



A Schema–Theory Based Study on the Improvement of the College Students’ English Writing

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Abstract

College English Test-Band 4 is of great importance for non-English major students. However, some related survey shows that students’ writing competence in CET4 is far from satisfactory. Thus improving students’ writing ability has become the urgent task for English teachers and language scholars. The author carries on a ten-week empirical research on the application of schema theory to non-English majors’ EFL writing teaching. Before the experiment, 120 freshmen of non-English majors are randomly chosen as a sample. The subjects are divided into two groups. One is the control group, and the other is the experimental group. The former receives traditional English writing teaching mode. The latter receives schema-theory based writing training. The author goes on to make statistical treatments with questionnaires, the interview, the pretest and posttest in writing. The result shows: Schema-theory based writing training has a great effect on non-English majors’ writing ability, which also helps college students change their writing habits and writing mode. Their linguistic accuracy, content correctness and formal appropriateness have been achieved after schema-based writing training. The participants in experimental group hold a positive attitude toward the new way of writing teaching.

Key words: Schema theory; EFL writing teaching; Non-English majors; College students

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complex process of language communication and a creative thinking process (Zuo, 2002, p.197), in which a writer needs to experience complex mental organizations of lexical choices, structural options and appropriate organization of content and form. Wang (2000) claimed: Being a complex cognitive activity, writing a good essay is an organic organization of content and form.

In China, learning English is not an easy thing for non-English major students. As is known, writing is the most difficult skill to master. Just as David Nunan (1999, p.271) thinks, “composing a coherent, fluent and extended essay is probably the most difficult task to do even for a native speaker”. For second language learners the challenges are greater. In recent years, writing has been stressed in the universities of China. In 1985, a syllabus called “the College English Syllabus for Undergraduates Majoring in Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences” was issued, which made English writing as important as other four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and translating) in college English teaching. According to the requirements of College English Curriculum (2004), students are required to write complete, clear and coherent passages in the limited time. The new CET4 has got a comprehensive promotion since June, 2007. Compared to the old form, the biggest change of new CET4 is that the writing part has been placed at the beginning, which reflects the importance of writing. Appearance of writing in the first section will have a serious influence on students if it is badly done. Therefore, writing a good composition in CET4 is of great significance. According to the marking

rubric of CET4, testees have to finish a 120-150 words composition of the given topic within thirty minutes. The content needs to be coherent and without serious mistakes. Since 1986, when the CET4 was first held, the average English writing score of Chinese college students has been below 9 points (15 is the total) whether the students are from key universities or from the ordinary colleges (Zhang, 2004). Since 2006, the total score has been 710, with writing still taking 15 percent. A lot of English teachers find most students can only get 40% to 50% of the total score, which is much lower than the required level, and that there is significant difference between these testees' scores. After surveying the writing performance of Chinese students studying abroad in Texas of the USA, Teng (1993m p.65) said that teachers in China emphasized the grammatical structure too much and ignored the training process of writing. So it is not hard for them to do grammar exercises. But writing is another thing. Written discourse consists of sentences. Yet combination of sentences doesn't mean a good writing. Writing must have its own rules and strategies. In CET 4, testees are usually required to write an argumentative essay, but problems always occur. "When students give examples and explanations, their writings are short of coherence and the sentences are not logically connected (Zhang, 1995). What worries English teachers are that although most students have learned English for many years, they still can not write a good essay. College English teachers have made a great effort to change it, but a large gap still exists between the teachers' diligent work and student' poor performance in writing. Therefore studies of EFL writing become necessary and urgent.

The writer conducts this research in order to have a better understanding of schema theory, to know how schemata operate, how we can help students to activate the schemata stored in their mind and try to make good use of schema theory to teach EFL writing, especially for non-English major students.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term of schema theory first appeared in Bartlett's book *Remembering* in 1932. Bartlett was a famous Gestalt psychologist. He believed that schema is "an active organization of past reactions or of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in any well-adapted organic response" (Bartlett, 1932, p.201). But Bartlett did not state how schemata work.

