

Original Paper

Exemplar-based Instruction in China's ESL English Writing: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract

This article explores an exemplar-based teaching mode which can be used in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) writing classrooms for Chinese undergraduates. This project adopts an exemplar-based textbook published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press to prepare freshmen's writing. Theoretical underpinnings of the use of exemplars, namely scaffolding theory, will be given. The discussion finishes by suggestion of some tasks of this teaching approach for ESL writing instructors who are interested in using exemplars to cultivate students' writing. This topic of e-education drawn from Contemporary College English Advanced Writing, which is currently used in most of China's universities, has been chosen to illustrate ways in which this might be achieved. Five tasks are presented in order to highlight the complexity of writing for ESL learners and to illustrate ways in which it can be made more accessible. The possible benefit can be seen in teacher's and students' applying this writing practice not just for the current topic but also for other writing topics in ESL writing classrooms. Furthermore, this work sheds some lights on curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education in various writing contexts.

Keywords

scaffolding theory, exemplar-based instruction, English writing, errors and mistakes, teacher education, ESL learners

1. Introduction

As we know, writing is of great importance for undergraduates who are majoring in English. However, like other ESL teachers, many English teachers increasingly find it difficult to teach students who are reluctant to write English essays in the mainstream classroom. ESL students may face the challenges of acquiring and presenting writing knowledge and writing skills of new topics. Moreover, the ESL learners must deal not only with these challenges but also with the demands of distinguishing the

significant differences between Chinese and English. Satisfying the needs of these students can be quite challenging for average ESL teachers. A typical exemplar-based instruction, combined the product approach, which emphasizes the instruction of language system knowledge (Tribble, 1996) and a process approach, putting the teaching of writing steps in the foreground (Pennington, Brock & Yue, 1996) will be presented to address the writing difficulties.

2. Literature Review

Writing is the use of graphic symbols to represent specific linguistic utterance (Rogers, 2000, p. 2). How to use language to convey a message correctly and effectively to the readers is quite difficult for students to grasp. Some mistakes and errors in the students' essays can be investigated. These mistakes and errors can be divided into pragmalinguistic failures and sociopragmatic failures. Pragmalinguistic failures usually suggest ungrammaticality, misspelling, nonsense non-words, unidiomaticity, Chinglish, to name but a few. Sociopragmatic failures, on the other hand, involve cultural inappropriateness of various sorts, often resulting in impoliteness or cultural shock (Wang & Hou, 2021).

The findings on English writing in the context of ESL students have been centered on the causes of mistakes and errors, the kinds of mistakes and errors and the teaching approached/methods to cultivate the students' writing proficiency. As for the kinds of mistakes and errors, they can be the misuse of words, the misuse of collocations, redundancy, improper grammar and so on. Generally speaking, they can be categorized into two kinds: pragmalinguistic failures and sociopragmatic failures (as mentioned above).

As for the the causes of mistakes and errors, Lado (1957, p. 2) pointed out that the learners have a tendency to transfer the structure, meaning and word order of their native language and native culture to foreign languages and foreign cultures (negative transfer). The researches by Ellis (1994) and Rudolf (2014) have shown that Chinese-speaking students are affected by their mother tongue when they learn English. Zhang and Zhan (2020) analyze the influence of various educational factors of Chinese culture, language, and education on Chinese students' voice development in English writing. Generally speaking, pragmalinguistic failures stem from students' (also translators') lack of bilingual knowledge, international practice, or responsibility or simply from their dependence upon online/machine translation. In addition to spelling and grammar errors and *pinyin* mistranscription of Chinese characters, Chinese students' essays may abound with poor or clumsy English expressions: grammatically acceptable, not yet in accord with Anglophones' linguistic and cultural norms, hence the stigma of Chinglish. Sociopragmatic failures arise out of student writers' poor knowledge of the target culture: culture, subculture, and so on. If, for instance, differences in values are ignored, (the Chinese cherish collectivism, hence consideration of the overall situation in many cases, and an overwhelming respect for the group's norms and harmony with others, whilst Anglo-American societies value individualism), students may miswrite when writing, all ascribed to sociopragmatic failures.

