Study on the Selection of Words in College English Writing

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Abstract

Selection of words is an important part in college English writing. A perfect writing largely depends on the right choice of words. By means of a writing test and a questionnaire, a survey was carried out upon 100 freshmen with non-English majors from two classes to investigate the challenges of the selection of words in writing. The findings indicate that students have major difficulties in spelling, meaning conveying, concise expressing, style of words, and so on. Thus, the study puts forward some effective methods in lexical, grammatical and stylistic aspects to improve the selection of words. Furthermore, the researcher attains valuable reflection on the teaching of college English writing. The reflection includes the cultivation of students' writing accomplishment and writing interest, the adoption of flexible teaching methods in writing class, and effective use of online writing platforms. Finally, an interview with 35 respondents has proved the teaching effect. So the study can be implemented by students and teachers to enhance the learning and teaching of English writing.

Keywords

Selection of Words, College English Writing, Writing Teaching

1. Introduction

College English writing is an important aspect to evaluate the quality of language output of college students. It can directly reflect students' comprehensive language skills. According to China Standards of English (2018) issued by China's ministry of education, the writing ability should reach to Level 5 as to freshmen and sophomores, while Level 6 as to juniors and seniors. That means students can not only write a passage with an interested topic, but are also competent in writing reports, practical writings, and academic essays by adopting various ar-

gumentative methods.

The study centers on the selection of words in college English writing. As second language learners, students are influenced by their mother tongue, writing habits, word storage and many other factors. The study is to improve students' word selection ability and quality. Meanwhile, it aims to enhance the writing teaching. The paper consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction. In Chapter 2, a literature interview is presented. In Chapter 3, the methodology of the study is discussed. This part includes research design and research result. Here, the problems appeared in the selection of words are analyzed. Chapter 4 provides some methods to improve the quality of selection of words mainly through the lexical, grammatical and stylistic aspects. Chapter 5 is about the reflection on college English writing teaching. The last chapter is the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Selection of words is regarded as an important approach to promote college students' writing levels. Wilkins emphasized the importance of word choice. Without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed (Wilkins, 1972). Vocabulary is basic for a piece of writing. The combination of individual English words based on grammar will form a sentence. Besides, the choice of words matters the meaning of a sentence. However, in writing, college students usually consider little about the choice of words, which causes the expression improper or illogical, and even affects the intention of the writing. As Allen (1983) put it, "lexical problems frequently interfere with communication; communication breaks down when people do not use the right words". So selecting words appropriately will have significant effect on a fluent and high-quality piece of writing.

Liu advocated six principles of writing: exactness, concreteness, conciseness, appropriateness, vividness and diversity (Liu, 1999). There are four basic principles of diction in English writing, namely, correctness, appropriateness, vividness and conciseness (He, 2010). Liu and He focused on the principles of diction, but lack detailed analysis on students' challenge of word choice especially from the quantitative aspect. According to Jiao (2012), learners can improve diction in writing through conscious reading and conscious imitate use of the words and expressions in reading. The suggestion is based on the input and output hypotheses. Although it can shed certain enlightenment on improving writing teaching, it is not comprehensive.

Based on the above discussion, this paper is to focus on analyzing the actual difficulties in the selection of words through the writing test and the questionnaire. Then related improving methods are proposed based on the research result. These methods are relatively comprehensive and systematic, and will help students to overcome their difficulties in the selection of words. Then some suggestions on teaching will be proposed aiming to improve the teaching of college English writing. Finally, an interview will be carried out to prove the teaching effect.

3. Methodology

The research intends to deal with two questions: First, "What are the problems existed in the selection of words in college English writing?" Second, "Will the research be effective or not after adopting the improvement measures?" Based on the two research questions, the survey combines both quantitative method and qualitative method. It is hoped that the study can facilitate the finding and generalization of related problems. In addition, it can also prove the effectiveness of the research.