Since 1970s, due to the development of artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology, many scholars have developed their concepts of schema (Rumelhart 1980; Widdowson 1983). Rumelhart studied the effect of schema on foreign language reading and considered schema as a complex and abstract mental structure of knowledge, or "the building block of cognition"

(Rumelhart, 1980). Anderson (1985), O'Malley (1990) did further exploration on schema and claimed that schema is a way of information storing in long-term memory. Cook (1997) regarded schema to be "a mental representation of a typical instance", and it provides an easiest way for people to read the world since "people understand new experiences by activating relevant schemata in their mind". Brown and Yule (2000, p.248) also defined schemata as "the organized background knowledge which helps people to understand or predict different aspects of discourses".

Although these definitions of schema are different in wording, they have something in common: Schemata are the means by which knowledge is constructed and maintained in human brain.

Schema theory tries to use the cognitive psychological theory to analyze the cognitive structures in human mind. The main point of the theory is that when people try to understand new information, they should relate the new information with their acquired knowledge, past experience, i. e. background knowledge. The input information should match these schemata (Wang, 1999). The basic principle of schema theory is as follows: any language material, whether it is oral or written form, it is meaningless by itself; it guides the hearer or reader to recover or constitute the meanings of sentences according to original knowledge in one's mind.

1.1 Different Types of Schemata in English Writing

With the accumulation of various kinds of knowledge, schema is gradually formed. Cognitive psychologists usually divide schemata into two kinds: content schema and formal schema. But with the application of schemata in language teaching, schemata can be categorized into three kinds including linguistic schema, formal schema and content schema. The importance of these three types of schemata in English writing will be explained below.

1.1.1 Linguistic Schema in English Writing

Linguistic schema refers to the existing form of students' acquired linguistic knowledge and linguistic competence. Carrell (1988) thinks that teachers should build up students' linguistic knowledge by providing them with appropriate vocabulary. "Without abundant vocabulary, it's impossible to undertake reading, translating, listening, speaking and writing" (Jia, 1996, p.89). A skillful writer can activate the linguistic schema at his disposal in the writing. On the contrary, students who do not acquire enough linguistic schema cannot understand the linguistic information, let alone activate the content and formal schemata related with the context. Thus, linguistic schema is the foundation and plays an important role in English writing.

1.1.2 Formal Schema in English Writing

Formal schema is the knowledge of different styles of discourses, such as the differences between the types of writing, figures of speech, and the differences of structures, etc.. In 1983, Carrell and Eisterhold viewed formal schema as a macrostructure of a text. If the style and the writing pattern of a passage are familiar to students, it will be much easier for them to get across the offered information (e.g. words, titles, pictures, tables) and activate the stored formal schema in the brain. Owing to the different ways of thinking in different cultures, there are different formal schemata about paragraph development and cohesive usage between English and Chinese. "English writing is quite direct and formulaic. Writers always first state the topic or the goal of an article clearly and then provide the supporting details. The paragraph and essay structure should clarify the relationship between details and the unifying ideas" (Nunan, 2001, p.297). In contrast, Chinese paragraphs are more indirect and usually developed in a spiral form. With respect to cohesive devices, native English is in favor of "Hypotaxis" to use cohesive devices to link sentences while China prefers "Parataxis" which stresses the cohesion of meaning. So it's necessary for Chinese learners to know the differences. What's more, every text has its definite communicative purpose, either to narrate a story or an event, or describe a person or an object, or explain a phenomenon and causes, or argue to persuade others, etc.. The genre of each text is determined by the respective communicative purpose. Thereby, the rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse as well as influences the arrangement of content and style (Kay & Dudley-Ecans, 1998).

