my own.

According to the syllabus, college English teaching aims at “cultivating in students a relatively high ability in reading, and a moderate ability in listening, speaking, writing, and translation, so that they will be able to employ English as a means for exchanging information”⁸ (p. 1), and college English teaching should help students build up a solid language base, master sound language learning skills, and enhance their cultural knowledge, in order to meet the needs of “social progress and economic construction” (p. 1).

College English teaching is divided into two stages, a foundation stage (the freshman and sophomore year) and an application and improvement stage (the junior and senior year). Teaching and learning at the foundation stage is particularized into six levels of requirements, or six bands as they are called in China, with the first four bands signifying the basic requirements and the fifth and sixth band signifying higher requirements for the foundation stage.

Next, the syllabus prescribes some descriptors for both the basic requirements and the higher requirements in seven different areas: vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening comprehension, speaking, writing, and translation. In the area of writing, to meet the basic requirements, a student should:

Be able to take notes, answer questions, and write an outline when he/she is reading written material similar to the textbook passages in terms of difficulty; be able to write a short essay of 120 to 150 words within half an hour when given a certain topic or an outline; be able to write short letters and notes with clear expression and no significant language mistakes. (p. 3)

The syllabus also prescribes the requirements for the application and improvement stage in different areas. During this stage, students are required to take subject-based English courses and select advanced English courses if their English proficiency is high enough.

When the college English syllabus for non-major students was first published in 1985, the Ministry of Education postulated that the goals and requirements prescribed in the syllabus would be used as criteria for the ministry to evaluate college English teaching and learning, and that for the schools that followed the syllabus, students who were finishing their Band 4 and 6 studies would need to take a standardized test (CET Committee, 1999). Thus, the CET Committee was formed and such standardized tests were officially launched in 1987. The test written for Band 4 is usually composed of five sections: listening comprehension, vocabulary, structure, reading comprehension, and writing.

To make the tests known to both the English teachers and students, the committee published a test syllabus and sample tests. The test syllabus for Band 4 stated the requirements for each section of the test. For the writing section, students are asked to write a short composition of 100 to 120 words within 30 minutes. In the test, a prompt such as a title, a scenario, a topic sentence of the first paragraph, a picture, or key words might be provided. The writing needs to be correct in expression, coherent, and without significant grammatical mistakes. The writing also covers daily life topics and general knowledge (Standardized Test Design Team, 1994). Expressions such as “correct in expression,” “coherent,” and “without significant grammatical mistakes” in both the College English

⁸Direct quotes from the College English Syllabus and the CET Syllabus are translations from Chinese by the author.

Syllabus and the CET syllabus all suggest that correct form rather than well-developed thought is most valued in the CET writing section.

It is within the context of both the College English Syllabus and the CET that the college English curriculum of my study functions.

In an interview with Mr. Cheng, the division director, he told me that in order to compete against other universities in the passing rate of the CETB-4, the university still held a stringent demand on all the students — without passing the CETB-4, no one can graduate from the university.

Mr. Cheng felt that the high expectation for college English education was both a bitter and sweet situation for English teachers. On one hand, the goal of achieving high passing rates in the CET brought immense pressure to English teachers. He thought English class in college should become elective instead of being compulsory. Events such as China joining the World Trade Organization and holding the Summer Olympic Games in 2008 reinforce the importance of English and will encourage more students to learn English if they feel the necessity. Therefore, it would be better if it became elective. “But now English teaching is becoming *laomin shangcai* (a waste of money and manpower)!”, he said. On the other hand, as English becomes more and more valued, Mr. Cheng was glad that English teachers’ status was improving in both the social and academic structure.

5. Two sets of English textbooks

Before the year 2000, the college English division of this university had been using *College Core English* (Yang et al., 1998), first published in the late 1980s, as the primary textbook. During the two years of the foundation stage, students would use both the Reading and Writing manual and the Listening manual every semester. In the Reading and Writing manual, each unit contains three reading passages followed by grammar, vocabulary, translation, and writing exercises. For the writing component, instruction began with word choice and sentence-combining in the students’ freshman year and moved to cohesion and paragraph-writing in their sophomore year. This graded, controlled composition instruction had a strong emphasis on correct grammar and vocabulary usage.

The division decided to adopt a new textbook entitled *New College English* (Ying et al., 2000) in the fall of 2000 to replace *College Core English*. I was curious about why the division chose this textbook, how the new textbook organizes the writing component, and how teachers taught writing with this textbook. I asked the division director, Mr. Cheng, these questions during a break when I was observing his class.

He first told me that the teaching division had used *College Core English* for more than 10 years and they was ready for a change. Then I mentioned to him some stories I heard about textbook publishers competing to woo universities into using their books by offering them kickbacks.

Mr. Cheng agreed that choosing a new textbook for the students was an important business decision. But first, he said, some teachers in the division reviewed the book and affirmed its strengths. One of the teachers even took the book to her class to get her students’ opinions. The students also confirmed the strengths of the book. Choosing the textbook was also the result of business operations. The publisher offered to send the

teachers to Beijing or Hangzhou for further professional training that the department had never been able to afford. Mr. Cheng exclaimed, “There are some teachers who had never had any chance to receive professional training on paid trips during their entire life up until then.”

