

Principles of designing second foreign language teaching material

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Abstract: The improvement of second language learners' linguistic performance seems a tortuous process especially for the advanced English learners in China. Although native speakers give their witty sayings and sparkling comments, the majority of Chinese students could only rigidly apply English phrases they have learned from the textbooks very passively. Guided by foreign monographs in English language acquisition, a learner-centred second language teaching material is designed, underpinning the principles of providing authentic input for learners, drawing learners' attention to the linguistic features of input, providing opportunities for learners to communicate in target language, fostering learners' autonomy and offering guidance for autonomic learning. The activities designed in this teaching material have especially catered to the needs of advanced English learners, by providing them with more input resources, more feedback as well as more guidance in self-evaluation and self-learning after class for their further improvement. The material design would enlighten modern textbook compilers in guiding advanced second language learners' autonomic learning.

Key words: second language acquisition; teaching material; advanced English learners; process writing; learner-centred material

1 Introduction

"My writing teacher in school always asks us to read more model essays and learn from them. But the point is how to learn from them? I have already learned the structure of essays and ways to construct my paragraphs with the ideas I come up with. However, I just don't know how to make them more persuasive and reveal a high level of linguistic proficiency like the model essays do. And I hardly have time to do extensive reading to enrich my ideas to write an essay." --Yuyan Wang, 18

The words above, spoken by a student who is striving for a high mark in his English test, represent a prevailing issue. The desire of students for more input, more feedback and more guidance in second language acquisition is an intractable challenge for teachers in China. Especially when faced with time constraints in the classroom, it is tough for them to offer that much academic support as their students required. Therefore, designing a teaching material to assist differentiated learners to receive more guidance in self-learning based on their own language proficiency becomes an increasingly urgent task.

This paper introduces a designed second foreign language teaching material focusing on improving Chinese advanced English learners' linguistic performance, and illustrates how this teaching material meets the requirements of contemporary Chinese students during their English learning process.

2 Context

After previous training in elementary and intensive writing courses, the advanced writing learners have already acquired a set of fundamental writing skills as well as lexical resources for essay. Thus, learners would like to focus more on the further improvement of their independent writing content and linguistic proficiency level, which demands for a higher-level skill of demonstrating ample evidence for argument, more appropriate word choice and syntactic variety in writing. Only absorbing a list of vocabulary, grammatical phrase or sentence structures alone may not satisfy second language learners' needs in improving their linguistic performance, but an official guide edited by English-speaking countries could give a hint. We can refer to the marking criteria of Band 5 TOEFL independent writing (the highest-level writing in the international English test) in *The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test* [1] (Educational Testing Service, 2012) as below:

"Effectively addresses the topic and task; Is well organized and well developed, using clearly appropriate explanations, exemplifications, and/or details; Displays unity, progression, and coherence; Displays consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety, appropriate word choice, and idiomaticity, though it may have minor lexical or grammatical errors."

Hence, two focuses of this material will be respectively on the content and language of writing, with each unit consisting of two different parts (i.e. Part 1 Focus on Content and Part 2 Focus on Language). Besides, according to the general independent writing questions collected from past TOEFL tests, which intend to examine students' perspectives towards social issues in their daily life, this writing material is designed based on a thematic syllabus (see Fig.1. Syllabus table). As mentioned by Tomlinson, if the learning objectives include improving students' social awareness, it is advisable to select more challenging themes such as environment or other globally concerning issues, "go beyond the conventional boundaries of textbooks" [3]. That's the reason why in choosing topics for advanced writing learners, the themes like environment, media and job will be included in this material.

Unit 1 Environment	
Part 1 Focus on Content	Part 2 Focus on Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Topic warm-up - Discussion - Picture explanation ·Reading ·Summary of introduction paragraph - Model - Structure review ·Introduction paragraphs comparison - Giving social background ·Peer-review: Content - Checklist ·Assignment - Revision: second draft 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Sample writing - Vocabulary - Syntax ·Vocabulary practice ·Syntax - Emphatic opinion ·Grammar: To express emphasis - It cleft-sentence - Subject-auxiliary inversion ·Second revision ·Peer-review: Language - Checklist - Discussion - Presentation ·Assignment - Sample writing for self-learning - New topic for writing: Media 1)Prepare to write: clustering 2)Unit project: research 3)Writing: first draft

Fig. 1. Syllabus table

3 Rationale

3.1 Pedagogy

The sequence of writing activities in this material is based on the pedagogy process writing, which corresponds with the learner-centred language syllabus, as the process of writing is highly individualistic. Comprised of prewriting, drafting, recursive revising and editing stages, this pedagogy can not only provide more writing support for students in class, but also provide a variety of techniques that learners may find useful for themselves. It is worth mentioning that due to limited writing time in class, this material, designed especially for the advanced writing learners who can write an essay independently, leaves the writing draft completion task after class. Consequently, the prewriting stage in the writing process has been proposed at the end of the former class, led by the teacher. And students are encouraged to finish their first draft of the new topic writing at home, as their assignment, before the new topic instruction begins in the next class (see Fig. 1 "Assignment: New topic for writing at Part 2" of each unit).

