

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **5.0 Introduction**

This chapter will first summarise the main conclusions that can be drawn from this study regarding the composing skills among learners in a Chinese school. This is followed by its implications on the teaching and learning of composition writing in the school concerned and some suggestions for further research.

As stated in chapter 1, this exploratory case study of the composing skills of learners in a Chinese school was undertaken because of their inability to write effective compositions in English despite having more English periods as compared to those in national schools and with much teaching and advice as claimed by the teachers. Three central questions were raised:

- What are the content-based problems faced by the students in composition writing ?
- What are the process-based problems faced by the students in composition writing?
- What are the language-based problems faced by the students in composition writing?

Data for this study was collected from a questionnaire survey, structured interview and samples of compositions, and analyzed via triangulation.

## **5.1 Summary of Findings**

The main conclusion from this study where the composing skills among learners of this Chinese school is concerned, is that, there is very little process-based activities that enable the mastery of composition skills. This is probably the main reason why students do not seem to have developed the requisite skills for effective writing. Currently, in composition lessons, students are generally assigned a topic to write, their errors are corrected by the teacher and students are expected to improve in writing skills. In the light of current composition theory and pedagogy, this approach seems to be rather simplistic. The teaching of pre-writing skills via pre-writing activities such as brain storming, mind-mapping, group discussions, free writing, listening or reading, which the students need to generate ideas for writing, is sadly neglected. Neither is there provision for teaching and practising the skills of editing and revision so essential for fine-tuning a composition. In fact, many teachers do not go beyond telling students the external characteristics of good writing, providing some of the content for the composition topic and marking the compositions handed in. Most of the time, students are left to develop writing skills on their own, through trial and error, which is hardly adequate to motivate them to write nor inculcate the joy of writing.

Another noticeable feature is that composition writing is taught in a very exam-orientated manner. Most of the teachers insist that students' compositions should begin and end within the specified periods allotted for writing in order to provide students with the necessary training to write within a time limit in preparation for examination. Owing to this adherence to a time constraint, most students regard the composition period as a time for testing how well they can write on a given topic. Therefore, without first developing their writing skills, it is doubtful whether students can improve on their writing.

Besides that, there seems to be no integration of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the composition lesson. Students spend most of their time writing individually, hardly discussing the content of their writing with their classmates and seldom reading one another's composition. This clearly contradicts all principles of language acquisition (Krashen, 1984) as well as the teaching guidelines laid down in the KBSM English Language Syllabus of 1985 which recommends an integrative treatment of the different language components. By merely requiring students to write in the composition lesson, students do not get reinforcement and support for developing their writing skills through other language skills.

With regard to the organization of the composition class, most of the teachers still employ the traditional approach of whole class lecture that hardly requires any involvement or participation on the part of the students. Besides that, merely 'talking' about the features of a good composition will be fruitless or incomprehensible to students without getting them involved in the writing process.

It is also obvious that many teachers regard students' writing as a product to be evaluated rather than a means to communicate information of interest to others. This is evidenced from the observation that the same topic for class composition is given irrespective of students' interest in the topic, their writing capabilities and their background experience. This may result in teachers not being particularly anxious to read their students' written composition since they know before hand what to expect. They give or spoon-feed most of the ideas or points to the students. Students on the other hand, are not motivated to write since they do not write on what they know or have experienced.

A second conclusion from this study is that, most teachers appear to have lack of adequate knowledge of the composing process namely how a writer actually writes. This inadequacy is reflected, among other things, in the lack of provision of pre-writing activities, the allocation of time for editing and the revision of the composition before handing in for marking or assessment. In short, writing tasks are not structured to encourage their students to go through a process of planning, organizing, composing, revising and publishing (Hedge, 1989). This process is necessary for better texts to result as shown in the review of literature in Chapter Two that skilled writers usually go through this process of composing. As remarked by Das (1978) cited by Goh (1986 : 36) " Without taking students through and allowing them to experience, the full composing process of planning, drafting, reviewing and revising, students will not come to grips with those problems which are unique to writing" Thus under such circumstances, no wonder

it is hardly surprising that many students have not developed the essential skills for writing effectively.

A third conclusion from this study, is that, written feedback is perceived by students as being very useful for developing composing skills. From this study, there is a misconception on the part of the teachers that giving written feedback to students is a waste of time as they assume that students do not appreciate their comments. Hence, teachers have the tendency to mark students' composition superficially which consist of merely pointing out errors in surface features (spelling, mechanics, usage) rather than brainstorming the quality of ideas expressed that tends to discourage students' creativity in writing. As for the evaluation of students' compositions, there does not seem to be a standardized marking system among teachers.