As for teaching methods, Chong (2019) used an exemplar-based teaching mode to develop students'

understanding of assessment standards of English writing. Zhang and Zhan (2020) suggest interaction of the dynamic changes in Chinese culture, language, and education in a globalized society with the more immediate context of writing to shape the complexity of Chinese students' voice in English. Li & Cui (2021) suggest that teacher and students use textbooks effectively to improve the students' writing skills.

Facing the writing complexities of ESL learners, the literature recognises the linguistic demands (Saville-Troike & Barto 2006; Shin, 2018), basic interpersonal communication skills (Cummins, 2000), critical thinking and the dynamic changes in Chinese culture, language, and education in a globalized society (Zhang & Zhan, 2020).

For ESL students, it is very difficult to acquire writing expertise solely by reading and/or writing alone; the chances of acquiring that can be greatly enhanced if the teacher makes full use of the sample essays or provide some topic-related reading materials and tasks. The teaching method outlined below are designed to be used in orthodox/blended whole-class settings, presumably to benefit most if not all the students in the class.

3. What is Scaffolding Theory?

In the 1930s, L. S. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and philosopher, proposed the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which points out that the learners with poor independent problem-solving skills can be improved under the guidance of adults or in cooperation with more capable peers. ZPD establishes several layers of information with regard to the students. The first layer is the information the learners can learn without any assistance; the second layer is the information that they have already mastered; the third layer is of information learnable or understandable with the help of a teacher or the classmates; the other layer is the learning materials which are too complex for their current level of understanding or education.

Scaffolding theory is a learning strategy based on Lev Vygotsky's ZPD. Based on this theory, especially the third layer, some scholars such as Bruner, Wood and Mercer put forward the scaffolding theory, which aims to evaluate where students are in their learning, in what learning materials they need help, and what remain difficult for the students to learn, and then provide assistance when they cannot accomplish the tasks without effective teacher-learner/learner-learner interaction.

The development of this theory further highlights the function of interaction in learning. Mercer (1994) thought that classroom interaction is "the intermediary of knowledge sharing and potential understanding transformation". In addition, in the learner-learner interaction, there is also a scaffolding model similar to the teacher-learner interaction: in the problem-solving classroom activities, the underachievers will advance themselves with the cooperation of the other students, especially the top students. Mercer (1994) pointed out that different activities of individuals with different abilities in the interaction advance the underachievers.

The core of the scaffolding theory is: on the one hand, through effective interaction between the teacher

and the learners, the teacher/mentor helps the learners complete the tasks that they cannot accomplish independently. This process not only presents the dominant role of the teacher, but also reflects the education concept of “learner-centered” teaching mode; on the other hand, the learners can elevate themselves into a higher level in the learning community in which they help each other to accomplish the learning tasks assigned by the teacher.

The teaching process is as follows: first, the teacher assigns a topic, and then establishes a conceptual framework, which involves some topic-related attributes, according to the requirements of ZPD; second, these attributes are arranged in line with their importance or difficulties, and then invites the learners into certain problem-centered situations (a certain layer in the conceptual framework) where the learners can explore the answers/solutions independently or in groups, and accomplish the teaching assignment.

4. From Theory to Practice: Sample Tasks

Below I try to apply the scaffolding theory to the writing teaching of English majors, and carry out a one-semester teaching experiment with 55 fresh students of Quanzhou Normal University, majoring in English. The whole process of classroom teaching, videotaped, lasts 16 teaching weeks with 2 class hours per week, and peer/fellow teachers are invited to conduct classroom observation. After the teaching experiment, feedback and evaluations from students and peer/fellow teachers are collected through open-ended student questionnaires, semi-structured teacher interviews, and student reflection logs. In order to truly present the teaching experiment process, the following section will take the teaching of a unit as an example to present the activity design and basic teaching process of scaffolding theory.

It starts with the teacher presenting the students with the problems they may encounter in the ensuing writing learning, so that they are first aware of the challenges they are about to face. Only after realising the daunting tasks confronting them and their weaknesses do the students attempt to tackle problems and improve their academic performance, thus igniting their desire to learn.