As Langer claims, writing and reading are closely related activities in terms of language use and cognitive formation. Considerable research has documented the connection between writing and reading [2]. The strategies that writers and readers use to remember, organize and present content are almost the same in writing and reading. Considering this and learner's need for more input to refresh their mind, a reading activity helping to organize students' ideas as the writing content has been added (see Fig. 1. "Reading at Part 1 Focus on content" of each unit). It then introduces students to the summary writing of a particular paragraph in essay, with the paragraph structure review and a model included as guidance for them, facilitating students' final output in writing by making use of the authentic material written from other authors' points of view. Samgorinsky points out that learners can identify the elegance as well as articulation of a piece of good writing, and then reproduce these in their own expression.

White and Arndt pointed out that model essays written by other authors could also be introduced in the process-focused lessons only if students had written their own draft prior to the presentation of the model text, regarded as a kind of resource for further learning instead of a model for pure mimicry. Therefore, given the advanced learners' urgent needs for guided study of a large number of model essays, a typical sample writing of the same topic is selected as resources to further improve learners' language proficiency level after their "first draft writing in Part 2 Assignment", with its language points being illustrated through the following vocabulary-review activity, syntactic comparison activity to raise learners' language awareness, as well as latter successive PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) grammar activities for syntax learning (see Fig. 1. "Part 2 Focus on Language").

3.2 Activity

In terms of the design of activity forms, I choose learner-centeredness as the core principle for the writing teaching material. Since the target learners are mostly advanced English learners, it is of great possibility that they already have their own preferred learning styles after several rounds of writing skills development. What counts for a material developer is that they pay attention to their target learners' differences in their preferred learning styles, and there shall be no tendency for the material developer assuming that all the learners who can benefit from the same approaches are the good language learners. Taking the learner-centred tenet into account, the principles underpinning the design of writing teaching material are as below, most taken from Tomlinson [4]:

1. Provide authentic input for learners
2. Draw learners' attention to the linguistic features of input
3. Provide opportunities for learners to communicate by using target language
4. Foster learner autonomy and offer guidance for autonomic learning

4 Evidence of the pedagogical principles within materials

4.1 Process writing pedagogy

The sequence of activities in the writing material is based on the stages of White and Arndt's *Process Writing*, whose activities centre on the following processes: generating, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating and re-viewing. White and Arndt claim that the sequence of activities presented in individual teacher's final material does not necessarily align with such processes, as the writing process is actually a recursive one. The detailed illustration of activity sequence is presented in the table below:

Table 1. Activity sequence

Process	Form	Activity	Instruction
1 Generating	1.1 Brainstorm	Prepare to write: clustering	Provide stimulus topic, ask each student starts writing their ideas on paper.
	1.2 Making notes	Prepare to write: listing & outlining	<i>Listing</i> (making unstructured notes): ask students to write down ideas concerning the topic; <i>Outlining</i> (making structured notes): nominate categories for students to arrange their ideas.
	1.3 Using questions	Topic warm-up	Give a topic to writers, who then use a series of questions to stimulate thinking.
2 Focusing	Considering audience	Throughout the whole Unit 2	<i>Topic warm-up</i> : ask students to exchange about their interesting experience and interrupt each other when the speaker's information offered is not clear; <i>Peer-review</i> : ask students to exchange their drafts in pairs and evaluate each other's work according to the checklist.
3 Structuring	3.1 Grouping ideas into frameworks	Prepare to write: clustering	Use 'spidergram' technique for grouping information. Student produce a range of ideas on the topic of crops.
	3.2 Considering priorities	New topic for writing: Media	Start students generating ideas on the chosen topic and ask them to do more research on information about this topic; then let them choose an opinion they would like to support and write.
4 Drafting	4.1 Considering ways of beginning	Giving social background	After review of the introduction paragraph structure in summary part, provide some paragraph examples for comparison: ask students to choose an opening that interests them most and note any similarities with or differences from their own writing.
	4.2 Adding information	Giving evidence	Ask students to analyse another student's draft example, in order to identify where extra information is needed; use 'planning cues' for prompts; at last display the paragraph including additional explanation.
5 Evaluating	5.1 Developing criteria for evaluation	Peer-review checklist	Get students to work together through their writings: mark the places where can be improved according to the checklist.
	5.2 Becoming your own critic	First draft evaluation	Get students to read critically first their own draft after class; then read the draft of their partner during Peer-review activity; later, discuss each of their texts in turn to offer suggestions for improvement.
	5.3 Reading and responding:	Peer-review	Have students work with a partner: get each to read other's draft, and make notes in it of the places they particularly liked or disliked; return papers to each other and discuss the points they have noted.
6 Re-viewing	Editing	First Revision	Ask students to revise the content of their first draft writing.
		Second Revision	Ask students to revise the language of their second draft writing.