1.1.3 Content Schema in English Writing

Content schema is the background knowledge existing in the learners' mind, including the familiarity of the topic, cultural knowledge, and prior experience. Content schema is usually culture-specific, which includes conceptual knowledge or information about a certain topic, and how some happenings relate to each other. To some extent, content schema can make up the shortage of linguistic schema and enrich the content of the composition. Each individual has his own life experience, so his schema is unique. Writing "should not be viewed solely as an

individually-oriented, inner-directed cognitive process, but as much as an acquired response to the discourse conventions with particular communities" (Swales, 1990, p.4). When non-English speakers write in English, "the act of writing is not only social, but also cross-cultural. It involves a socially and culturally complex rhetorical context". (Qi, 2000, p.36) The people of the same culture have the same background knowledge due to their shared cultural properties. On the contrary, people from different cultures have different schema structure which may lead to misunderstanding. Carrell's studies (1987, 1988) revealed that the content schemata or knowledge proposed by a text which interacts with the reader's own background knowledge can make the text easier to read and understand than those based on a less familiar, more distant culture. Just as Kern (2000) said, the nature of schema stands for the way we human beings see the world from the viewpoint of our own specific culture, so sometimes successful communication between the writer and the reader will not be achieved, especially intercultural communication.

1.2 Activation of Appropriate Schemata

People consider writing as a constructive and creative social process. Schema activation is generally recognized as the process in which some textual stimuli signal the direction or area for the reader to look for and evoke the relevant schema from memory into the present reading task (Li & Chen, 1997). To comprehend a text, we must activate the appropriate schemata. There are two reasons that students can not write a good article. On the one hand, students lack the appropriate schema. On the other hand, they may have an appropriate schema in memory but fail to activate it. Studies by Carrell and his colleagues have convincingly demonstrated that our comprehension and memory will be poor when the passage is written so obscurely that we can not determine what might be the right schema. The failure to activate an appropriate schema may be either because the writer does not provide sufficient clues for the reader to activate the schemata stored in the mind, or because the reader possess the appropriate schemata expected by the writer and then fails to comprehend. The following table will show some techniques to activate the stored schemata. See Table 1.

Table 1
Techniques to Activate Stored Schemata

Activities	Purpose
Brainstorming	Think out related words and phrase.
Semantic mapping	Write down words or draw a simple outline.
Experience sharing	Discuss similar or related issues.
Guide questions	Encourage students to prompt questions or pictures.
Content-based reading	Read related short texts for gist, either English or Chinese.
Advanced organizing	Recall and transfer prior knowledge to new information.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the effects of schema theory on Chinese EFL students' English writing, qualitative method is adopted to analyze data gathered from their written products, questionnaires, and personal interview. This chapter provides a detailed account of the design and methodology of the present study.

2.1 Research Objectives

The researcher uses personal interview and written products to obtain reliable and multiple data. Through these valid data, the author finds evidence to prove the effectiveness of schema theory applied to EFL writing. Focusing on the qualitative analysis, the author aims at exploring an effective teaching method of English writing

2.2 Subjects

The researcher randomly selects 120 freshmen from 4 different majors in Henan Polytechnic University. All these students in the 4 majors have the same lessons in English with the same textbooks; and their teachers have the same teaching syllabus; they are given the same topic to write. Among them, the number of the subjects in the experimental group is 60:30 students majoring in Chinese, 30 students majoring in Computer Science and Technology. Furthermore, the number of the subjects in the control group is also 60:30 students in Applied Mathematics, 30 students in International Trade. Neither of the two groups has received any kind of the schema-based writing training before the experiment.

Table 2
Background Information About the Two Groups

Group	Number	Male	Female
EG	60	40	20
CG	60	35	25
Total	120	75	45

Note. EG is short for the Experimental Group and CG for the Control Group.

During the time of ten weeks' experiment (from Oct.10th, 2014 to Dec. 24th, 2015), all the students chosen finished the experiment and the research with the author.

2.3 Experimental Instruments

The author employs pretest and posttest writing tasks and personal interviews as the major experimental instruments. Pretest is mainly used to test students' writing ability in the traditional class. Posttest is employed to check the effects of schema-based instruction of EFL writing on college students. Individual interview can help the author know whether these subjects hold a positive or negative attitude towards the schema-based writing instruction directly and know more about the effect of schema-based writing. By comparing the results, we will get an accurate and effective conclusion.