3.1. Research Subject

The study was conducted with 100 students from Baoding University, an application-oriented university from Hebei province, China. All the 100 students are freshmen with non-English majors from two intact classes. Each class has 50 students. They major in Primary Education and Automobile Service and Engineering respectively. They have the normal grade distribution. In normal English learning, students have finished some college English writing tasks, through which they have grasped how to organize passages and how to express their views on different topics.

3.2. Research Instruments

The involved instruments are a writing test, a questionnaire and an interview. First, the writing test is chosen from a piece of CET-4 writing tasks. CET-4 is a nationwide test for college students to test their English competence, so it is authoritative and scientific in test content. The 100 students should finish the writing within the regulated time. The writing test is used to find students' challenges in the selection of words while writing. Second, a questionnaire is released to all the respondents to further get an overall picture about the status quo of their selection of words, which is hoped to provide related improvements in the later writing teaching. Third, an interview is carried out with 35 respondents to check whether the improving methods of word choice and the writing class have helped their writing study.

3.3. Research Procedure

The research lasted for 9 months starting from May, 2019 to Jan., 2020.

First, some preparations were made before the study in May, 2019. The research plan has been set. Two classes of 100 students have been chosen for the respondents.

Second, in Jun. 2019, 100 respondents were asked to finish the writing test. The writing task is from CET-4 of June 2015 (Picture 1). Students were required to write at least 120 words but no more than 180 words within 30 minutes. As the writing task is a cartoon, students need to first describe the picture, and then comment on the kid's understanding of going to school.

Third, the 100 respondents were required to complete a questionnaire, which

"Why am I going to school if my phone already knows everything?"
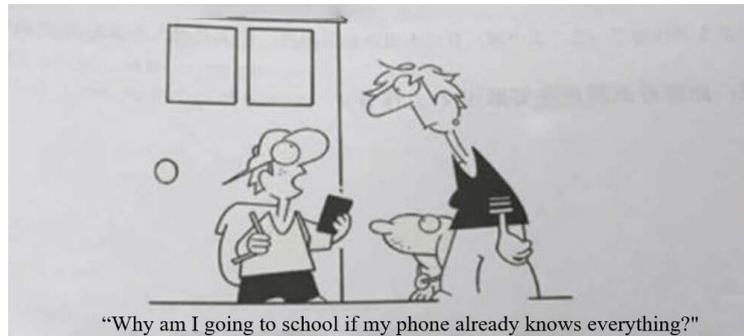
Picture 1. The writing task from CET-4 of June 2015.

involved students' attitudes towards the selection of words, writing abilities, study interest in writing and the learning environment.

Fourth, form Jul. 2019 to Aug. 2019, the researchers checked each piece of writing, collected related data and investigated on the mistakes that students had made in their writing. Meanwhile, the results of the questionnaire were collected and analyzed. After that, a series of improving methods was put forward to enhance the quality of word selection and the writing teaching.

Fifth, from Sept. 2019 to Jan. 2020, the researchers applied the improving methods to practical writing teaching. At the end of the semester, an interview with 35 respondents was carried out to examine the teaching effect of the writing class. Finally, the researchers summarized some reflection on the teaching of college English writing.

3.4. Data Collection

During the research, a writing test and a questionnaire were carried out successively with the respondents. Besides, after a semester's college English writing study, the respondents also had an interview. The data collected are listed below:

1. The result of the writing test

According to the data collected from the writing test, students tend to have the following mistakes in the selection of words (Table 1): misspelling, conveying inappropriate meanings, expressing repeatedly and redundantly, lacking linking words, making collocation mistakes and adopting improper style of words. The writing result shows that 48% respondents have made spelling mistakes and 51% respondents have made collocation mistakes, which are due to students' word storage to a great extent. 65% respondents convey inappropriate meanings of words, especially in identifying synonyms, connotative meanings of words and affective meanings of words. Meanwhile, they also meet the challenge of expressing specifically. 46% respondents express their ideas redundantly by using repeated expressions. 33% respondents are not good at using linking words, which has caused the content quite loose and illogical. 29% respondents use informal words, which doesn't conform to the style of the writing. From the above analysis, it can be found that the problems of selection of words are very common, and these mistakes have influenced the effect of expression, and impaired the writing quality.

