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Second language writing and literary reading in university: three empirical studies

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SUMMARY

In the project, we set up three experiments to stimulate the Asian/Vietnamese students' idea, voice, and response generation via learning activities like written brainstorming, genre awareness, discussion, and self-questioning. The experiments were in the form of training courses that lasted for four weeks. We summarize in the below part the cultural contexts of the students (Chapter 1), the research question, methodology, and results of the study on idea generation via written brainstorming and genre awareness in argumentative writing (Chapter 2), on voice expression in argumentative writing via free writing and group discussion (Chapter 3), and on response to reading literature (Chapter 4). Finally, we summarize the contribution of the studies to (second language) teaching pedagogy, language research and theory development (Chapter 5).

Chapter 1 introduced the whole research project. First, we presented the cultural context of the Asian/Vietnamese undergraduate students. We assumed that the problems that Asian/Vietnamese might face in becoming competent in communication in English, a requirement for young Vietnamese academics in a global-oriented era of the country, could be traced back to their cultural background. From the perspective of teachers and researchers in foreign language training in Vietnam, we analyzed aspects of Vietnamese culture in communication that might affect personal stance taking, idea generation and voice expression of Vietnamese students in academically writing in English and in responding to English literary texts.

Second, we justified the problems that the three studies aimed to address and presented a theoretical framework. We presented, shortly, our observations on students' specific problems in argumentative writing and literary reading, and a review of literature on the problems. The first study was on activating students' idea generation in argumentative writing via written brainstorming, driven by a genre model. The second study was on stimulating students' voice expression via two different types of prewriting content generation activities: group discussion and free writing. In the third study, we tried to stimulate students to read literary fictions with self-questioning elaborated by group discussion and free writing for a higher cognitive and affective engagement.

Third, we introduced in the chapter the research design and measures used to examine the effects of the interventions on idea generation, voice expression in writing, and engagement in reading.

Chapter 2 detailed a study on the effect of written brainstorming and genre awareness on learner-writers' idea generation. Both L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) writing research emphasized the importance of facilitating idea generation in learner-writers because problems in idea generation might lead to writers' problems in developing rhetorical goals, and organization of text (Graham, 2005).

We presented the context of Vietnamese students. Vietnamese students have a notion of academic writing which is different from Anglophone/Western writing. Academic writing, in Vietnam is a tool to express students' mastery of knowledge, morals, and traditions embedded in literary texts. Vietnamese learner-writers possess a different concept of self-authority of text voice in which personal/individual voice ranked below group voice. Teaching English as a foreign language in secondary education places an emphasis on mastery of language knowledge rather than on language knowledge transforming or language for communicative purpose.

We reviewed the literature on the effects of interventions in idea generation of writers for a theoretical framework for our study and the hypothesis of prewriting activation and idea generation quality.

To answer the research questions whether prewriting activity with written brainstorming and genre awareness via discussion could influence positively idea generation, productivity, composition quality and self-efficacy of Vietnamese learner-writers, we chose a pre-test/post-test control group design. We tested the intervention of text analysis two times in two experimental panels. In the first panel, one group was in sample analysis and free-writing condition (experimental group) and another group in free-writing condition (control group). In the second panel, both group swapped the learning conditions. The design allowed us to examine the repeated effect of the intervention, and the effect of the sequence of condition, Experiment-then-Control or Control-then-Experiment. In the chapter, we introduced the newly created measures of quality of written brainstorming text with three indicators: (1) productivity of free writing created (2) the perceived usefulness of ideas in free-writing texts and (3) the actual use of these ideas in writers' final text. We also designed a 19-item questionnaire which proved to be reliable to measure students' self-efficacy for writing argumentatively in English. The course which lasted for four weeks with the participation of 66 students was detailed in the chapter. We found positive effects of text analysis on idea generation in written brainstorming texts. In short, a prewriting stage with two sub-processes including genre awareness via a short analysis of goal and function of argumentative writing genre and free writing would bring positive results in all the three indicators: (1) productivity of free writing created (2) the perceived usefulness of ideas in free-writing text and (3) the actual use of these ideas in writers' final text. Issues on why sample text analysis did not contribute directly to text productivity, text quality and self-efficacy were discussed.