2.3.1 Pretest and Posttest

The titles of writing used in the pretest and posttest are selected from CET4: One is from CET4 in December, 2014. The other is from CET4 in June, 2015. Just because those subjects are freshmen, they have never taken part in CET4. The writing topics for the pretest and posttest are new to them, which makes the reliability guaranteed. In order to know the subjects' true writing ability, the two topics chose are closely related to students' life. The topic of the pretest is: Creating a Green Campus. The topic in the posttest is: Due Attention Should be given to spelling. Thus, minimizing the possible culture-bound influence on the performance of the subjects can be realized. Papers are collected and graded by three experienced teachers according to the standard of CET4. After the pretest, students in the experimental group will have a schema-based writing training (about half an hour each time) every week, which lasts for 10 weeks.

2.3.2 Personal Interview

In order to know whether the schema-based writing training is an effective way to improve college students' writing performance and to know students' attitudes toward this new mode of writing, the author conducts a personal interview. Totally, 20 students (including both girls and boys) are randomly chosen as interviewees from EG. Before the personal interview, the teacher has introduced schematic knowledge to students in the process of ten weeks' schema-based writing training. Below are questions raised in the interview:

- (a) What is your attitude towards schema-based writing?
- (b) Do you still feel difficult to write an English composition?
- (c) Have you got any improvements in writing after schema-based training?
- (d) Do you think it is necessary to apply schema theory to EFL writing teaching?

2.4 Experimental Procedures

At first, students from EG and CG are asked to take pretest writing at the same time, and then questionnaires are handed out. Next, CG students still have their traditional English class. EG students will have a schema-based writing training. After ten weeks' training, EG and CG students are given posttest writing. Finally, a personal interview is conducted only to EG students.

In the control group, the teacher tells students general writing skills in their English class, and asks them to write compositions after class. And then students are required to hand in their compositions. The teacher will grade their compositions and correct the errors. These students do not receive any knowledge of schema theory.

In the experimental group, a schema-based training is practiced, which lasts for ten weeks. This process of writing training is divided into 10 periods, occupying 30 minutes every time. Each period the author as well as the

researcher covers a topic which has occurred in the past CET4. These topics can remind students of their stored schema, and they are also helpful for constructing and consolidating new schemata.

2.5 An Example of the Schema-Based Writing Training

The schema-based writing training usually follows four steps: semantic mapping, experience sharing, content-based reading and then advanced organizing.

Firstly, the teacher gives a topic, and students are required to discuss it in groups and work out the semantic

map. Here semantic mapping technique is used to motivate and involve students in the thinking process. The framework of semantic mapping includes: the concept word, some category examples, and other examples. This interactive process is modeled by the teacher at the beginning. The teacher first writes down the concept word on the board, asks students to think of as many words as they can for the concept word and then writes a list on the board and have students copy them, and finally asks students to put the words into categories. The following is a brief sample of a semantic map done by students on the topic of Spring Festival Gala:

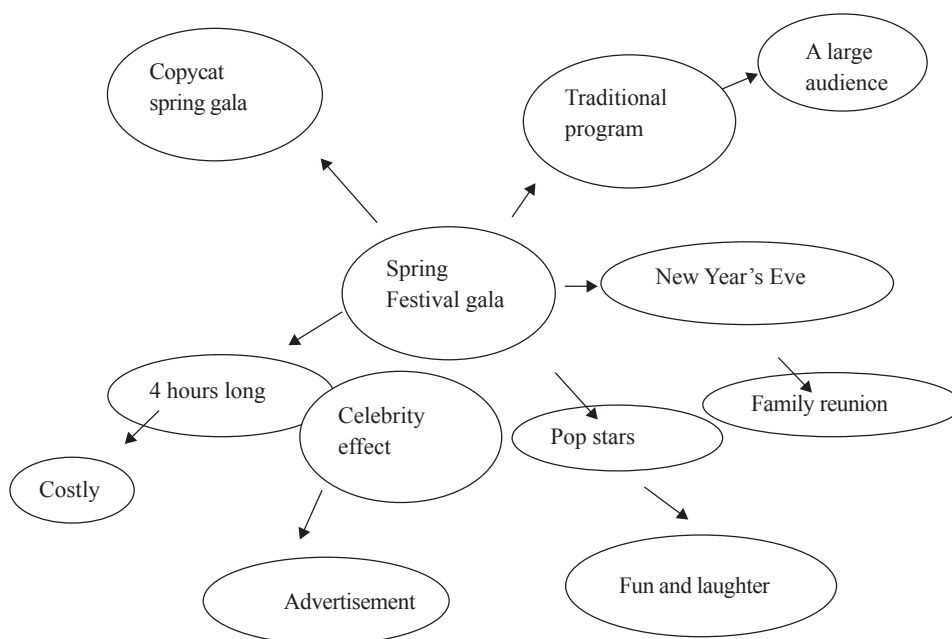


Figure 1
A Semantic Map on the Topic of Spring Festival Gala

With the semantic mapping, students can think of linguistic schema and content schema from these key words. If students make use of this information, the relevant schemata in their minds can be activated.

Secondly, the teacher asks students to talk about their own experiences relevant to the writing topic, which can not only help students to gain some background knowledge but also help relate the new to the known. Take the topic “Spring Festival Gala” for example, the teacher instructs them by asking such questions as “What do you usually do on New Year’s Eve?” “Do you think it is worthy watching Spring Festival Gala?” “Which program of Spring Festival Gala impressed you most?” “Have you ever watched Spring Festival Gala from the beginning to the end?” etc.. When the students talk about their experiences guided by these questions, their content schema of Spring Festival Gala are activated. The goal of experience sharing is to help the students predict the content of their writing and the textual organization.

Thirdly, the teacher provides several articles closely related to the writing topic. The explanations of key vocabulary and structures are given on the right side of each article. The students are asked to read the articles within the prescribed time. As reading and writing are closely linked according to schema theory, it is necessary to have sufficient reading input for writing. These reading materials either in Chinese or in English are not expected as writing models but as sources of information. This step provides students with an extended study of a topic before writing, which means there is “active control of ideas” and “extensive processing of new information” (Anthony, 1985) before students begin to write. While selecting reading materials, the teacher should bear in mind that there is cultural difference between Chinese and English so as to raise students’ awareness of the cultural knowledge. This content-based reading step not only supplies the necessary materials for students to build up their schemata, but also facilitate students’ lexical and syntactic development. The following passage are

provided by the writer to students when deal with the writing topic “Spring Festival Gala”.

A Focus on Spring Festival Gala’s Stage Design

One of the programs they’ll look forward to in Hong Kong is CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala. In our regular look at preparations for the CCTV Gala, we turn the spotlight on stage design. It’s all about creating magic, giving the audience an unforgettable view of one of the world’s most glittering performances.

The unadorned stage has had a face lift. As the curtain rises, this year’s stage design has already won high acclaim from audiences taking part in the first two rehearsals.

Chen Linchun, director, said, “the stage design involves more high technology than ever. The stage is surrounded by screens. There is one huge LED high-definition at the back of the stage. And there are screens on each pillar. The screens will show pictures that vary with the program.”

The lift stage and the waterfall-like backdrop are other highlights. More stunts and amazing performances can be achieved through this combination of technology and art. With the festival eve approaching, nerves are getting a little frayed in every quarter of the staff. People are working hard, attending to every detail to make everything perfect.

<http://www.cctv.com/program/cultureexpress/20080130/101078.shtml>

When students finished reading these materials, the teacher asks them questions as “Do you think there are some other forms of entertainment that can replace Spring Festival Gala on CCTV?” “Do you think it takes too much human resource and financial resource to hold such a program?” “What do you most appreciate in the Spring Festival Gala?” etc.. With the guidance of these questions, students will revise their previous semantic mapping of the writing task and then easily organize their ideas and the passage structure.

Fourthly, the teacher adopts an advanced organizer step to enrich students’ formal schemata. Take the topic “Spring Festival Gala” for example, the teacher first instructs students how to write argumentative essays and presents the following brief summary of differences between Chinese and English argumentative essays: Chinese paragraphs are developed in a spiral process with implicit expression of main idea by an inductive approach. In contrast, English paragraphs are often developed in a linear process with explicit main point by adopting a deductive approach. Besides, compared with Chinese usage of “Parataxis” which prefers to cohesion of meaning, English is in favor of “Hypotaxis” to use cohesive devices. Problem-solution, cause-effect and comparison-contrast patterns are often adopted in writing argumentative essays. “Spring Festival Gala” belongs to the comparison-contrast pattern.