The succeeding tasks encounter to offer cognitively challenging writing exercises to all students, which simultaneously offer linguistic supports and scaffolding writing tasks (writing knowledge and writing skills). These can be used for all ESL learners in grades in a differentiated way with the teacher's/mentor's evaluation as to when, what, how, and with whom they can be used.

When teaching English writing to the ESL learners, the teacher may see some barriers such as hard words, sentence patterns, the structure of the article, etc. All throttling the development of the students' writing. Consequently, in the planning phase, he should bear in mind the aforementioned barriers and distinguish which are the crucial musts for the writing topic. The second step is to think of the ways to invite the students to engage themselves cognitively in these predesignated exercises to reach for a full understanding of the topic, practical know-hows for the writing itself. The teacher can choose one or two or more succeeding tasks outlined below in their classes, designed to illustrate various ways

specific writing skills go foregrounded in the blended classes.

The topic for this writing is e-education which features in the university syllabus at junior (third-year) level has been selected as the context for the tasks outlined below.

This topic is found in the textbook *Contemporary College English: Advanced Writing*. This textbook, meant for different writing classrooms or classroom teaching, is suitable to students from different backgrounds and levels, especially for English majors in China. This textbook is comprised of 10 units, each having a topic covering five to eight articles to read. Three to five are by Anglophone authors, while the others are by Chinese authors knowing English well.

What is striking about this writing topic on e-education is: 1) how linguistically rich the texts are; 2) how the paragraphs are developed; 3) how they are written; 4) the logic or logos therein and the textual effect of persuasiveness (after Aristotle) or identification (after K. Burke). During the process, the students are exposed to the rich language, sentence patterns, various paragraph-developing ways and the ways to composing an essay. The teaching goal of these tasks is to train the learners as competent written interactors in the sphere or aspect of e-education, in addition to capacity to apply the learned skills in their writing for a particular purpose and the requirements of the curriculum.

As a consequence, these tasks can be used in the traditional or blended classroom in ESL writing teaching.

Task one: words and phrases

Task one is envisaged as a linguistic scaffolding task, and therefore the learners can engage themselves cognitively in the active use of the words and phrases in their writing about e-education (pages 65 to 85 in *Contemporary College English: Advanced Writing*, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2006).

This task locks on highlighting specific words and phrases/chunks in the texts which are closely related to the topic, to be utilised in their following writing tasks.

When previewing the texts, the students are rearranged into seven groups, to explore the thematic words/chunks/ universal vocabulary, and then to categorize the chunks of language which are used in these texts. It can be finished before or in class. As can be seen in the following groups: for groups 1-3, it is the thematic words/the chunks that are closely related to e-education; for groups 4-7, it is the universal words and phrases which apply to this or any other topic of e-education.

- 1) computer-mediated/computer-based/nontraditional/online/distance/virtual/digital education
- 2) traditional/face-to-face/orthodox/conventional education
- 3) learning mode /teaching method/ digital instrument/ tuition/ e-education/ e-schools/ on-site instruction/ teacher/mentor/ on the Net/ to pursue education/ nation-wide/virtual university
- 4) getting oneself updated/ to cultivate one's inner self/ to take oneself to a higher level/ to advance oneself/ to improve oneself/ become a wonderful person
- 5) supporter/ advocate/booster/critics/opponents
- 6) shortcoming/deficiency/limitation/ weak point/ demerit/ weakness/ flaw/ cons/ disadvantages/

faults/ limitations

7) virtue / strong point/ strength/ pros/ merit/ advantage

In this way word banks could be constructed in a collaborative way before class or in class and the teacher can add relevant items to the word banks over time.

This task is to broaden the students' vocabulary and to help them access words more effectively and subsequently to use them in their writing, which enriches the vocabulary they can employ in their essays, stimulates their linguistic curiosity and relieves their writing anxiety caused by lack of vocabulary. The greatest contribution this type of task makes to writing teaching is the creation of a language-rich learning environment.

