



The Effect of Lengthened Writing Approach on L2 Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract

Based on empirical research and qualitative analysis, this paper aims to explore the effects of Lengthened Writing Approach on L2 vocabulary acquisition. The results show that, during L2 vocabulary teaching process, the proper application of Lengthened Writing Approach can effectively facilitate the memorization of new words, and this teaching approach is welcomed by most subjects. This study highlights the role of Lengthened Writing Approach in L2 vocabulary acquisition, and sheds light on the college English learning and teaching.

Keywords: Lengthened Writing Approach, L2 vocabulary teaching, Memorization of new words

1. Introduction

China, with the largest population of the earth, has the largest body of L2 English learners. Since Chinese and English belong to different language families, Chinese English learners, especially beginners and intermediate learners, feel it very difficult to memorize English words. English practitioners have been trying to find out ways of helping English learners remember English words quickly and effectively. They try their methods in their classes, write or compile books, make software for the self-learners, etc. But there have been relatively few methodological proposals on how best to systematically approach the teaching and learning of vocabulary which really suits Chinese EFL learners.

Lengthened Writing Approach is a kind of foreign language learning and teaching method first initiated and advocated by Chinese scholar Wang Chumming. In view of the characteristics of Chinese EFL learners, he integrated various approaches and proposed this method with a teaching focus on the creative task design which will stimulate the learners to express their true feelings and arouse their writing impulse, in accordance with the laws of foreign language learning, the instructors adjust the requirement of the length of the learners' compositions at different learning stages (the higher, the longer), so as to facilitate the learners to overcome the tough barrier to foreign language learning, enhance their confidence and sense of achievements, and hasten the transformation from knowledge to application competence. (Wang C.M, 2000)

For the intermediate L2 learners, especially the college students, researchers of Lengthened Writing Approach hold that, since the affective variables such as attitudes, anxiety, motivation and self-confidence play an important role in making individual differences in language learning, this method may effectively solve this problem, and by encouraging the learners to write freely, Lengthened Writing Approach may give them a sense of achievements, this, in turn, will enhance their self-confidence. What this approach stresses is the learners should write to learn, rather than the traditional way—learn to write. Most important is that, through long writing, the learners' knowledge of foreign language may be gradually internalized and consolidated.

2. Hypothesis

Theoretically, we may hypothesize that, Lengthened Writing Approach has a positive effect on Chinese EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition, or to put it in another way, Lengthened Writing Approach is an effective way to enhance Chinese EFL learners' lexical competence. But there is still a lack of empirical research to further test this hypothesis. Therefore, this study, with a reference to Yun (1989) and Wang (2005), intended to provide some additional information in this respect by conducting experiment and analyzing the experimental data. Specifically, this study attempted to answer the following questions:

- (1) Whether the new words retain longer in the learners' memory, after being used in their writings,
- (2) What the reactions of the subjects to the Lengthened Writing Approach are.

3. Method

In order to find answers to these questions, 4 research instruments—written task, tests, questionnaire and retrospective interview—were administered to the subjects (112 first-year undergraduates of non-English majors at Qingdao

University of Science and Technology, including 55 in experimental group, 57 in control group). The first-year undergraduates were selected because they had no college English education experience and similar personal English learning background, standing at the same starting point.

Data were collected over a span of more than 8 weeks; the subjects were given two English passages inside class. The researcher picked out 60 words or expressions that may be unknown to the subjects. These words or expressions were printed and made into test papers. The first test was carried out in the classroom settings. The subjects were required to decide which word or expression was known to them and write down the corresponding Chinese meaning within 30 minutes. All the participants in the test cooperated with the researcher, followed the directions strictly and took the test seriously. The researcher collected all the test papers after the subjects finished.

After the first test, the subjects learned the 60 new words and expressions under the help of the teacher, and then it came to the writing task. The subjects were given an assignment: writing a piece of composition after class. The subjects were required to write as long as possible, but must finish within two days. There was a difference in requirements to the experimental group and the control group. For the experimental group, the subjects were required to use the 60 words and expressions as many as possible, the more, the better; especially the unknown ones in the first test; while there was no such requirement to the control group. And the researcher collected all the compositions when they finished two days later. Two weeks later, all the subjects participated in the second test. The test paper was made up of 60 English sentences, each sentence contained one word or expression from the above-mentioned 60 ones, and the other words in each sentence were all the frequently used ones. This test required the subjects to translate all these sentences into Chinese. The purpose of the second test was to see how many words or expressions which were acquired two weeks before could be remembered, so as to check whether there was any difference in memorizing the new words between the two groups. Eight weeks later, the third test was conducted in the classroom to all the subjects. The purpose of this test was the same as the second one, checking whether there was any difference in remembering of the new words between the two groups after eight weeks. The test method was still the English to Chinese translation of 60 sentences which were different from the second test in meaning and sequence, but still contained those 60 target words or expressions. The test paper was modified to give the subjects a sense of freshness, so as to ensure the validity of the test.