Table 1. Mistakes in the selection of words.

Mistakes	misspelling	inappropriate meanings	redundant expressions	lack linking words	collocation mistakes	informal words
Percentage of mistakes	48%	65%	46%	33%	51%	29%

2. The result of the questionnaire

The following is the statistics of the questionnaire (Table 2). In this questionnaire, question 1 to question 4 mainly investigates the respondents' attitudes and interest. Most of the respondents have realized the importance of word choice, and want to improve it. However, they tend to neglect the selection of words in actual writing practice. While writing, 34% of respondents just occasionally consider the selection of words, and 5% of respondents have never considered it. The questionnaire also shows that all the respondents have interest in word choice, but 30% of them just occasionally have interest in it. So their interest needs to get promoted in future study.

Question 5 to 9 is about the investigation on their writing ability. From the data, it can be seen that their writing skills need to get enhanced. When they write, 65 respondents are weak in distinguishing among synonyms. Although all the respondents have enlarged their word storage in varying degrees, more than half of respondents cannot flexibly select words and apply them to the actual writing practice. 8 respondents have never used advanced words. 13 respondents have never considered the affective meanings of words. Besides, only 62% of respondents take context into consideration when they write.

Question 10 to question 13 is designed to investigate the situations of writing teaching and online learning. The data of question 10 and question 11 indicate that teachers should pay more attention to explanations of word style and methods of improving word choice. At the same time, 54% of respondents use online platforms frequently, but 46% of them use inadequately. According to question 13, 42 respondents tend to neglect the advice given by online writing platform. Thus, the utilizing frequency and efficiency are hoped to get further promoted.

The questionnaire has revealed some limitations of the writing teaching. Teachers should make corresponding improvement in the introduction of word choice, and the promotion of overall English writing abilities.

3. The result of the interview

After a semester's study of college English writing, 35 respondents voluntarily joined the interview (Table 3) given by the researchers.

In question 1, all respondents admit that they have gained some knowledge of word choice. In question 2, 31 respondents have more interest in learning English writing, while 2 respondents still don't have so much interest. The two respondents are poor in English study, so the teacher tries to discover their interest point and activate their interest. In question 3, there are 3 respondents who are dissatisfied with the class interactions. They expect the teacher to increase

Table 2. A questionnaire on the selection of words.

Questions	A	B	C	D
	Never	Occasionally	Often	Always
1) Do you consider the selection of words while writing?	5	34	44	17
2) Do you think it's important to consider the selection of words?	0	11	36	53
3) Do you hope to improve your selection of words in your writing study?	0	9	39	52
4) Do you have interest in the selection of words?	0	30	49	21
5) Do you distinguish among synonyms when you write?	11	54	27	8
6) Do you use some advanced words?	8	62	27	3
7) Do you consider a word's appreciative or pejorative color?	13	46	37	4
8) Do you consider the context while you write?	6	32	47	15
9) Do you enlarge your word storage?	0	46	42	12
10) Does your teacher discuss the style of words with you?	3	41	39	17
11) Does your teacher introduce some methods to improve word choice?	5	31	45	19
12) Do you use online writing platforms?	3	43	42	12
13) Do you check the advice from online writing platforms?	7	35	47	11

Table 3. An interview after a semester's learning.

Questions	Feedbacks	
	Yes	No
1) Do you know about the methods of selection of words in writing?	35	0
2) Do you take more interest in learning English writing?	31	2
3) Do you like some interactions in the writing class?	32	3
4). Do you increase your efficiency of online writing platforms?	35	0
5) Do you have suggestions about your writing class?	2	33

interactions. So some activities such as having discussions, drawing mind maps and playing games will be introduced into the class afterwards. In question 4, all the respondents think they have increased their using efficiency of online writing platforms, and they think the advice from those platforms is quite valuable for them to improve their writing. In question 5, the teacher obtains two suggestions from the respondents. First, the teacher can introduce more English reading materials. Second, they want to do more major-related writing.