4.2 Learner-centred material

4.2.1 Provide authentic input for learners

Granted, the authentic input of target language is not sufficient for learners' acquisition since they also need to be aware of how the language is used and try to interact with the input instead of just passively receiving [4]. Nonetheless, it is quite necessary for them to be exposed to authentic material if the material developer can stimulate their interaction with the input. Firstly, in order to promote more physical or mental response of learners while handling the input, in this

material, the authentic articles selected from the government brochure in "Unit 1 Reading activity", which inform students of relevant topic knowledge (i.e. environmental issues being heatedly debated all over the world), are only presented after the pre-reading comprehension questions or reading task. Additionally, followed by a "Summary activity", the reading material is designed to enrich students' ideas taken from authentic input so that they can better organize and enrich the content of their own writing. Secondly, the language input can also be based on the knowledge and experience of individual learners. The "Unit project activities" (i.e. research and interview in this material) assigned after class require students not only to make notes of their own perspectives towards the topic but also to gather information through other channels from their surroundings.

4.2.2 Draw learners' attention to the linguistic features of input

It seems that many researchers would agree paying more attention to the linguistic features of input can help learners acquire those features to some extent. Whether such attention is conscious or subconscious, Tomlinson points out that the crucial point is that learners shall be aware of the gap between how they understand and use the language currently and the corresponding feature in target language. For instance, in "Part 2 Focus on Language", before the sample writing is shown, students have a requirement in their minds that they should not only appreciate the demonstration article, but also distinguish the language features in the demonstration article that are different from their usual writing style. Also, after the sample writing presentation, the subsequent questions which remind students to think of the function as well as characteristic of these syntax can act as an "acquisition facilitator".

4.2.3 Provide opportunities for learners to communicate by using target language

There are a lot of benefits for learners if they are given opportunities to communicate by using the target language. Above all, learners can check their internal hypotheses' effectiveness, automate their existing ways of using the target language and further develop their strategic competence. When the use of language is interactive and encourages learners' negotiation of meaning at the same time, the effect exerted on learners is even greater. The discussion in "warming-up" activity at the beginning of each unit is such an activity for students to exchange their existing knowledge through interaction and negotiation of meaning. In addition, the discussion during "peer-review" activities to evaluate learners' progress in their writing content and linguistic proficiency (respectively in Part 1 and Part 2) after new knowledge acquisition promotes students' output to become a kind of "informative source of input" for each other in pairs.

4.2.4 Foster learner autonomy and offer guidance for autonomic learning

Having their own preferred learning styles, advanced language learners are in greater needs of the guidance on how to explore new knowledge which is particularly useful for themselves, rather than the prescribed general knowledge which is only applicable for most elementary learners. For instance, the sample writing for self-learning activity in "Part 2 Assignment", accompanied by the tasks of an online post of students' selected language points and learning from other students' posts, cultivates students' habit of autonomic learning from models after class. Gradually, after the guidance of sample writing learning activity in class (see the beginning of "Part 2 Focus on Language"), students can also do extensive appreciation of outstanding writing works from other authors whenever they need after class. Furthermore, the checklist embedded in every draft writing and peer-review activity in the material does foster learner autonomy by raising students' awareness of checking their own writings each time.

5 Conclusion

Being grounded on the *Process Writing* pedagogy, the activities designed in this teaching material have especially catered to the needs of advanced English learners, by providing resources of more input, more feedback as well as more

guidance on self-evaluation and self-learning after class for their further improvement, which is indeed a learner-centred material.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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