Application of Task-based Language Assessment in College English Writing Teaching

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Abstract—**Despite task-based assessment's popularity in many countries including Canada and America, there are not many researches that combine it with English writing teaching in China, especially researches on using task-based assessment to solve the problem of unsatisfactory writing teaching at colleges. In order to solve some existing problems resulting from traditional English writing teaching at colleges, the researcher attempts to introduce it into English writing teaching for non-English majors at colleges to testify its effectiveness and practicality in qualitative and quantitative analysis. The researchers apply the model to the writing course of a group, and apply the traditional model for another group in Xi'an Peihua University for one semester. The results show that the assessment can exert a positive influence on students' writing and positive feedback on teaching. The teacher has a thorough understanding of students' writing; students can finish the task designed to reach the aim of communication; their interest in writing is aroused and their autonomy is cultivated in a harmonious atmosphere; their writing abilities are promoted.**

Keywords—Task-based assessment; Task; English writing teaching

I. Introduction

Mainly due to rigid teaching models and imperfect assessment, English writing teaching at most colleges is not optimistic at all. Teaching models limit English writing teaching. In writing class, most teachers abide by traditional model. They usually lecture some writing skills, analyze some samples on textbooks, and then ask students to write compositions by imitating samples. Finally, students hand in their compositions and teachers comment on them in class after marking them. Sometimes, after telling students some writing skills, they directly give them an arbitrarily chosen topic and students should finish writing within certain time after class and hand in their compositions for teachers to correct mistakes. English writing course assessment is also imperfect. Final scores are the only means adopted by most colleges because the final grades in final exam measure students' writing. Teachers are the only judgers of the whole process. It is not scientific to check students' real writing abilities by the only scores in final exams because teachers ignore assessments to whole writing process.

In consequence, writing teaching results are unsatisfactory. Students are not the center of teaching interactions. Their experience, insight, and practice are not the center of class activity. In teachers' eyes, writing is not an interactive process.

They do not stress the importance of teaching focusing on contents and processes because they neglect the collection, selection, analysis, estimation, and modification of writing materials. At the same time, students' works lack comprehensive assessment. Their writing proficiency cannot be facilitated and teachers cannot get enough feedbacks to check their teaching to know students' weaknesses and strengths. It is impossible to arouse their interest in writing, cultivate their autonomy, and create a kind of harmonious atmosphere in which teachers and students share information in class.

II. Empirical Study

Applying task-based language assessment into English writing teaching is a desirable solution to the problems outlined above in that it has some advantages. It is "the process of evaluating, in relation to a set of explicitly stated criteria, the quality of the communicative performances elicited from learners as part of goal-directed, meaning-focused language use requiring the integration of skills and knowledge" (Brindley, 1994:74).

A. Advantages

1) Arousing interest.

Task-based learning and teaching models create a more positive affective climate in classrooms while they also individualize instruction and raise students' motivation (Long & Norris, 2002). Research shows that motivation is one of the most important decisive factors in successful language learning.

2) Cultivating autonomy

In 2000, Aoki defined learner's autonomy as "a capacity to take control of one's own learning in the service of one's perceived needs and aspiration." Some psychologists argued that students can learn better if they are in control of what they are learning. One linguist shows that second language learners presuppose interdependence because language development requires communication. Writing is a social communicative activity, through which autonomy fosters.

3) Creating a harmonious atmosphere in classroom.

The task-based assessment model can make teachers aware of the different roles of teachers and students in classroom. Teachers are not authoritarians of a class, but are planners and organizers of class activities, suppliers of learning materials and guidance, assessors who offer feedback and record the activities performed by students.

B. Application

The reason for carrying out assessment in the first place should have an important bearing on how to carry out the assessment, when to carry it out, and how to report the results.

1) Task selection

The core of task-based assessment is tasks, and its emphasis is on language use. It is to assess learners' performance of fulfilling tasks with the choice of tasks as a starting point. It is to check whether learners fulfill targeted tasks or not with language, laying emphasis on assessing learners' performance of communicative abilities. The assessment is not simply to trigger some certain aspect of language system with real life task to test it. Rather, the concept of assessment is the performance of fulfilling tasks by task takers. For the reason that designing tasks affects validity of assessing learners' ability, it becomes a priority. Authenticity is a key problem in tasks, and it is a noticeable sign of modern language assessment from traditional one. The authenticity of task-based assessment is "the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a target language use task" (Bachman and Palmer, 1996: 23). McNamara (2003) think the field of language testing continues to embrace the notion of performance assessment as a means of achieving a close link between the test situation and authentic language use. While designing tasks, designers firstly decide the scopes and features of test takers' language in real life or in the future, and then correspond to them as possibly as they can. The higher the correspondence is, the higher the authenticity is.

An embodiment of authenticity in tasked-based assessment is the following: authentic test material, authentic test tasks, and authentic communicative situations.