The interview has proved the teaching effect of the English writing class, because most respondents are satisfied with the teaching. Meanwhile, there are still a small number of respondents are dissatisfied. Their suggestions have been ac-

cepted by the researchers. Besides, the researchers also have more enlightenment on the teaching of college English writing.

4. Methods of Improving the Selection of Words in College English Writing

Based on the result analyses of the writing test and the questionnaire, some methods are put forward to improve the quality of the selection of words in college English writing.

4.1. Selection of Words from Lexical Aspect

First, some synonyms are similar but not completely identical in meaning. Subtle differences among synonyms exist universally. For example, in the sentence "The question is not as simple as they thought". Here "question" is inappropriate. It emphasizes doubt or uncertainty about something. The writer originally wanted to convey an unsatisfactory or difficulty situation. So the word "problem" is better. In writing, the subtle difference of synonyms should be taken into account.

Second, it is quite normal that a word has its denotations and connotations. Denotation is the most direct or specific meaning, while connotation is the implied or suggested meaning. Connotation needs to be considered in context. Take "learn knowledge" as an example. If it is replaced by the word "acquire", the meaning will be more definite, because "acquire" not only has the denotation of "learning sth.", but the connotation of "gaining sth". Thus the connotative meaning of a word should be brought to notice.

Third, specific words can explain meaning clearer. If over generalized words are frequently used, the writing will be dull and indefinite. For example, "painting" refers to a picture that someone has painted, such as wash painting, finger painting, oil painting, etc. If a specific word (e.g. "cartoon") is adopted, the sentence meaning will be more definite. Actually, words with smaller meaning ranges can make the writing more precise and more vivid.

Fourth, pay attention to the affective meanings of words. There are a small number of English words which can express feelings and attitudes towards the person or thing in question. In the sentence "The kid asked his father oddly", "oddly" means "in a strange or unusual way". So the derogatory color of it will influence the affective meaning of the sentence. Here "curiously" is an appropriate substitute.

4.2. Selection of Words from Grammatical Aspect

In college English writing, students are also likely to make some grammatical mistakes in their selection of words. First of all, repetition should be avoided.

Example 1: "He holds a mobile phone in his hand."

Analysis: The word "hold" already indicates the meaning of "carrying sth. in hand". So "in his hand" can be omitted.

Example 2: "Can mobile phones replace school education? Actually, mobile

phones can help us study, but cannot replace school education."

Analysis: In the sentence, "mobile phones" appear twice, and the second one should be changed into "they". Meanwhile, there are two "replace", and the latter can be changed into "substitute."

From the above two examples, it can be seen that some repeated parts in the writing will cause the semantic meanings not concise. There are two solutions to achieve conciseness: 1) delete the redundant part; 2) adopt the corresponding pronouns or synonyms.

Besides, in order to create a coherent piece of writing, students should be good at using linking words. Halliday & Hasan (1976) divided the conjunction into four categories, namely, additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. Naturally there is scope for a considerable amount of subclassifying within them. Based on different semantic relationships, some linking words can be added to connect each part in a reasonable and logical way, so that the writing can form a coherent one. For example, "Students can cooperate to finish group tasks in class. Team spirit and thinking ability is developed." The two sentences seem unsmooth without a linking word "so". However, note that two adversative conjunctions cannot be used together in one sentence, e.g., "Although students can communicate through some apps, but face-to-face communication will make students have a deeper understanding of knowledge." Here, one of them ("although" and "but") should be deleted.

Moreover, sometimes fixed expressions are adopted to make the writing appear more authentic and impressive. These fixed expressions include idioms, proverbs, slangs and even phrases. They are conventional through years of communication and are unchangeable in usage. For example, "Phones are harmful to the eyesight of night cats." When people express a person who stays up late, they'll say "night owls", as this is a fixed expression. When writing, students need follow grammatical rules and select proper words.