Chapter 3 reported a study on the effect of two different types of prewriting content generation activity, individual free writing versus group discussion, on voice expression in argumentative writing of Vietnamese learner-writers. Issues of voice in writing, like development of concept of voice and investigation of voice expression of learner-writers have been receiving major concern in the field of academic writing

because of the possible connection between writing voice and authors' identity (Hyland, 2010; Ivanic, 1998). In this chapter, we started clarifying some cultural characteristics of Vietnamese communication that might affect Vietnamese students in expressing their voice in writing.

We reviewed studies on writing voice in L1 and L2 to form a theoretical framework for designing interventions in the stimulation of voice expression of Vietnamese students. It is noted here that although many studies investigate what voice is and how voice could be found in texts, it is still unclear how authentic classroom supports may stimulate voice expression of second language novice writers.

To answer the research question on effects of content prewriting activities on voice, we chose a pre-test post-test reversed-treatment control group design with two conditions. Two conditions were implemented: (1) idea generation via individual free writing and (2) idea generation via group discussion of individual lists of ideas. The design allowed us to examine the repeated effect of each content activity on voice. In the experiment, we found a valid and sensitive way of measuring two dimensions of voice: the distance between the author-I and the reader-You (Personal voice) and the distance between the author-I and the writing content-It (Directness) in argumentative writing from micro-linguistic perspective. The course which lasted four weeks with the participation of 66 students was detailed in the chapter.

We observed effects of the differences between the prewriting activities and voice construction of novice Vietnamese students in writing argumentatively in English. Group Discussion enhanced the self-confidence about content, however, resulted in a less personal voice in argumentative texts. Free writing stimulated individualized voice, however affected the self-confidence about content negatively. The discussion of effects found on designing an effective EFL classroom in the Asian/Vietnamese context was provided in the chapter.

Chapter 4 reported a study on the effect of self-questioning on cognitive and affective engagement in literary fiction reading. Reading and responding critically and creatively to English-written fiction and literary stories is required in EFL academic education in Vietnam. However, the pedagogy emphasizing text-based reading and teacher-supported reading seems not to be effective in facilitating the students to meet the requirement. Students are reported as reading on the surface and not really investing in finding meaning of the literary texts even if the stories are appropriate for their language level and age.

In this chapter, we reviewed reading theories, studies on engaging students with self-questioning on reading comprehension and appreciation to form the theoretical framework for designing a reader-based experimental course to increase students' engagement in reading. We facilitated students to read and generate questions while reading and later addressing the questions with group discussion/free writing. The effect on cognitive and affective engagement was measured in students' written response essays and an inventory of students' perception of their own engagement. To answer the research questions we chose a pre-test post-test control group design with switching replications with two different types of experimental conditions and one

control condition. The design allowed us to examine the repeated effect of each version of self-questioning on cognitive and affective engagement, the development pattern of each sub-group, and the durability of effect.

We found a valid and reliable way of measuring students' cognitive and affective engagement with reading via two channels: teachers' assessment of students' engagement via qualities of the students' response essay and students' assessment of their own level of engagement via an inventory of 10-item engagement questionnaire. The course which lasted for four weeks with the participation of 59 students was detailed in the chapter.

We found that both approaches of self-questioning positively affected students' engagement with literary fiction, compared to the teacher-led condition. This effect was different for low and high achieving students: self-questioning positively affected the engagement with literary fiction of low achievers, but did not show an effect on the engagement of high achievers. The maintenance of the intervention effects was also observed. No different effect was shown between the two experimental conditions. Implication of the findings is that, for second language undergraduate learner-readers, a literary reading classroom with students' self-generation of questions combined with reflective discussion in group or individual free writing positively results in cognitive and affective engagement observed by teachers and self-perceived by students.

Chapter 5 discussed the major results reported in the three studies in connection with the cultural and educational context of the Asian/Vietnamese students. We, first, discussed the contribution of the findings towards building an effective language education program for Asian/Vietnamese students. We emphasized that an effective pedagogy must be the one being sensitive to the students' historical/cultural backgrounds, addressing the students' real challenges and encouraging potential of students as individual learners. Second, we discussed the contribution of the three experiments to research methodology and theory in (second) language training. We suggested that repeated measure of intervention effects was necessary in testing the effects because that would validate and ensure reliability of the effects found. We might also contribute to Anglophone/Western theories of language education in making the theories sensitive and inclusive by applying the theory on the learners whose English is not the first language.