Questionnaires and the retrospective interview were given to the subjects on two different school days after they finished the third test. The questionnaires were administered in classroom within 10 minutes, and when completed, they were collected immediately by the researcher. Interviews with small groups of 6 to 8 were carried out after class in an informal way. Though with some key questions in mind, the researcher did not interrupt them when the subjects were talking. Instead he followed and asked more questions once the subjects said something worth exploring. Such a pleasant atmosphere led to a relaxed and honest outflow of personal views. The interviews were conducted all in Chinese so that the subjects could express themselves accurately and thoroughly. And the researcher made notes while subjects contributed something valuable and meaningful.

4. Results and Analysis

The results have been fed into SPSS (12.0) and analyzed using independent sample T-test analysis.

Table 4.1 shows the means comparison of Test 1 from the outcome of independent sample T-test in SPSS. It indicates that in Test 1, Experimental Group (E Group) and Control Group (C Group) are quite similar in the means (E Group is 48.78, while C Group is 48.77), this means both groups have nearly the same new words and expressions size (about 49) in the given two passages, and though control group is a little lower, it ($P > 0.05$) has no significance at all.

Therefore, the results of Test 1 proved again that both groups started at the same or similar vocabulary level before the experiment which provides an ideal reference for the following experimental tests.

Based on the number of the each subject's unknown words and expressions, how many of these unknown words and expressions were used in his/her composition were counted. Table 4.2 shows the means comparison of the counted numbers from the outcome of independent sample T-test in SPSS. It indicates that in the writing task, in the numbers of the new words and expressions used in the compositions, E Group and C Group are quite different in the means (E Group is 15.22, while C Group is 4.53), and the difference is statistically significant. ($t = 13.47, P < 0.01$). This means that, in the experimental group, most subjects could consciously put what they have learned in the two passages into their compositions, while in the controlled group, the subjects' performance in using the new words and expressions is much poorer.

Based on the above analysis, there is only one possible explanation that accounts for the different performances of the two groups, that is, in the task assignment stage, the subjects in experimental group were required to use the 60 words and expressions as many as possible, the more, the better; especially the unknown ones in the first test; while there was no such requirement to the control group.

Therefore, the subjects' performance of using the new words and expressions can be greatly affected by the teaching requirements. And the teacher's purposeful guidance in the task assignment stage plays a positive role in arousing the

consciousness and interests of the subjects to use the words and expressions they have just learned in their writings.

Test 2 provided the researcher with two kinds of data statistically (Data A and Data B). Data A was the scores of the test which showed how many new words and expressions could be remembered after two weeks. Then with a reference to their compositions, the researcher could work out Data B, that is, among the remembered new words or expressions, how many of them were actually used in their compositions. In the following, the two results will be presented and described respectively.

Table 4.3.1 shows the means comparison of Data A in Test 2 from the outcome of independent sample T-test in SPSS It indicates that, after two weeks, in the numbers of how many new words and expressions could be remembered by the subjects, E Group and C Group are different in the means (E Group is 22.44, while C Group is 16.96), and the difference is statistically significant. ($t = 7.51, P < 0.01$). This means that the subjects in E Group acquired the new words and expressions better than those in C Group

From Section 4.2, we know that the experimental group and control group had different performances in using the new words and expressions in their compositions. Does this contribute to the different performances of the subjects in memorizing the new words and expressions? So it's quite necessary to make a statistical analysis of how many of these memorized new words and expressions were used in the subjects' compositions.

Table 4.3.2 shows the means comparison of Data B in Test 2 from the outcome of independent sample T-test in SPSS It indicates that in the numbers of how many of the remembered new words and expressions were used in the subjects' compositions, E Group and C Group are different in the means (E Group is 9.89, while C Group is 4.04), and the difference is statistically significant. ($t = 11.83, P < 0.01$).