4.3. Selection of Words from Stylistic Aspect

During the process of selecting words, students should consider the stylistic aspect so as to create a perfect piece of writing. Based on the criterion of formality, Martin Joos (Brown, 2002) provided a classification of speech styles, namely, frozen style, formal style, consultative style, casual style, and intimate style. None of these styles is better than any other; appropriateness is the key to the good use of the various styles. For instance, "Students can talk ideas with teachers". Here "talk" is too casual. As the writing is an argumentative one, the style should tend to be formal and the language should be objective. So "exchange" is better.

5. Reflection on the Teaching of College English Writing

The teaching of college English writing can adopt the following measures to help students improve the quality of selection of words.

First, college English writing class should cultivate students' writing accomplishment, and strengthen their writing abilities. Due to the lack of vocabulary,

some students cannot express their ideas in English, not to mention identify the difference of synonyms. Some tend to write passages according to their Chinese ways of thinking, which causes many grammar mistakes. So teachers should encourage students to increase their word storage and English reading input, and develop their English thinking patterns. As to the curriculum, college English writing course should include basic English writing course and advanced English writing course. The former is a compulsory course, while the latter optional one. Basic English writing course covers basic writing skills, writing genres, writing process, figure of speech, etc. In this course, students' writing levels will get promoted. While in the advanced writing course, students should learn how to write report, academic paper, discipline-related paperwork, etc., which can further cultivate students' creative thinking ability and critical thinking ability. In addition, word choice in the advanced English writing will be relatively more academic and more formal than basic English writing.

Second, the English writing teachers should increase students' writing interest. The teaching of college English writing is an art. From the very start, teachers should lead students to realize the necessity and importance of the writing class. To increase students' interest, teachers should be good at digging out some writing topics. At the beginning, these topics are perhaps related to students themselves, such as their study, their hobby, their life, their ambitions, etc., so that students can express their ideas more or less. Gradually, teachers can find topics concerning students' majors and future careers. Based on the university's orientation of cultivating applied talents, students should be more adaptable to the future job requirements. So English writing about their majors and careers will promote their communicating skills and working abilities. Furthermore, teachers can also lead students to write on the topics of society, economy, culture, and so on. Through the step by step process, students will become more and more interested in English writing. With more and more writing, they'll become proficient in the selection of words in the light of different context.

Third, the teaching methods of college English writing should be flexible and varied. As to the selection of words, teachers should increase interaction among teachers and students. Teachers can present a piece of writing, and then let students to have group discussions on the choice of words. Students should consider the lexical rules, grammatical rules, context and style in writing, and try to detect the improper expressions. During the process, teachers should also get involved in and give some suggestions on improvement. After the discussions, students share their opinions and teachers give effective evaluations. This method can activate students' thinking, let them know their shortcomings and make some improvements accordingly. Besides, teachers can also encourage students to copy, imitate, or adapt pieces of writing, so that they can find the gap and gain some enlightenment from the selection of words in writing.

Fourth, the teaching of college English writing should combine some online writing platforms, such as iWrite, Pigai, Bingo English, and so on. With the development of technology and network, these online writing platforms can assist

teacher's teaching efficiently. Students can write on the online platform, and then they will not only get a mark, but also get a list of mistakes. Take Pigai as an example, the platform can automatically identify spelling mistakes, Chinglish and non-standard expression. Meanwhile, it will provide suggestions of word choice and related sentence examples. Through checking the writing result, students can better distinguish the subtle differences of words, which can improve their writing levels. Therefore, these online writing platforms will help students in English writing.

6. Conclusion

Selection of words is an important part of English writing in college, which has a great impact on the delivery of information. It can also promote students' English writing ability. Through finding problems of word selection, the study concentrates on analyzing how to improve it in college English writing from the lexical, grammatical and stylistic aspects. At the same time, some reflection on the teaching of college English writing is presented.

The study hopes to reduce students' confusion in writing, lead them to quickly adapt to college English writing, activate their writing interest, and ultimately improve their writing abilities. Meanwhile, the teaching effect of college English writing is expected to get promoted. To a certain extent, there are some other methods to improve the word choice, which deserves further study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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