Here is the framework of paragraph development on “Spring Festival Gala” according to comparison and contrast created cooperatively by teacher and students: The first paragraph states the phenomenon that there is a widely held discussion concerning the necessity of holding the CCTV Spring Festival Gala. The supporters’ viewpoint is: Spring Festival Gala should keep on being observed on New Year’s Eve because the TV show can give people a lot of fun and laughter. In the second paragraph the critics state a totally different viewpoint that the program should be cancelled: a. It may waste a lot of time of the audiences since the program usually lasts for 4 hours or above. It will also cost a large amount of money of our government, such as leasing the site, inviting the stars and investments in repeated rehearsals. In the last paragraph the writer states his/her own viewpoint: As far as I am concerned, I prefer the program to stay, served as an occasion for families to get together, the Spring Festival gala is a tradition and treasure of Chinese people.

The teacher also needs to offer some cohesive devices:

Contrast: But, however, on the other hand, after all, on the contrary, by/in contrast, even though, conversely, rather, whereas, nonetheless, yet, nevertheless.

Conclusion: Finally, then, thus, hence, therefore, so, in conclusion, to sum up, to summarize, to conclude, in short, in brief.

Result: Therefore, hence, consequently, as a result, all in all, thereby, thereupon.

The teacher may introduce other types of writing patterns and cohesive devices to cultivate their way of thinking and guides students to be aware of English formal schema. Having given different framework of an essay, the teacher assigns students to finish the composition and arrange another similar topic for students to practice the textual structure so as to consolidate the learnt schemata.

The four steps mentioned above have their respective focuses. Semantic mapping, experience sharing and content-based reading mainly deal with linguistic and content schemata. While advanced organizer contributes a lot to a clear understanding of the formal schemata. In EFL writing course, the teacher can apply these steps alternately to activate and build students’ linguistic, content and formal schemata in English writing.

3. RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following are direct transcription from the handwritten compositions in the pretest and posttest by the same student. All the grammatical, lexical and spelling errors are his original.

3.1 Writing Products

Pretest writing

Creating a Green Campus

Today (1), I want to say something about creating a green campus (2). Firstly (3), it is very important (4), it is not just plant more trees (5), more grass in school (6), but also we should build a good atmosphere (7). Now more and more bad manners come into school (8), such as fighting (9). We should protect our students (10), so we must do something (11).

In order to do this (12), we should usually educate our students (13), for example (14), we can give a speech (15).

In order to do this (16), we can also punish our students (17).

In a word (18), we should let our school more and more beautiful (19), greener and greener (20).

(101 words)

Posttest writing

Due Attention Should Be Given to Spelling

Nowadays there is a common phenomenon in college that fewer and fewer students pay attention to spelling (1). According to a recent survey (2), there is a dramatic increase in the number of students who can only imitate the pronunciation of a word but be incapable of spelling of it (3).

There are a number of factors accounting for this situation (4). First of all (5), the goal of most students to learn English is to pass the examination which reduces the importance of spelling (6). What's more (7), the wide use of electronic devices such as e-dictionaries and computers make students no longer need to correct the words by themselves (8).

As far as I am concerned (9), I firmly argue that we need to attach great importance to word spelling (10). To the students (11), they should write as much as possible (12). Meanwhile (13), to the teachers (14), the dictations should be reinforced in the class (15).

(146 words)

3.2 Writing Products Analysis

Though the two compositions are on the similar topics and in the same genre, they read much differently. The pretest writing is written before the instruction of schema theory. It seems the writer just transcribes what is on his mind directly onto the paper, without much rich pre-writing generation of his ideas, without obvious reviewing and revising. In the posttest, this composition seems to be much better.

3.2.1 Comparison From Linguistic Schema Perspective

Corona, Spangenberg and Venet have once claimed, "At any level, written communication is more effective when a depth of vocabulary, and command of language is evident" (1998, p.26). To some extent, an influential factor of judging a good writing is the choice of words and expressions.