Task two: sentence patterns

English and Chinese sentence patterns differ significantly from each other. For example, many English sentence patterns are tree-shaped with one or more clauses after a main clause, easy for Chomskyan tree diagrams, while Chinese sentence patterns are bamboo-shaped, hence a strong juxtaposition tendency. Otherwise put, the main difference lies in that English is considered as a hypotactic language and Chinese, a paratactic language. Therefore, we explore what can be universal sentence patterns and what can be English- or Chinese-specific sentence patterns, in each chapter, to alleviate the learners' writing anxiety, and to avoid Chinglish to some extent. Sentence one below is a universal sentence which is often used in an argumentative essay. The students can use the chunks (the fragments in the following brackets) in their essays.

- 1) I see the advantages of e-education overwhelming its disadvantages when compared with the traditional education system. (I see the advantages of ... overwhelming its disadvantages when compared with ...)
- 2) There are people holding the opinion that the rise of e-education is just a flash in the pan, while the so-called "orthodox education" offered in schools should and will still play the dominant role. (There are people holding the opinion that ..., while ...)
- 3) Four deficiencies, which are hard to remedy in the foreseeable future, throttle the development of e-education. (... deficiencies, which are hard to remedy in the foreseeable future, throttle the development of ...)
- 4) The first and foremost flaw of e-education lies in limited accessibility. (The first and foremost flaw of ... lies in ...)
- 5) However, one question has been overlooked by the advocates -- the access. (However, one question has been overlooked by the advocates ...)
- 6) There are still more flaws with the new mode of education: little attention and support from instructors, no extensive interaction with peers outside the cyberspace, no personalised teaching material and methods, and larger feasibility of cheating and plagiarism than traditional education in a classroom setting. (There are still more flaws with ... little ..., no ..., no ...)

Task three: paragraph-developing methods

When Chinese students compose argumentative essays, they often use examples and illustrations, ignoring largely other paragraph-developing methods See the following.

1) Development by definition

What is “e-education?” According to Professor Zhong Deliang from Renmin University, it is a type of education conducted in the environment of the internet with the guidance of modern educational theories. It makes full use of the Internet’s educational functions and resources, providing both the educators and the learners with abstract space for knowledge interaction, which is different from the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning mode. (see the above-mentioned textbook p81)

2) Development by data

Secondly, the tuition of e-schools is usually much lower than that of traditional schools, which enables more people to pursue further education in that way. According to a document released by UNESCO in 2001, the fees are, in average, 30% lower than those in traditional schools, whereas in the case of universities, the difference is much more obvious. Take Peking University for example, in 2003 alone, the average tuition for a traditional student reached 4,300 RMB per year, while an e-student was expected to pay no more than 2,980 RMB yearly. From this we can see why e-education has become the hope for many people, favoured by many well-informed parents and their children. In other words, e-education opens more doors to those aspiring for further education. (see the above-mentioned textbook p82)

The purpose of this task is to help students use different paragraph-developing methods in argumentative writing. The key methods are thus highlighted in this meaningful way in each unit and, consequently, the learners may master the different paragraph-developing methods introduced, after learning these units, and choose what they think are appropriate methods according to the topic in their writing.

Task four: list the advantages and disadvantages of e-education

The students are asked to exhaust all possible advantages and disadvantages of e-education. When writing argumentative essays, students often only list one or two, at times overlapping. e.g.,

The past decades have witnessed the rapid development of computer technology and the shipping information on a global scale through the Internet. E-education has gradually gained popularity in recent years. As we know, every coin has two sides, e-education is no exception. There has been both strengths and weaknesses.

Below are some of the pros and cons of e-education. After completing the chart, you should read pages 79 to 85 of the textbook and check your answers. Besides the pros and cons listed in your textbook, you can add the pros and cons of your own.

Advantages	Disadvantages

financial constraint
lack of learning resources
imbalances in e-education
the concept of e-education is not well promoted
it is not a formal way of education
the equipment is too expensive to afford
e-education removes many limitations existing in the present system
the tuition of e-schools is usually much lower than that of traditional schools
e-education has limited accessibility
e-education is costly

This task aims to have the students think of the details or examples to support the main idea.

