

## Effects of Content-Based Communicative Language Teaching in University English Writing Classes

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**[Abstract]** Based on the textbook of Contemporary College English First-Year Writing (Volume Two), content-based communicative language teaching has been fully practiced in the English majors' writing classes. Through a comparative analysis of narrative essays written by students from two parallel classes at the beginning and end of the first semester of their sophomore year, this research has found significant effects of content-based communicative language teaching on students' writing proficiency. Even though the essays were of the same genre, similar topics and styles, those finished at the end of the semester showed reduced writing anxiety, broadened thinking, more profound emotion and increased logic. However, no prominent change in students' grammatical proficiency has been observed. Thus, it is proposed that in the future English writing classes, teachers can combine content-based communicative language teaching with traditional grammar teaching, which will complement with each other and produce more positive influence on students' writing proficiency.

**[Keywords]** content-based communicative language teaching; communicative competence; writing proficiency; lexical signal; grammatical knowledge

### Introduction

Writing is a complex process of thinking. Among the several fundamental skills of English majors, the course of writing is taken as the most difficult subject for students to achieve immediate success, because of which, the writing course generally brings great anxiety to students. To many college English learners, writing frequently becomes an activity of translation since students are used to firstly organizing ideas in their mother tongue and then transforming the corresponding information into English. However, it will be much time-consuming and restrict students' thinking.

In college education, one important function of writing is to enlarge learners' knowledge by reflection rather than to exchange information (Bereiter, & Scardamalia, 1987). Reflection can be classified into many types. Learners can on one hand have reflection on cultural difference, meaning representation and the depth of thought and on the other hand on the function of language, genre and the social context of language in use. Even though scholars give different definition of linguistic knowledge and linguistic competency, there tends to be an almost identical focus. For example, Grabe & Kaplan (1996) classified language knowledge into three categories including linguistic knowledge, discourse knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge.

Linguistic knowledge is further classified into spelling, the use of punctuations, vocabularies and syntactic structures. Discourse knowledge covers discourse markers for logical relations at the inter-sentential and intra-sentential levels, information structure and clausal relations and sociolinguistic knowledge specifically refers to the function of the written discourse and writers' control of some social variables, such as formality and psychological distance and so forth. Bachman & Palmer (1996) classify students' writing competency into two types. One is linguistic knowledge and the other one strategic knowledge. Linguistic knowledge has several subtypes including grammatical knowledge, discourse knowledge, functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge. No matter how linguistic knowledge is defined, writing will be neither a mechanical translation process, nor an imitation process. For students with

different proficiency levels, there will be different focuses in teaching and learning at different stages of the writing class.

This current research combines two teaching methods of content-based instruction and communicative language teaching together. The former emphasizes that teachers should provide students with real contexts and materials and with various themes in study, students' personal development and motivation in study will be fostered (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). The latter changes the acquisition pattern of fundamental syntactic structures of students and emphasizes on the communicative function of language rather than grammar and vocabulary. The purpose of language learning is communication and communicative competence is the goal to be realized during the process of language learning. It cannot be denied that every teaching method has both advantages and disadvantages but content-based communicative language teaching method is believed to facilitate the acquisition process by authentic communicative activities and writing tasks with realistic functions.

Littlewood (1981) pointed out that the communicative approach of language teaching is characterized with systematic attention given to language abilities and structures. Besides, content-based instruction will help to guarantee students' constant motivation and interest apart from language knowledge and linguistic abilities developed during the whole process of language learning. It is hoped that when language teachers choose or develop authentic communicative contexts and encourage students to participate in language activities with active thinking, the goal of teaching will be realized in an active learning atmosphere and meanwhile, language knowledge and abilities will be naturally acquired during the communicative process.

## Research Method

### *Subjects*

The research takes the written materials by two parallel classes of sophomore English majors as the subjects. Respectively, at the beginning and upon the end of the first semester of students' sophomore year, the researcher asked students to finish an English writing. The two English writings were of similar topics and styles with the same genre. The reason why sophomore students have been chosen is that there is a large space for the teachers to promote their linguistic competence. After the first year of study in the university, students' vocabularies and logical thinking abilities in English witness great development. Thus, they are neither novices nor writers at the intermediate level. The first semester of the sophomore year can be judged as a transitional period for students to be developed from novices to intermediate writers.

### *Orientation of the Teaching Method*

The main purpose the research is to explore into the effects of the content-based communicative language teaching method on the development of English majors' abilities of thinking and the specific representations of the improved thinking abilities in English writing. The textbook of *Contemporary College English First-Year Writing (Volume Two)* is content-oriented and it focuses on developing students' rigorous thinking, depth of ideas and the delicate use of language. Every unit in the textbook offers writing tasks with topics closely related to students' life, such as an unforgettable experience, a moving heroic deed, reminiscent home, cherished objects and so forth. It is just based on the textbook characterized with content-based instruction that the researcher can practice content-based communicative language teaching method throughout the whole teaching process. Classes were always students-oriented and the researcher applied rich in-class activities to motivate students to make efficient use of language to realize different communicative purposes. The researcher became the guide in students' in-class activities, administrator in students' group work, investigator, observer and commentator of students' story sharing activities.