"Unfamiliarity with low frequency words, perhaps with only one such word in a sentence, may render an

entire sentence meaningless, which may, in turn, inhibit comprehension of the meaning of subsequent sentences in the same passage..." (Mark, Doctorow, & Wittrock, 1974, p.262). Just as what has been said, the author thinks that it is also true of writing an English passage. If a writer is unable to choose the most appropriate words and sentence patterns when producing an essay, he will not be well understood and appreciated by his readers.

In the pretest writing, the writer only uses some simple and ordinary words, and there is nothing special. Like words in sentence (2), (10), (11), (13) and (17), when we read these sentences, we can not find any sense of vividness and beauty. There are no shining and impressing words in the whole essay. The sentence pattern is also too simple, without complex sentences. It sounds as if a middle school student can do this or even better.

In the posttest writing, the writer has made great progress after schema-based writing training. In sentence (1), we can find the popular expression "fewer and fewer" appears. In sentence (2), there is an attributive clause "... in the number of students who ...". The length and pattern of sentence has changed, which makes the passage more readable and more expressive. In sentence (4) and (8), the phrases "account for" and "the wide use of" make this writing vivid and lovely. Sentence (6) is a complicated one. "Attach great importance to" in sentence (10) and "reinforce" in sentence (13) helps the readers to sense the depth and meaning of this writing. In sentence (10), the writer uses objective clause "I firmly argue that we need to attach great importance to word spelling."

Compared with the pretest writing, the posttest writing is much better. So we are assured of our special training for EG.

3.2.2 Comparison From Content Schema Perspective

Content schema was defined by Carrell and Eisterhold (1988) as "background knowledge on the topic and relevant social-cultural knowledge". To make it concrete, content schema means different kinds of knowledge about the world things and world people, consisting of two parts: content-related knowledge and background knowledge.

In the pretest writing, the writer just states his viewpoint directly, without any content schema. This writing reads not so convincing. To some extent, we even want to complain the writer is too writer-based and subjective.

In the posttest writing, the writer has skillfully employed the content schema in sentence (2) and (3) "According to a recent survey, there is a dramatic increase in the number of students who can only imitate the pronunciation of a word but be incapable of spelling of it."

The writer has found something in common with the reader in order to convince the readers of his viewpoint. In the posttest writing, the writer also becomes reader-based.

3.2.3 Comparison From Formal Schema Perspective

Formal schema is the knowledge about discourse structure, including different genres, various stylistic

and rhetorical devices and different developmental patterns.

The genre of the pretest writing and the posttest writing is an argumentation. They should follow the given outline which has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Three paragraphs are enough. The introduction ends with a general statement. The body part begins with a clear topic sentence, and then specific supporting materials come, including facts, reasons, and examples and so on. The conclusion summarizes the main points or paraphrases the general statement, beginning with a conclusion signal, and leaves the reader with the writer's final thoughts on the topic.

In the pretest writing, the writer doesn't follow the given outline. So we can see his first writing is in disorder. He even doesn't know how to organize his writing. Although his composition includes 4 paragraphs, we can't get much from his writing.

In the posttest writing, the writer followed the given outline, so his organization is in order and clear. After reading this composition, we are quite clear about the writer's ideas. What's more, the writer also uses some cohesive devices which made the essay natural and fluent. We can find them in sentence (5) "first of all" (7) "what's more" and (13) "meanwhile". We can also find passive voice in the posttest writing in sentence (15) "the dictations should be reinforced in the class."

To sum up, the posttest writing shows a deeper thinking and a much more inventive and literary style of writing in comparison with the pretest counterpart on a similar topic, indicating the effect of the schema-based writing training.

3.3 Analysis of Personal Interview

In order to know whether the schema-based writing instruction is an effective way to improve college students' writing performance and to know the participants' attitude towards the new mode of writing teaching, the author conducts a personal interview after the posttest. Twenty participants were randomly chosen from the EG. According to what some students say, we find that after ten weeks' schema-based training, students begin to take interest in English writing. They have changed their previous idea, thinking that writing an essay is no longer a hard and sweating task, but an enjoyable thing to do. Even two of the participants say they start to write English diaries now. More than half of them say that they have known how to choose a topic, and if the teacher tells a topic they could image many words concerning it and they could draw a list of a rough clustering concerning the topic sentence and make up sentences and that they do not feel worried when they put pen to paper. That is to say, after applying schema theory to students' English writing, they know how to make use of the stored schema in their mind and how to construct and consolidating the new schema.