Task five: ways of composing an essay

The task is envisaged as a composing-an-essay exercise that relates to the topic of e-education. The students are asked to write down the sentence outline of each essay in this unit. The following samples are illustrated of this task.

Outline one (pp79-81)

Topic: China, not ready for e-education

Thesis: Four deficiencies, which are hard to remedy in the foreseeable future, throttle the development of e-education.

Outline:

The first one is the financial constraint.

The second deficiency is the lack of learning resources.

Furthermore, some imbalances in e-education slow down the pace of development as well.

Last but not least, the concept of e-education is not well promoted and therefore not widely accepted.

Conclusion: The four deficiencies are and will be the stumbling block to e-education development for a long time.

Outline two (pp81-83)

Topic: E-education will make the future of education

Thesis: The advantages of e-education overwhelm its disadvantages when compared with the traditional education system.

Outline:

The opponents' view: Education will not replace the contemporary education system.

Reason 1: First, e-education is not a formal way of education.

Reason 2: E-education requires digital instruments, which is impossible for remote, underdeveloped areas.

Conclusion: Undeniably e-education has some deficiencies, but nothing is perfect at the beginning. As

time goes by, e-education is making progress, perfecting itself day by day.

The author's view: Judging from another aspect, I see the advantages of e-education overwhelm its disadvantages when compared with the traditional education system.

Reason 1: Firstly, e-education removes many limitations existing in the present system.

Reason 2: Secondly, the tuition of e-schools is usually much lower than that of traditional school.

Reason 3: As the technology is developing fast, those high-tech machines will gain ground at an amazing speed.

Reason 4: Meanwhile, more universities, including famous ones, have already had or are setting up their digital colleges to further improve their e-education system.

Conclusion: I firmly believe that e-education will surely be the future of education.

The goal of this activity is to raise students' awareness of the ways of composing an essay, which engages the students to organize their essays well and express their supporting ideas clearly, accurately, and logically.

Furthermore, with regard to eastern and western argumentative styles, English gives priority to a direct, explicit and deductive argumentative style, whereas Chinese prefers an indirect, implicit, and inductive style. This task presents the discourse dissimilarities between English and Chinese.

Task six: follow-on writing activity: Write an essay of about 300 words on the topic of e-education.

By this the students are supposed to compose an essay of e-education. The words, the sentence patterns and the ways of developing paragraphs can be emulated and supported in their essays. The preceding activities stimulate their writing curiosity and lay down a basis for further writing. And this task is to help the learners put into practice what has been acquired so far.

The above sample tasks that aim to engage learners simultaneously in writing knowledge (e.g. thematic words) and the writing skills that is required to compose an essay (e.g. sentence patterns, ways of developing the paragraphs or an essay) are presented. Once the students begin the tasks outlined above, they are well placed to move towards writing their own text. ESL learners could find it helpful to use a scaffold. This particular scaffold provides the students with a linguistic template which helps them organise their ideas in a smooth, coherent text. What the students can hope to achieve is their writing practice for the current topic and also potential competence for other writing topics in ESL writing classrooms.

5. Research Findings

Conventional writing teaching in China is by and large "dominated" by the teacher who pours the basic knowledge and skills of writing onto the students like a waterfall and then assigns them a topic assignment to accomplish after class, and when they hand in, corrects the essays. Its inherent deficiencies are the stumbling block to the writing development for a long time. According to my teaching experience, the application of "scaffolding theory" to writing teaching has at least the following advantages, compared with old ways:

“Student-centered” teaching method extends the opportunities for interaction between faculty and student, incorporating simulations, as well as collaborative learning. The whole teaching process lays great emphasis not on what the teacher does but on what students do. Students are the main characters in the play of learning, among other teaching activities. Now that writing skills need to be developed and improved through the practice of students themselves, the teaching effect should be based on the students’ learning involvement, which relies solely on their initiative and willing participation. Therefore, classroom teaching must be student-centered. It can be seen that the application of “scaffolding theory” to writing teaching is not only an improvement of teaching methods, but more importantly, it is a change of teaching concepts.