It is not surprising to have such difference since from Section 4.2; we know that the subjects in E Group used much more new words and expressions in their compositions than those in C Group. What the researcher most concern in Data B is presented in Table 4.3.3. It clearly shows that, in E Group, 65% of the new words and expressions which were used in the compositions were still retained in the subjects' memories two weeks later; while the ratio is much higher in C Group, which amounts to 89%. That is, for both groups, most of the new words and expressions which were used in the compositions had been memorized after two weeks. This means that, during the L2 writing process, if the newly acquired words or expressions have been creatively used, they will retain longer than those without in the users' memories.

The same as Test 2, Test 3 also provided the researcher with two kinds of data statistically (Data I and Data II). Data I was the scores of the test which showed how many new words and expressions could be memorized after eight weeks. Then with a reference to their compositions, the researcher could work out Data II, that is, among the memorized new words or expressions, how many of them were actually used in their compositions. In the following, the two results will be presented and described respectively.

Table 4.4.1 shows the means comparison of Data I in Test 3 from the outcome of independent sample T-test in SPSS. It indicates that, after eight weeks, in the numbers of how many new words and expressions could be remembered by the subjects, E Group and C Group are still different in the means, (E Group is 28.31, while C Group is 25.07), and the difference is still statistically significant. ($t = 4.52, P < 0.01$). But the difference is not so sharp as that in Test 2 (E Group is 22.44, while C Group is 16.96, $t = 7.51, P < 0.01$).

This means that, eight weeks later, the experimental group still remains its dominance in the acquisition of those new words and expressions. But in terms of the total numbers of the new words and expressions that could still be remembered by the subjects, the control group has got close to the experimental group. What's more, both groups' performances are a little better than those in Test 2. This may due to the fact that, during the eight weeks, the subjects had been learning English continuously, and they may directly or indirectly go over those words and expressions. This is the negative factor which the researcher cannot control during the experiment. But that does not affect the explanation of the test results.

Table 4.4.2 shows the means comparison of Data II in Test 3 from the outcome of independent sample T-test in SPSS It indicates that in the numbers of how many of the remembered new words and expressions were used in the subjects' compositions, E Group and C Group are different in the means (E Group is 10.63, while C Group is 4.07), and the difference is statistically significant. ($t = 18.63, P < 0.01$).

We may also resort to table 4.4.3 to see the revelation of the result. It clearly shows that, in E Group, 70% of the new words and expressions which were used in the compositions were still retained in the subjects' memories eight weeks after they finished their compositions; while the ratio is much higher in C Group, which amounts to 90%.

And just as Data B in Test 2, this again proves that, in L2 vocabulary acquisition, if the new words and expressions have been consciously used in the writings, even after a long time, they will still retain in the learners' memories. That is, using the newly acquired words or expressions may facilitate the acquisition of them.

The purpose of questionnaire and interview is to explore all the subjects' personal and subjective feelings about the questions that the researcher is interested in. For each item, the means of the subjects' marking were figured out. And Table 4.5 shows the results of means of both groups in the questionnaires. It clearly reflects the subjects' attitudes towards different items related to the Lengthened Writing Approach. We may note that all the means are over the dividing value 3, which means, in general, the subjects' opinions about the items being investigated are positive.

Item 1(I have confidence in writing a long composition in English) mainly concerns about the affective factors of the subjects. According to the creative construction model of Burt and Dulay, the affective filter screens incoming language data and constitutes the first main hurdle that incoming language data must encounter before they are processed further. That is to say, the affective factors play an important role in making individual differences in language learning. It is, therefore, necessary to look at the affective reactions of the subjects to the Lengthened Writing Approach. And the means of this item shows that most subjects (especially E Group, with the means of 3.39) have self-confidence to write long composition, and being able to writing a long composition in English gives them a sense of achievement, which builds on their confidence in learning English.

Item 2(I like to write a composition which is related to what we have just learned.) was designed to see whether the subjects like to a composition with a topic related to what they had just learned. This may also belong to a kind of affective factors and directly related to the first two stages of Lengthened Writing Approach, materials input and task design. The means of both groups are up to or nearly to 4, which shows that, if the subjects are exposed to a certain task-related materials, a materials-related writing task is no longer a tough thing for them, for they know how to express what they want to say.

The means of Item 3(Writing long composition is helpful to use the new words and expressions we have learned) shows that, most subjects hold positive idea on the role of writing long composition. And E Group's better performance in the experiment may account for why the mean of E Group is a little higher than that of C Group.