Then he talked about the strengths of the textbook. The textbook is theme based. Focusing on a particular topic, students can practice listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The readings are diversified, with both colloquial and formal contents. Unlike *College Core English*, the textbook includes a wider range of topics, such as social issues, philosophic discussions, and campus life rather than just scientific topics, as *College Core English* did. So students, according to Mr. Cheng, were very interested in attending the class.

Next, I asked him how the new textbook teaches writing.

“After the students do the unit preparation, listening, and reading the major text, vocabulary usage and ideas become available to the students. The key issue left is how to organize (them). Students can find some model writings in the reference book. So they’ve got content to write about. In the past, only a title would be provided by the textbook, and students needed to figure out the content for themselves.” Mr. Cheng flipped through the textbook to show me the writing task in each unit. Most of the tasks consisted of a topic and a three- or four-line paragraph of directions.

“They look like the writing tasks in CETB-4. Look here, ‘On Happiness.’ This is a big topic. How do students write on this topic?” I asked.

“Yes. Well, first you define happiness, then you bring up your own thoughts, and then use some evidence to support your views.”

The bell rang. Mr. Cheng pinned a lapel-microphone on his shirt and went back to the teacher’s desk. The students had quite a pile of things on their desks — textbooks, exercise books, reference books, vocabulary handbooks that had been worn out, and electronic translators. They seemed to be using their reference books constantly. While Mr. Cheng was explaining a major reading passage from the textbook, many students were burying their heads in their reference books and electronic translators.

According to the preface of *New College English*, the series was written based on “the student-centered theme teaching mode” (p. i). Each unit consists of four parts: preparation, listening-centered activities, reading-centered activities, and further development. Each unit sets a writing task at the end of the further development part. While the majority of writing tasks offer the students vague, general topics such as, “On bargains,” “Health is as important as work,” and “Do we need heroes?”, a few require some pre-writing activities, which seem to work well with the process approach and writing for academic purposes approach. Such an example is found in Book 2 on “Gender Difference,” cited as follows:

Directions: Follow the procedure to conduct a survey to find out the students’ view of the topic: Who are Teachers’ Pets, Boys or Girls?

Procedure:

- 2.1. Design a written questionnaire.
- 2.2. Interview at least 30 students.
- 2.3. Write a report of your survey, analyzing the answers of the respondents to your questions both in the questionnaire and the interview. Your report should be no

less than 120 words. Remember to write neatly, whether you are male or female. (p. 243)

However, I also noticed that for all the writing tasks in the textbook, students could read model essays from reference books that they had to buy separately. After Mr. Cheng's class, I asked two students about how they used the reference books.

"I noticed you have a reference book for your English textbook. Do you simply copy the model essay for the writing assignments and give it to your teacher?", I asked jokingly.

"I copy part of it, and write the rest of the composition." One of them was quite frank about it — he knew I was an outsider. But obviously that was not what the teacher wanted.

6. Other aspects of the curriculum

To learn about the general circumstances of the teaching staff in the division and more about English writing instruction, I interviewed Mrs. Meng. She was a middle-aged English teacher, reputed among her colleagues for her teaching excellence and familiarity with new English teaching methods.

First, I asked her how much money she made per month. Asking someone about his or her income usually is not considered as rude in China and is well accepted among acquaintances.

She told me without any hesitation that she made about 2,000 yuan (US\$240) a month, including all sorts of bonuses. This was the income from her regular 12-hour-per-week schedule and end-of-semester bonus. Teachers in government-funded schools are considered civil servants in China, so they are paid by the government for their regular schedule. As a bounty of teaching opportunities were also available in language training schools and private universities, many of my colleagues taught nearly the same number of hours beyond their regular teaching schedule, and therefore could double their income.

Mrs. Meng felt the most pressured by her teaching work. The university launched a system in 2001 called "*dinggang dingbian*," which means the teachers would be ranked according to comprehensive indicators and be paid according to the total index they were given. In the system, classroom instruction only makes up a small portion of the total index. Professional training is another important factor in improving one's ranking, a great appeal to teachers, but there are not many ways they can receive it. Mrs. Meng needed to teach over 12 hours a week, and then wrote papers for publication in her spare time.

She also mentioned another source of pressure. As the undergraduate enrollment had been growing by 20 percent annually during the previous three years, some students had actually not met the minimum requirements of the high school English syllabus when they entered the university. Some students could not even write complete English sentences, which gave the teachers a real headache. As there were not enough

teachers and teaching facilities, students were grouped in big lecture halls, thus weakening the teacher's power.

Talking about the newly adopted textbook, *New College English*, Mrs. Meng considered the organization of the writing section to be reasonable and scientific. The textbook starts with paragraph and passage writing instead of sentence level exercises, thus making a smooth transition from the high school English syllabus to the college syllabus. In her class, students participated in discussions first before they actually wrote. All her students took part in the discussions, or brainstorming, to find original ideas and comprehensive perspectives. Freshmen students were excited about this teaching method. However, according to Mrs. Meng, five weeks after the semester had started, fewer and fewer students in her class participated in the discussions because they were overwhelmed by many other courses.