Hughes (1989) believed that the best way to test students' writing competence was to ask them to write. The researcher asked students to make full use of any in-class and after-class opportunities to practice

English writing and at the same time the researcher strictly abided by the principle of the content-based instruction. Based on the main content and focus of the foreign language writing class stated by Hyland (2003), the researcher provided students with many topics close to life and many corresponding materials for them to read and study. Students were encouraged to apply the authentic English way of thinking to organize ideas in their writing. For example, students tended to use English rhetorical devices to polish their writing and apply the English way of thinking to organize clause relations. Sometimes, students were divided into small groups with two to four members in one group to orally share with each other their personal life experience in class. Occasionally, six to eight students were in one large group to be responsible for after-class research and writing task and in the next class, each of the group members would be invited to go to the podium to make oral reports about the research findings.

Research topics for writing covered many perspectives, such as an introduction of a university, charity activities and the legendary entrepreneurship of successful businessmen. Students were also given full opportunities to compare articles in each unit of the textbook written by native and non-native English speakers, discussing merits and defects.

### ***Description of the Writing Task and Criteria for Writing Assessment***

Two classes of sophomore students in the research were labeled Class A and Class B. The in-class writing task was of a semi-topic feature which needed to be completed by students. The semi-topic was “*The most...Moment in My Life*” and it would encourage students to express personal emotions which originated from life and thus, did not ask for much professional knowledge. The researcher notified students of the purpose of writing. That was to test the depth of emotion and vividness in details in their English writings. There was no word limit but a time limit of thirty minutes. Given the fact that the topic was related to students’ psychology and emotion, the profundity in the description of emotions and the development of details were naturally taken as the criteria for assessing the writings.

The researcher applied a holistic criterion in giving assessment to students’ writings. Specifically, if the writing had a definite central idea with clear structure and great coherence and meanwhile with abundant description of details, it would be marked A. Then in accordance with the application of specific vocabularies and grammatical representations in the writing, the A-level writing was further classified into another three hierarchies, including G (Good), VG (Very Good) and E (Excellent). If the central idea in the writing was relatively definite, the use of vocabularies was relatively accurate and the organization of the discourse was relatively coherent, the writing would be marked B in spite of a few grammatical mistakes. Finally, if there was no definite theme, the organization of information was illogical and incoherent and meanwhile both vocabularies and grammar were not put in accurate use, the corresponding writing would be marked C.

## **Research Findings**

### ***Changes in the Time, Level and Word Number of the Writing***

There were respectively 34 students in Class A and Class B, but because there were students absent in the two in-class writing tests, there were only 28 student writings in Class B that were collected for analysis. With the same time limit of 30 minutes, the time students spent in finishing the writing in the two writing tests were quite different. In the test at the beginning of the semester, eighty percent of the students in the two classes could finish their writing tasks within 25 minutes, whereas in the test at the end of the semester, eighty percent of students spent 30 to 35 minutes in finishing their writings. After the end-of-the-semester test, the researcher interviewed some students and it was found that the majority of students did not feel as nervous as they did in the test at the beginning of the semester so they seemed to have a lot of ideas to share in their writing but they just didn’t have enough time. Apart from the difference in time consumed, there are also differences in the level and the word number of the writing as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Changes in the Level and Word Number of the Writing*

Content in Statistical Analysis			Class A		Class B	
			<i>Semester Beginning</i>	<i>Semester Ending</i>	<i>Semester Beginning</i>	<i>Semester Ending</i>
Levels of the Writing and Number of Students	A	E	0	3	0	1
		VG	1	5	0	5
		G	10	2	6	4
	B		18	21	15	14
	C		5	3	7	4
Average Word Number			144	217	96	182
Difference of Word Number between the Largest and the Smallest			70	183	87	118
Difference of Word Number between the Smallest and the Average			66	91	58	62

The word number in the writing finished upon the end of the semester was much larger than that at the beginning of the semester. Based on the difference of word number between the largest and smallest and between the smallest and the average, it can be found that individual differences are distinct. The number of students whose writings were marked E and VG became larger while that of writings marked with B or C was smaller. Generally speaking, among the 62 students from the two classes, there were altogether 23 students whose levels have been advanced and it accounted for 37% of the total number. These students' writings tended to present many common features, such as precise and definite topic sentences, vivid use of rhetorical devices and individual vocabularies, visualization of details and the indirect way of describing emotions.