A fourth conclusion is that, there is also a discrepancy or dichotomy between theory and practice among teachers. Questionnaire and survey responses from students and teachers evidenced a gap between teachers' ideals and actual classroom practice in the teaching of writing. Although many teachers do not teach in a very process-orientated way, they show in their responses that they assume a process-writing philosophy. To cite an example is that of teachers claiming the importance and administration of pre-writing activities in class before writing but in reality students were denied the opportunity to experience or perform these activities in their composition lesson. The gap in the teachers' ideal versus actual teaching situation is mirrored as a gap between their theoretical knowledge and practical implementation of process-orientated teaching. A

possible cause for this is the majority of the teacher respondents did not undergo professional teacher training in general and in specific, training in the teaching of writing, although some claimed to be familiar with the tenets of the process approach.

A fifth conclusion from this study, is that, most students do not read widely. Their lack of extensive reading in English accounted for the problems in their composition writing. This resulted in them having content-based problems such as the structuring of the different discourse types/genres of writing, the organization of ideas, coherently and logically, paragraphing and the lack of critical skills for revising text. Besides that, their lack of extensive reading also resulted in them having language-based problems such as the correct use of grammatical items like tenses, articles, prepositions, cohesive devices, spellings, punctuating meaningfully and choice of vocabulary.

Lack of extensive reading can also be the cause for the students to have the problems of not being able to write in a clear, organized and logical manner. Convoluted reasoning and poor organization of ideas were found in students' composition to the frustration of the teachers who attributed it to having to teach students in an environment where English is the third or foreign language.

Finally, in motivating students to write better, teachers should write as frequently as their students and share with them their writing experiences. Many teachers agree in theory but in practice, however, only students wrote and teachers merely judged and evaluated their students' writings. Researchers ( Graves 1983, Smith 1982, Reid 1996 ) have argued that

if teachers write with their students, they would experience the craft of writing themselves and understand what students are doing and how they feel. Sharing their experiences and the process of writing, their difficulties and joy of writing would certainly motivate students to write and with time, to write more effectively. Some writers like Danelson (1990) have argued the case more strongly, suggesting that if teachers do not write or are unable to demonstrate their crafts in front of the students, they should not be teaching writing at all.

## **5.2 Pedagogical Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study have important implications. First, they indicate that the traditional approach to teaching composition writing in this present school is quite different from what has been recommended by research studies on process writing. And judging from the feedback and responses from the questionnaire and the interviews with teachers and students, the process-based approach could be an alternative to the present traditional and simplistic product- based approach to composition writing.

Since students' writing skills are generally unaffected nor are there any improvement shown in their writing using the traditional approach which is product - orientated, it is opined that students may benefit substantially from a different writing approach. The process approach to teaching composition writing should be recommended and implemented by the teachers in this school. With the process approach to teaching composition, teachers would have to work through the writing process along with their

students, thus making their composition lessons more of a partnership between students and teachers. With the process approach, according to Applebee (1986:101) "instructional activities are designed to help students think through and organize their ideas before writing and to rethink and revise their initial drafts." This approach to the teaching and learning of composition writing is also in line with the policy of the education ministry and of the present school to promote and provide opportunities for creative and critical thinking among students.

Besides that, with the process approach which foster active development of writing skills among students, writing will not be a daunting task since both teachers and students are involved in the process of producing the written text.

The recommendation and implementation of the process approach to writing would also have ramifications for the English Language curriculum time of the school as well as teachers' training.

Since students have to go through the processes in their writing like planning, organizing, composing, revising and publishing, more classroom time is needed. In view of the importance of writing skills and the necessity of integrating other components of English language into the writing lesson especially grammar and mechanics, it seems justifiable to recommend the present double period used for composition into a writing week during which students learn how strategies for each stage of the writing process could be applied to their own writing problems and evaluate their effectiveness for specific tasks. When

such strategies/skills are consistently employed by students and form part of an instructional sequence, the likelihood is that students would internalize these skills and tackle their writing tasks more efficiently and effectively. Under this approach, students would definitely be more focused and have more meaningful writing practice for an example, students would have to go through multiple drafts in the revision stage and under the teachers' guidance, students would be able to produce better writing. White and Arndt (1991 : 257) states the goal of the approach is to "nurture the skills with which writers work out their own solutions to the problems they set themselves, which they shape their own raw materials into a coherent message and with which they work towards an acceptable and appropriate form for expressing it."

The current emphasis on testing could become a stumbling block to the implementation of this approach especially if teachers insist on students completing their composition within the writing period, purportedly to train students to write under examination conditions. While both teaching and testing composition are important for the students, teaching and learning the skills of composition should deserve more time. A possible solution would be for students to write using process writing for much of the semester but to write within a time constraint towards the end of the semester, thus giving students some practice of writing under pressure.