She mentioned a practical problem with the new textbook. There were reference books published by several publishers for this textbook with model essays for the writing sections, and some students would hold the model essays in front of them while she was teaching. The students acted like her supervisor, checking whether she was teaching the *correct* writing. Therefore, she could never use the writing tasks in the textbook and had to find them from elsewhere.

Finally, I invited her to comment on the three-paragraph format required by the CETB-4. Many English teachers complained that this format had constrained them from using new approaches to writing instruction.

Mrs. Meng had taken part in grading the CETB-4 writing sections on several occasions. She thought that the three-paragraph format was the best choice so far. The most important reason for this choice comes from the convenience teachers have in grading the students' writings. The writing tasks in the CETB-4 ask students to write short argumentative or expository essays. She explained that writing for daily applications and writing for examinations serve different purposes. In her own teaching, she encouraged students to translate Chinese notices and graffiti into English, or to keep an English diary, all of which interested her students enormously. In the end, she sighed, "The three-paragraph essay (in the CETB-4) is *wunai de xuanze* (the choice made from no choice). It is the best choice in the sense that it is easy to implement in practical terms."

To gain more knowledge of how the curriculum was functioning, I observed one of the division's biweekly meetings. The meeting was held in a small conference room called English Salon, a bright room with a big, round table in the center designed for teachers' meetings. Twenty-one females and two male teachers were present, a gender distribution typical in foreign language departments across the country. They were all teaching sophomores in the 2001–2002 academic year. The meeting started by distributing 100 yuan (US\$12) to each teacher as an attendance bonus, a ritual in the division.

Because the CETB-4 was coming soon, the division members discussed arrangements for the three weeks of class left before the test. Mrs. Tang, the executive director of the division, told the teachers that the textbook-based teaching needed to stop and be replaced by administering and discussing two sets of simulated tests in every class.

Mrs. Tang also encouraged the teachers to guess the writing task in the upcoming CETB-4. She told them that the teacher would be rewarded with 1,000 yuan (US\$120) by the department if his or her guess was right or close to the writing task in the CETB-4. If a high

rate of students passed the test, the division would receive a cash reward from the university. In 2000, the university awarded the division 35,000 yuan (US\$4,200) because the sophomores passed the test at a 75 percent rate. Every teacher was given a share of the reward.

It is not an understatement that the CET is a gamble for both the teachers and students, an eminent power generator for the entire college English curriculum to function. Some teachers in the division were very interested in guessing the CETB-4 writing tasks and had their students practice on topics that seemed likely to appear in the test. One teacher told me that the year before some of her students recited over a hundred model essays and were in fact given a writing task in the CET that they had previously memorized. Obviously, the CET has placed high stakes on both teaching and learning of a certain kind.

7. Conclusion

A single observational report does not provide a complete picture of the curriculum, let alone any conclusive understanding of college English programs in China. But from this report, we do get a glimpse of how writing is being taught to non-English majors as manifested in some important curricular elements. To summarize, a typical college English curriculum in China works under the guidance of the College English Syllabus and is evaluated almost exclusively by the results of students' scores on the CET. In such a curriculum, students' individual needs for English are hardly acknowledged; many teachers are predominantly concerned about teaching language knowledge and test-taking skills, instead of language skills for communication purposes. English writing is still taught in the current-traditional approach, focusing on correct form rather than helping the students develop thoughts. Systematic language instruction is severely constrained by simulation tests and various test-preparation exercise manuals when the CET draws near (also see Wang, 1998). And driven by market forces, many teachers are pressured to work extra hours in their spare time to make more money, thus reducing the amount of attention they give to each of their students. Heavy teaching loads also make it hard for them to find time to advance their professional training. Therefore, like the different parts of a gigantic machine, the curricular elements work closely together in such a coherent unity that most writing teachers have to maneuver in a limited pedagogical space, making their pedagogical choices virtually from no choice.

Despite these constraints, and the need for critical caution in adopting imported approaches, there are signs of new Western approaches to writing instruction slowly seeping into college English classrooms. Some English teachers are reading about the new approaches. They engage students in pre-writing activities, such as group discussions, surveys, interviews, and library research. They require their students to work on multiple drafts and provide the students with feedback. English textbooks for non-English major students, while still accommodating the CET, have started to treat writing as a skill developed through processes instead of some kind of transferable language knowledge. Thus, it can be hoped with some reserved optimism that the growing social demand for English writing ability in college graduates, teachers' improved social and economic status, their increasing exposure to writing theories and approaches, and the growing

research on the new writing pedagogies in China will all encourage more teachers to experiment with the new Western approaches and decide for themselves whether they can integrate these approaches in their teaching.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Tony Silva, Ilona Leki, and three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions on the earlier versions of this article. I also thank Ma Jing, Scott Baxter, and Gigi Taylor for their encouragements and help.

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