Item 4 (Writing long composition makes me review the new words we've learned so that I could find some useful ones) and Item 5(Writing long composition makes me read more so that I could find more useful words and expressions) were used to survey what the subjects have done during their writing process. The means of these two Items, though a little lower, together with the retrospective interview, prove the researcher's assumption, that is, the material-related writing task may arouse the subjects' learning interests, and they actively go over what they've just learned and expand their reading after class in order to finish their composition assignment.

The means of Item 6 (Through writing long composition, I found I can remember more new words and expressions) are not very high (with only 3.56 in E Group and 3.22 in C Group), which may be due to the facts that when the questionnaire were conducted, the subjects had only experienced three times of writing long compositions, some of them hadn't realized the potential effects of such method on their acquisition of new words and expressions. But it is enough to show that most subjects approve this item.

And Item 7(I think writing long composition after class is an effective way in English vocabulary learning) is the summary of the whole questionnaire. In terms of the means of both groups (E Group is 4.13 and C Group is 4.09), a conclusion can be safely drawn: generally speaking, the subjects have approved the positive effects of Lengthened Writing Approach on their English vocabulary learning. And some of the opinions of the subjects during the retrospective interview are presented below to further illustrate the conclusion.

5. Conclusion

The following are the major findings of the present research

(1)In consolidating word form and meaning in memory, using the word may be an effective way, for the data gained from the tests has approved that, if being used once in the writings, the new words or expressions will retain longer in the user's memory than those without.

(2)The results of questionnaire and retrospective interview indicated that, Lengthened Writing Approach was welcomed by most students; it did strengthen the students' confidence and arouse their interests in English learning, urge them to consult various resources, motivate them to find more useful words and expressions in their writings, so as to enhance their abilities in English vocabulary acquisition.

The present study first contributes to the theories of second language acquisition, especially the functions of L2 writing: Lengthened Writing Approach, to some extent, is an attempt to bridge across reading and writing while awakening a producing desire and consciousness in learners throughout the process of input, promote the transition from input to output by timely practice of long writing after reading, and thereby to make the Chinese EFL learners more efficient and effective. While reading is a way of learning, writing, as a more accurate kind of output, is another. "Writing reinforces grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary." "Writing is a unique way to reinforce learning."(Raimes, 1983) Meanwhile, this study calls for more importance to be attached to the role of written output in L2 vocabulary learning.

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Table 4.1 Means Comparison for Test 1

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Experimental Group	55	48.78	2.29	.024	.981
Control Group	57	48.77	2.05		

Table 4.2 Means Comparison for the New Words and Expressions Used in the Subjects' Writings

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Experimental Group	55	15.22	5.32	13.47	.000
Control Group	57	4.53	2.71		

Table 4.3.1 Means Comparison for Data A in Test 2

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Experimental Group	55	22.44	4.08	7.51	.000
Control Group	57	16.96	3.63		

Table 4.3.2 Means Comparison for Data B in Test 2

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Experimental Group	55	9.89	3.15	11.38	.000
Control Group	57	4.04	2.24		

Table 4.3.3 Means and Frequency comparison for Writing Task and Data B in Test 2

	N	Mean of the new words and expressions used in compositions	Mean of the memorized new words and expressions in Test 2 which were used in compositions	Proportion (%)
E Group	55	15.22	9.89	65%
C Group	57	4.53	4.04	89%

Table 4.4.1 Means Comparison for Data I in Test 3

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Experimental Group	55	28.31	3.53	4.52	.000
Control Group	57	25.07	4.02		

Table 4.4.2 Means Comparison for Data II in Test 3

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Experimental Group	55	10.63	2.14	18.63	.000
Control Group	57	4.07	1.56		

Table 4.4.3 Means and Frequency comparison for Writing Task and Data II in Test 3

	N	Mean of the new words and expressions used in compositions	Mean of the memorized new words and expressions in Test 3 which were used in compositions	Proportion (%)
E Group	55	15.22	10.63	70%
C Group	57	4.53	4.07	90%

Table 4.5 The Result of Questionnaires

Item	Group	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
		5	4	3	2	1
Item 1	E Group	3.39				
	C Group	3.43				
Item 2	E Group	4.01				
	C Group	3.92				
Item 3	E Group	4.17				
	C Group	3.61				
Item 4	E Group	3.61				
	C Group	3.32				
Item 5	E Group	3.92				
	C Group	3.63				
Item 6	E Group	3.56				
	C Group	3.22				
Item 7	E Group	4.13				
	C Group	4.09				