As for evaluative purposes, teachers should, as recommended by writing research, adopt a more humanistic approach to students' errors. For example, where students need to revise their drafts for each topic more than once, teachers need to evaluate only the final

draft. The final feedback could also be in the form of written comments consisting of some personal and positive evaluative comments on their strengths in the entire composition, to motivate students to produce more interesting writing. To reduce teachers' marking time and meticulous correction, peer marking should be allowed as it would help train students to spot their own errors. However, a point to note, only surface errors such as spellings and grammatical items like incorrect tense usage, concord, articles would be corrected by students, while errors on sentence structure and deviant expressions would be corrected by teachers. For institutional requirements, teachers may award a grade or mark for each composition.

The implementation of process writing in the school would need to be communicated to the school administrators and teachers to gain their support. Incidentally, the number of compositions to be done by students in the school should remain. ( In this school, the number specified is 10 marked compositions a year and their composition marks are taken as part of their English Language assessment )

While the proposed process - based approach to composition writing appears to hold great potential for improving students' competency in writing, it must be implicitly acknowledged that the best educational practice is unlikely to succeed in the hands of an inadequately trained or unmotivated teacher. Currently, many of the English teachers in the school are not professionally trained to teach writing. They do not know how to elicit good students' writing and do not know the stages of the writing process. Appropriate training courses, at both pre-service and in-service levels should therefore be conducted

to equip teachers to teach writing as a process. Teachers need to understand the underlying theory of this new approach, and to internalize and maintain the new concept of writing instruction through first hand experience of the writing process itself. In addition, they need to assume appropriate instructional role as facilitators of learning in a community of writers, and act as supportive audience for their students (Goh 1986).

Composing process research has also suggested that better readers tend to produce syntactically more mature texts than poor readers ( Stallard 1974, Pearl 1979, Pianko 1979). Furthermore, research findings also revealed that providing increased reading experiences for students in place of grammar study or additional writing is just as beneficial as, or more beneficial than, grammar study or additional writing practices (Cohen 1992). Writing and reading research has also pointed to the necessity of integrating reading into the writing classroom

From the above, we can see the importance on the part of the school authority and the teachers to promote extensive reading by providing an environment in which students will have to read. Reading programmes similar to that promoted by The Star NIE "Reading for Reward" is an example.

It is heartening to note that literature is brought back and is a compulsory component in the English Language paper for the PMR and SPM examination. According to

Kamalnathan (1999) the use of literary materials such as novels, short stories, plays, poems, excerpts from novels etc would not only encourage students to read and to develop interest in reading but would also provide students with the opportunity of being exposed to excellent models of the target language at its best.

Another benefit of extensive reading in English is that it can help the students to master vocabulary and grammar which in turn will benefit students in composition writing. The correlation between reading and writing has been well documented in many research findings

The school library should provide a wide collection of reading materials such as periodicals, magazines, recently published books or best sellers and others for students to read. Besides that, teachers should encourage students to become members of public libraries in order to get access to a greater variety of books and reading materials.

School administrators and teachers of English in the school could initiate the necessary curriculum changes to improve the writing competence of our students. To do so will require the continued upgrading of the professional skills of teachers and co-operation among teachers, book publishers and the administrators who set educational policies. It will also require that we assign writing a high priority in the school curriculum.

Although the past few years, have witnessed changes in the researcher's English Department, initiating change in composition pedagogy in the classroom is one of the

major challenges yet to be met. The journey towards improving composition writing among students in the school is long and fraught with difficulties, but it is necessary to make a start. As Confucius remarked with wisdom, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

### **5.3 Suggestions for Further Research.**

The present study on the composing skills of Chinese learners has given rise to a number of suggestions for further research.

First, it would appear that if the process-based approach for composition writing is implemented in the school, it would certainly be beneficial to find out how successful it has been implemented and how effective this approach is to the school. This could be done through a longitudinal study on the use of this approach in a cross-section of the classes lasting at least one academic year and utilizing both examination and non-examination classes. A comparison could then be made between the quality of writing achieved by experimental classes and control classes. Teachers teaching the experimental classes would, of course, have to be adequately trained in both the theory and practice of process writing before embarking on the project. More importantly, they would need to have a firm belief in the process approach to writing.

Another possible line of research which could be explored is in connection with the composing skills of English teachers teaching in Chinese schools. Many of the teachers

teaching English in these schools are products of these schools. They are bilinguals and many are trained in Taiwan. It would be interesting to research on their composing skills or on the problems they faced in their own writing. Such a study could provide valuable insights into process writing.

Researchers could gain further insights into the teaching of writing in other Chinese schools in the country by replicating the case study in another Chinese school for greater validity to the findings which could serve to consolidate or contradict the findings of the present study.

It would also be interesting and invaluable to involve different groups of students from different schools where the medium of instruction differs, for example, students from government - aided schools where the medium of instruction is Bahasa Melayu and students from other non-government aided / independent schools where the medium of instruction could be either English or Chinese, to compare and contrast students' composing skills.