Test material refers to any non-man-made material used for the purpose of language teaching. Wilkins (1976) pointed out that authentic materials should not be made such modification as deleting or rewriting long complex sentences or grammar points to decrease difficulty, but should be developed and used to varying degrees. Widdowson(1978) also believes authentic written materials are the only means to provide authentic communications. Authentic test materials mainly involve the authenticity of material sources and the authenticity of language. Authentic material sources are the basis. Except for materials from textbooks, materials from magazines, newspapers, and internet can also be a blueprint of tests. Coming from the real world, these materials are closely related to people's daily lives and work. Authentic language means that materials of various types should conform to the features of their language and style. Materials about speaking and listening must have remarkable features of speaking and listening language, while writing materials should have noticeable features of writing language.

The authenticity of test tasks is relevant with test purposes, forms, and contents. Test purposes should firstly be clear. Is designing test tasks based on the possibilities that learners may meet them in their daily lives or future lives or jobs? Just as Wang Yanni (2009) puts it, "while designing tasks, teachers should consider the possibility that they might appear in daily life or study, or future life or study." Are learners' communicative abilities with target language checked? If the answers are yes, these tasks have authentic test purposes.

Authentic test tasks not only require authentic test purposes, but also require authentic test forms and contents. Authentic test forms and contents must conform to language use in real life or in the future. Test designers cannot ignore real possibility of language use for the sake of exams.

Authentic communicative situations refer to the similarity between the scene of test tasks and similar communicative tasks in real life. That is to say, it is likely that the scene offered appears in real life. Authenticity communicative situations include language and cultural communicative situations. Tasks should provide learners with the necessity and feasibility of using target language. Different cultural background restricts authenticity.

2) Class Organization

The researcher chose Class 61 as experimental group and Class 62 as control group to find out the differences in writing performances between them after they received two kinds of different writing teaching models that lasted one term from Sept.2017 to Dec. 2017. They were 30 girl students and 16 boy students in class 61, experimental group and 26 girls and 19 boys in class 62, control group. The student number of experimental group was almost the same as control group with the former having 46 and the latter having 45. All of them, ranging from 19 years old to 21, with the majority of 19, majored in Human Resource Management in Xi'an Peihua University. Although the two groups used the same textbook: *College English Writing* by Professor Liu Shuying published by Fudan University Publishing House, they received different writing teaching methods. Control group received traditional method and experimental group received task-based assessment model. The researcher was also the teacher who taught them English writing.

The following task was one of examples designed for Class 61 in writing class: You are Tom. You are going home by plane after your travel in China. At the airport, you suddenly remember you forget your passport in a hotel, but time does not allow you to fetch it. You have to call your Chinese friend, telling him where your passport is and where you are at the airport. You write a letter to thank him for helping deliver it. After having an understanding of the task, students spent 30 minutes in finishing writing it in class.

3) Assessment

The five aspects decided the evaluation of a piece of writing: content, linguistic effect, structure and coherence, format and style, and the communication with the readers. To be more specific, scoring criteria were the same as those of compositions in Band 4 and 6. The full mark was 15.The standard was five levels: 2 points, 5 points, 8 points, 11 points, and 14 points. The raters consulted sample compositions of each level. If a composition was similar to a sample composition, the score was the same as the score of the sample writing. If it was a bit better or worse, they added one point or subtracted one point.

The following were specific marking criteria:

0 point: Blank exam papers with irrelevant topic or only a few separated words that cannot express thoughts.

2 points: A composition is incoherent in content, and is illogical in organization with fragmented language or mistakes, even many serious mistakes in some sentences.

5 points: A composition is basically relevant to the topic with unclear thoughts, poor incoherence, and more severe errors.

8 points: A composition is basically relevant to the topic with unclear thoughts in some sentences, grudging incoherence, and quite a lot of language errors even some severe errors.

11 points: A composition is relevant to the topic with clear thoughts, incoherence, and a few language errors.

14 points: A composition is relevant to the topic with clear thoughts, good incoherence, and without language errors on the whole, only individual small errors.

Guided by such standard, everyone assessed his own writing along with other classmates and the teacher after they completed the task. Writing skills, wonderful ideas, excellent words and sentence structures, and even mistakes and so on were explored during their discussion while they assessed compositions in class to learn something good and avoid something bad. Each student gave a mark to each writing. A student's final score was the average of all the 47 assessors' scores since there were 46 assessors including 46 students and one English teacher in the class. The student with highest score displayed his composition in class for others to learn from.

Every two weeks in that term, Class 61 had such writing classes, but Class 62 had traditional ones.