From the interviews, we know 15 out of 20 students have positive attitude to the schema-oriented instruction. Actually their writing proficiency has been promoted conspicuously. In their opinions, schema-oriented instruction is helpful to them. Firstly, it provides them a friendly learning context in which teacher and students can interact with each other. Students are given more freedom and self-determination to create their writing. Secondly, the interesting teaching activities provide colorful and systematic information and arouse students' willingness and excitement to participate. Students are ready to give their voices in class. Thirdly, the schema-oriented instruction offers some effective skills to activate or reconstruct students' schemata to compose good essays, so that their self-confidence is enhanced. Particularly, judging from the reward score in the posttest, it's easy to conclude that they've already known some common genres, cohesive devices, text patterns, that is, their awareness of textual knowledge has been raised. Among them, there are two low students who have performed so well in posttest writing, even much better than their middle-ranking and top-ranking classmates. When they are interviewed how they make such a great improvement, their response is quite simple just because they like this new, mentally challenging composition method. Maybe schema-based writing training is a very valuable way out for them.

Concerning the negative views held by a small percentage of students (5 students in 20), the reason may attribute to their inner motivation, learning styles which cannot change in a short time and their disassociation from the schema-oriented instruction. Thereby, they make less obvious improvement on linguistic forms, organization and content and still lack interest in learning English. Their existing schemata have not been fully activated. It's necessary for the teacher to sense the problem and make some adjustment on selecting reading materials in the instruction. At the same time, timely help should be offered to the low-level students during the activities such as discussion, experience sharing, etc.. Teachers also need to pay attention to low-proficiency students' vocabulary development.

CONCLUSION

A. Major Findings

After ten weeks' experimental study, the research got the expected results:

(a) From the data results and analysis of the experiment, the author draws the conclusion that schema-based writing approaches can improve students' writing proficiency better than traditional writing teaching method. The schema-based writing approach emphasizes activating, building and consolidating students' background knowledge, namely formal schema, content schema and linguistic schema, which is helpful for

students to make an organic combination of content and form. The experimental study has successfully proved that students' knowledge about the topic and the culture knowledge continuously enrich so as to offer abundant materials for the content in the writing.

(b) In the personal interview, the writer has found that with the special training, most students have changed their attitudes towards writing. In the experiment, the author switches writing importance from focusing on the language points, grammar and vocabulary to content schema and formal schema. Students feel it is interesting and funny to make duster about a topic, and then write the composition step by step. Equipped with the writing skills, students are full of confidence and enjoyment when writing. The application of schema theory to EFL writing could greatly arouse students' English writing interest. The students in EG feel much easier to deal with writing problems. They are not pushed by the teacher, but to write actively for their own. In this way, the students will be able to make progress more independently both in and out of class in their further learning. Therefore this study has proved that schema-based writing approach is more affective and effective in improving college students EFL writing

B. limitations of the Research and Directions for Further Research

This study is an attempt to explore a new approach to EFL writing, which is capable of shedding some light on English writing teaching, like many other researches, the present study bears some limitations in methodology and in theory.

Methodologically, restrained by the school curriculum program, the author just chooses two majors randomly as the experimental group rather than a large number of students from the whole school. It will be more scientific if the subjects are chosen from many classes in the school; the results may be much more convincing and have more wide influence on application. So, further studies should be done in a wider range.

Theoretically, learning process involves the coordination of many factors like individual styles of cognition, motivation, aptitude, affection, attitude and even social environment and so on. This research just expresses the author's viewpoint from the teaching method. The author supposes that other factors are neglected.

To sum up, schema-based writing training only deals with little about English writing in this school. More researches and hard work should be continued in order that English language teaching and learning might be improved quickly.

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