## Changes in Expressive Lexical Signals

The effects of the content-based communicative language teaching method are also represented by students' use of lexical signals. Even though the communicative teaching approach does not emphasize on the use of lexes, it has been proved effective, bringing positive changes in the use of lexical signals. Apart from the accurate and proper use of lexical signals, students' English writings finished upon the end of the semester show distinct features in the use of lexical signals expressing direct and indirect emotions from those in the writings finished at the beginning of the semester.

Table 2

*Changes in Expressive Lexical Signals*

Content in Statistical Analysis		Class A				Class B			
		<i>Semester Beginning</i>		<i>Semester Ending</i>		<i>Semester Beginning</i>		<i>Semester Ending</i>	
The Frequency of Lexical Signals Expressing Emotions and Their Proportions among the Total Word Number	Adjectives Adverbs	151	3.07%	199	2.72%	98	3.62%	151	2.95%
	Verbs Verbal Expressions	26	0.53%	54	0.74%	20	0.74%	45	0.88%
	Nouns Nominal Expressions	13	0.26%	38	0.52%	13	0.48%	40	0.78%

Compared with nouns or notional verbs, adjectives or adverbs lack vividness and depth, in spite of the fact that they can also be applied to express emotions. That is the reason why in the textbook there are several units which propose that students should use notional verbs or nominal expressions rich in specific content. From Table 2, it can be found that the proportion of adjectives and adverbs which are applied to express emotions is smaller in the writings finished upon the end of the semester whereas that of verbs and nouns becomes larger than that in writings finished at the beginning of the semester. It is also an important indicator for the development of students' writing proficiency.

Comparatively speaking, the frequency of adjectives and adverbs is high but after a close observation, it is found that most of the time, students tend to use adjectives or adverbs in a repetitive manner, such as happy/happily, unforgettable, nervous/nervously, sweet/sweetly, fortunately, memorable, surprised/surprising, sad, serious, warm, excited/exciting, moved/moving, shocked, beautiful and so forth. However, the frequent use of these adjectives or adverbs does not mean that students are good at using them since students often take the use of these vocabularies for granted. For example, the word "*beautiful*" is frequently applied by students in their English writings to show positive emotions but it lacks specific and distinct meanings. By contrast, when students use notional verbs, verbal expressions, nouns or nominal expressions to express emotions, they show great creativity. Many such kind of expressive lexical signals enjoy high frequency of occurrence in students' writings, such as *cry, love, like, miss, smile, laugh, tear, surprise, happiness* and so on.

Flowerdew (2008) classified lexical signals into two types. One is called an inscribed lexical signal and the other is an evoking lexical signal. The former refers to lexical signals which can directly show writers' attitudes and emotions and the latter refers to those lexical signals that can evoke readers' judgment even out of context. Consequently, emotions described by inscribed lexical signals are direct and explicit but those by evoking lexical signals are relatively indirect and implicit. With regard to the differences between the two types of lexical signals, it can be said that most expressive adjectives and adverbs in students' writings belong to inscribed lexical signals but the majority of verbs, verbal expressions, nouns and nominal expressions are evoking lexical signals.

For example, verbs or verbal phrases like tremble, sweat, refresh, waste, applaud, isolate, complain, frown, punish, settle down, given up, speak highly of together with nouns like glory, noise, danger, loser, togetherness, warmth, enthusiasm, importance, separation, gift, mess and so forth are all of the feature of evoking lexical signals which further specify and even visualize the emotions in students' writings. It is verified by the research that a large quantity of content-based reading activities and communicative writing tasks can help to promote students' writing proficiency and linguistic competence.

### Conclusion

Based on the textbook of *Contemporary College English First-Year Writing (Volume Two)* which is compiled with the teaching principle of content-based instruction, the content-based communicative language teaching method has been fully practiced in the English majors' writing classes by the researcher for the whole semester of English majors' sophomore year. Throughout the whole semester, students not only have access to a lot of reading materials but also are given full opportunities to practice English writing which shares similar topics with those articles in the textbook. After a comparative analysis of students' in-class written materials finished at the beginning and upon the end of the semester, the promoting effects of the content-based communicative teaching method on the sophomore English majors' writing proficiency are verified. The word number in students' English writings has been greatly increased and within the same limited period of time, students tend to have more information to share.

Besides, students are more inclined to apply more evoking lexical signals to describe emotions and the alternating use of expressive adjectives and adverbs with verbs and nouns strengthens the vividness and

logic in the writings. Moreover, students' anxiety in English writing is reduced, being able to make full use of the limited time to organize information in a more effective manner. However, the special teaching method discussed in the research does not testify whether it has positive effects on students' English grammar. Since grammar is also a very important criterion to measure students' linguistic competence, it needs to be testified in the future research concerning whether the mixed teaching method between content-based instruction and the communicative approach can improve students' grammatical competence.

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