4) Pre-test

For the purpose of having a more thorough understanding of writing teaching and learning, a pre-test was essential. The researcher based writing pre-test on students' English final exam in previous term. The composition was similar to ones of Band 4 and 6 with the full marks of 15 points. It was an argumentative and the title was *Online Shopping*. Everyone in control group and experimental group wrote it within 30 minutes at the beginning of Sept. With the scoring criteria of compositions in Band 4 and 6, two qualified raters who are often involved in marking compositions of Band 4 and 6 marked their writings. Every student's score was the average of the two raters' scores to make sure the validity of it. The following tables show relevant data:

TABLE I   STUDENTS' MEAN SCORES IN THE PRE-TEST

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	EG	46	6.5000	2.35081	.52566
	CG	45	6.7500	2.24488	.50197

(EG: experimental group CG: control group)

TABLE II   INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST IN THE PRE-TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Scores	Equal variances assumed	.031	.862	-.344	38	.733
	Equal variances not assumed			-.344	37.919	.733

From Table 1, it is clear that the mean score of experimental group is very close to that of control group, so is the standard deviation. Experimental group's mean score is 0.25 point lower than control group; the standard deviation of experimental group is about 0.1 point higher than that of control group; the standard error mean is 0.02 point higher than that of control group. In Table 2, Sig. is 0.862(>0.05), which means equal variances assumed. Sig. is 0.733(>0.05), which shows no remarkable differences existed in terms of the scores of the two group students. All these mean that there were no noticeable differences in writing before the experiment.

5) Post-test

Apart from the pre-test, all the students in the two groups wrote a composition titled *An Introduction to Tourism in China* within 30 minutes at the same time and in the same place at the end of the term in order to further testify the effectiveness of task-based assessment. With the same soring criteria, the same raters marked their writings. Table 3 and 4 are about the results.

TABLE III   STUDENTS' MEAN SCORES IN THE POST-TEST

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	EG	46	11.3500	2.30046	.51440
	CG	45	6.8000	2.19089	.48990

(EG: experimental group CG: control group)

TABLE IV INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST IN THE POST-TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Scores	Equal variances assumed	.009	.925	6.405	38	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			6.405	37.910	.000

From Table 3, it is clear that the mean of experimental group is much higher than that of control group after the research. It is 4.55 points higher. There are some big differences in terms of the standard deviation and standard error mean between the two groups. In Table 4, Sig. is 0.925(>0.05), which shows equal variances assumed. Sig. is 0.000(<0.05), which means noticeable differences exist in terms of the scores of the two group students after the experiment.

The above analysis helps us believe that task-based assessment can promote writing teaching for teachers. According to students' involvement during the whole process, teachers can get enough feedback to check teaching to further subsequent teaching. They know a lot about their skills, favorite tasks, interests, strengths and weaknesses in writing, which helps teachers better understand how to select more appropriate tasks and perfect writing class in the future.

Furthermore, students' motivation and self-confidence are aroused. In this way, teachers are able to do a lot to increase and maintain students' motivation in writing by the type of tasks that they design. Usually, students are eager to write their thoughts, when the topic is interesting and familiar or they have a clear goal in their minds. Willis (1996) stated that in task-based learning, communication tasks involve learners in an entirely different mental process as they compose what they want to say, and express what they think or recall. If students are motivated, they have desire to write. Highly motivated students are often very active participants. Students will reduce their affective filter to become self-confident and highly motivated learners. In this case, students can have self-satisfaction, build up self-confidence, enhance self-efficacy-the degree to which students believe they have ability to deal with the learning challenge if they make necessary efforts in order to learn the new language or to write about a new topic. All these arouse curiosity for writing tasks. Because the task-based writing model integrates students' experience and interest with writing topics and purpose and it stresses meaning, they focus their attention on writing topics and purpose instead of specific grammar points. Students are not afraid that they make mistakes in grammar. Their success during the whole process of fulfilling various writing tasks can lead to extensive use of the language and the development of greater language proficiency and the constant success may lead to more interest in writing.

While using the target language for communication, the students can self-determine, and become more autonomous, self-controlled, and less dependent upon authority (Boud, 1985). Without doubt, students' autonomy fosters during the whole process for the reason that they can actively participate.

It is needless to say that a harmonious atmosphere prevails in classroom where the students can make full use of their positive emotional factors, such as interest, confidence, self-esteem, motivation to perform tasks. Their active involvement is decisive in the inquiry, the induction and incorporation of knowledge while completing tasks. In such natural and harmonious class atmosphere, students become active participants and learners, rather than passive receivers, so their learning becomes more efficient.

III. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the results of task-based assessment, the author can draw the conclusions: thanks to students' interest in English writing and their autonomy, they enjoy a harmonious and relaxing atmosphere in class; the teaching model can facilitate students' writing proficiency; teachers can check their teaching by the model to know students' weaknesses and strengths because it is an effective and practical way to provide feedbacks. Facing some problems existing in English writing teaching for non-English majors at most colleges, teachers may attempt to apply it to find out its effectiveness on practical and pedagogical level at college.

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