

A General Study on the Length Approach

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Abstract

Many effective approaches have been proposed in the foreign language teaching field so as to enhance L2 learners' English proficiency, especially in writing. The Length Approach is regarded as a method of English writing put forward by Professor Wang Chuming. Taking the characteristics of foreign language teaching environment in China into consideration, it aims at improving learners' writing proficiency. So far, more and more scholars attach great importance to this approach and obtain significant teaching achievements. The study focuses on exploring the essence of the Length Approach.

Keywords

The Length Approach, Definition, Traditional Writing Method.

1. Introduction

Most second language learners' English competence is still at a low level, especially in writing. In this part, the Length Approach will be presented including the definition, implementation procedures, the differences and related studies.

2. The definition of the Length Approach

Based on the situation mentioned above, Professor Wang Chuming put forward the Length Approach in 2000, it was a task-based approach stemming from Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis. In his study, 201 freshmen of English majors were selected as the subjects and the teaching experiment had lasted for one semester. The result indicated the Length approach was conducive to improving the learners' writing skills and English competence. In addition, according to the questionnaire, the students accepted this new writing method and they felt more confident in writing.

The Length Approach holds that the second language learners' writing skill and language competence can be improved by writing long compositions. The key word "length" is fluctuant and depends on the learners' current language competency. In other words, the learners are supposed to use more words and proper expressions to compose the compositions to the best of their ability. It is well known that the process of second language learning is complicated and it can be influenced by numerous factors. However, we can adjust the "length" according to learners' language ability step by step. To some extent, long compositions do not mean high quality articles. It is just a kind of way to writing long compositions rather than the final goals in language learning. The learners need to surpass the minimum of the length and there is no upper limit. Through this writing approach, learners are stimulated to write more and improve their writing ability eventually. The Length Approach based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis changes teachers' role from correcting to designing tasks. In the Length Approach, through receiving comprehensible input, the learners can effectively internalize the knowledge what they have learned and turn out writing assignment in a productive way. In the process of writing, the learners are supposed to extract related words and respectable expressions, take grammatical rules and syntax into consideration as well. In addition, the Length Approach can reduce the learners' affective filter and stimulate learning motivation.

3. Implementation procedures of the Length Approach

According to the definition of the Length Approach, we can conclude that it varies from traditional writing approach. Its procedures mean a lot to both learners and teachers.

Firstly, designing appropriate writing tasks. The success of the Length Approach depends on writing assignments. The teachers should take a lot into consideration such as the learners' language competence, the difficulty of compositions, the representation of topic and so on. In other words, the difficulty of writing task should be proper and suitable for learners' current language ability. According to Wang Chuming (2005), the writing task should accord with four criteria. First, having something to write. It means the learners should not only write or output but also receive enough comprehensible input. In the process of designing tasks, the teachers can select proper topics according to textbook or provide them abundant reading materials. Second, being able to write. It indicates the teachers are supposed to consider the learners' language ability whether they have related writing knowledge or not. Third, being willing to write. That is to say, the subjects can arouse learners' interest and be conducive to expressing. Fourth, writing longer. The teachers stipulate minimum number of the words but no upper limitation.

Secondly, arranging the writing time and creating positive writing atmosphere. Usually, the students are required to compose an article once a week. In my view, the teachers can adjust writing time according to the teaching schedule but do not surpass once a week. Because too many assignments will arouse learners' affective filter and get half the result with twice the effort. The composition should be assigned in class and completed after class. What's more, there are numerous available resources for reference such as Internet and dictionary. The teachers' role is to provide enough language materials and comprehensible input, and then encourage learners to open mind and express their own thoughts freely and creatively. With full preparation, students will feel relaxed and turn out high quality compositions.

Thirdly, evaluation system and feedback. According to traditional writing approach, the teachers attach more importance to grammar mistakes and it is more time-consuming. This presents not only the anxiety of students, but also an increase of the burden on teachers. However, the Length Approach adopts one-hundred points evaluation system including four segments: length, content, organization, language. "length" accounts for the largest proportion at 40% and the other three at 20%, respectively. For example: the score "40+16+10+9=75", it indicates the student has reached the minimum of length. 16 means the content of this article is good, 10 indicates that the structure is not well-organized, 9 shows that it is poor in language and there are numerous syntax errors in expression. According to this evaluating system, the learners can obtain more detailed feedback and realize which aspect should be improved. Although syntax errors are unavoidable in the process of writing, the errors can be conquered by a large number of output. The evaluation methods are divided into three aspects: self-evaluation, peer-evaluation and teacher-evaluation. The first step is self-evaluation which can present what aspects need to be improved by students themselves. And then, as the second step, they can share the compositions with classmates and find out the merits and demerits. The last one is teachers' comment. What's more, teachers had better adopt some concise and insightful commentaries, such as "well done", "good job", "Great", and so on, and mark beautiful sentences and expressions as well. These positive feedback can satisfy the learners' affective needs and reduce affective filter. In the meantime, teachers are supposed to single out some good articles for learners' reference. On the one hand, they can learn from each other; on the other hand, it can boost learners' sense of achievement.

4. The differences between traditional writing method and the Length Approach

As a new writing method, the Length Approach varies from traditional writing method in many aspects, such as length, writing time, evaluation and so on. Professor Wang made the following table to present the differences between them.

Table3.1 The differences between traditional writing method and the length approach (Wang,2006)

The traditional writing methods(learn to write)	The Length Approach(write to learn)
(1)Teaching focus: correction.	(1)Teaching focus: designing titles
(2)English writing is regarded as a tool of language practice, less focus on thoughts and creativity.	(2)The writing task should accord with the learners' characteristics. The title should conform to four criteria: have something to write, be willing to write, be able to write and write long enough.
The task should be assigned and composed in class. There is an upper limit in the length so that it is convenient for teachers' correction. It attaches less importance to learners' affective needs.	(3)The task is supposed to be assigned in class and the students are required to write freely after class There is no upper limit in length; the longer, the better; so as to release learners' potential, obtain the sense of achievement and enhance learning confidence.
(4)It focuses on correction and tries to improve learners' language competence by correcting.	(4)It pays less attention to correcting and appreciates merits in compositions. Good articles are picked out for learners' reference.
(5)It laid more emphasis on teaching writing methods, genre study and systematic learning.	(5) It laid less emphasis on teaching writing methods, genre study. Meanwhile, it aims at writing more and using more.
(6)The correction is time-consuming.	(6)The correction takes less time.

Based on Swain's Output Hypothesis, the Length Approach focuses on learners' affective needs and encourages them to write freely. In traditional writing method, it adopts a total score in evaluation system. However, the Length Approach, it is a hundred-mark system from four aspects: length, content, organization and language.

References

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