(2) This teaching method gives the teacher a full play of his guiding role. That is to say, the role of the teacher in this approach is not shrinking but amplifying, because the teacher, as we understand, is to act as an organiser, a collaborator and a mentor. He is to select what to teach, to design how to teach, to relegate who to participate this or that way on the ground of the teaching contents, students’ individual differences and the teaching environment and the like. In short, the new teaching mode puts forward higher requirements for the teacher who should properly attend to the students’ academic, technical and social needs, and the students who should follow the teacher and complete all tasks well-nigh independently.

(3) This teaching method fully taps the potential of students. The consciousness and mental state of the students involved in the process of learning are important factors that affect their learning effect. As known to all, the learners’ attitude, emotion and motivation in the learning to a great extent determine how well they learn. The new teaching mode urges students to complete the uneasy teaching tasks through interaction with the teacher and their seatmate peers within a limited time, which in its wake lead to a lively classroom teaching atmosphere capable of prompting the students’ greater wish to actively participate more such learning activities.

(4) This teaching method alleviates the burden on the teacher and improves his teaching effect. Thanks to the current teaching situation, Chinese ESL teachers invariably shoulder a heavy burden on scoring or revising the students’ assignments. It is a pity that many students do not read the workbooks with red correction signs. It can be seen that in the orthodox teaching mode, the teacher not only repeats the weekly if not daily arduous and seemingly unrewarding job, but also may damage students’ self-esteem and learning enthusiasm. In the new teaching mode, however, the teacher guides the students through, to “support each other and help each other”, and their collective wisdom on the rise can usually create more fruitful results. As shown by our teaching practice applying the “scaffolding theory”, in just one lesson, the whole class can complete the whole process from reviewing questions, expanding paragraphs and completing the full text, thus greatly reducing the tiring task on the part of the tired teacher and thus improving his hard-to-improve teaching effects. What is particularly commendable is that in this new teaching mode, poorer students can be inspired by the teaching process and their communication with better-developed peers and consequently may complete such learning tasks that

they could not have done before, hence an all-happy end of common improvement for all the class.

6. Conclusion

Among the various benefits brought by the application of the “scaffolding theory” to writing teaching, the most fundamental one is the students’ involvement in various teaching activities. Undoubtedly, it is a historical truism that the architecture of digital and traditional communications necessitates a new understanding of the structures and “space” of knowledge. The aforementioned “scaffolding theory” provides useful inspiration for solving some problems in English writing teaching for Chinese undergraduates in that the teacher knows he can effectively teach writing.

The above tasks, as demonstrated, reveal that among other things, how an English-writing teacher in China’s soil can incorporate the scaffolding theory into the teaching of English writing in very practical ways. While carrying out the preceding tasks, the students are encouraged to engage actively individually or cooperatively (in groups). The tasks, as said, taking English writing (particularly argumentative essays) for ESL students into consideration in a planned way, sure is not a key to all problems, meeting all of the needs of the ESL learners or removing all the challenges of acquiring complex writing tasks completely. By this approach the teacher may invite the students to complete the above tasks in small groups, each group centering around a particular aspect. Follow-on activities then could involve them actively in the use of words, sentence patterns, paragraph-developing and essay-composing strategies etc., all oriented towards a written text as required.

As an ESL writing teacher very familiar with the requirements of writing, he is well-placed to identify language difficulties that need to be resolved by students if they are to write smoothly. As demonstrated above, mastery of these language features goes well beyond the learning of writing skills. Because ESL students need to know what to write, how to write and to/for whom to write in the writing tasks. The above scaffolding ways contribute a lot to the language awareness, reading and writing skills of the students.

Given many Chinese ESL teachers might find it useful to have these types of activities outlined above, this would certainly improve their teaching. Collaborative work could prove to ease their teaching burden while proving fruitful in the development of ESL students’ writing ability. The potentials for collaborative work in writing would seem more than obvious in our cases.

An ESL teacher cannot assume or guarantee that every student can master the learned language fully. Nor can it be taken for granted that the writing skills of each topic is to be acquired easily by ESL students. For these reasons, it is of great importance that the ESL teacher continue to explore ways of teaching English writing to China’s undergraduates, helping students to avoid pragmalinguistic failures; sociopragmatic failures in their writing.

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