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Investigating Writing Tasks in English Textbooks
for Chinese Secondary Students

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Research Background and Rationale

As the amount of research on L2 writing continues to proliferate, it has become even more evident that little importance is being given to the examination of English composition textbooks and writing tasks. The severely limited number of empirical studies that have been conducted have only focused on L2 writing tasks targeted at undergraduate and postgraduate writers; the types of tasks being given to high school L2 English writers has not been considered (Cho, 2014; Jackson et al., 2006; Maher et al., 2013; Mateos et al., 2007). The lack of empirical studies is worsened by an emphasis being placed on external evaluation to determine whether textbooks satisfy teachers' and students' perceived needs, or by examining textbooks based on macro-compiling principles rather than conducting a thorough study of the textbooks under scrutiny. As to the high school context, researchers have constructed models for materials evaluation but have lagged behind in applying these theories to evaluate writing materials (Chang, 2004; Jung, 2012; Jwa, 2007; Kobayakawa, 2011). Thus, a theoretical as well as empirical void exists in the L2 writing literature.

These and similar problems are also found in the Chinese EFL context. Firstly, few composition textbooks have been specially developed for the needs of Chinese senior secondary students; instead, there is a predominance of so-called "integrated" textbooks. Secondly, among these integrated textbooks, only a few writing tasks are included, and they are rarely adopted as part of the compulsory modules taught by high school English teachers. Lastly, the empirical investigations relating to EFL writing taking place in the Chinese context indicate a disinclination to evaluate writing task types.

To address the aforementioned issues, this paper reports on a portion of a larger investigation of L2 writing tasks found in senior secondary textbooks from mainland China. Taking the authoritative textbook *High School English* as a case, a newly constructed analytical framework is used to explore the features of EFL writing tasks found within this textbook to determine whether the tasks are based on the requirements set out in the General High School English Curriculum Standards (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2003).

EFL Writing and the Chinese New Curriculum Standards

In accordance with the New Curriculum Standards, senior secondary school students in mainland China are expected to obtain a certain level of EFL writing proficiency depending on their future educational goals. In general, students who do not have plans to further their studies after high school should graduate having obtained Proficiency Level Seven, while those aiming to proceed to tertiary education are required to obtain Proficiency Level Eight. The only exception is for students enrolled in foreign language high schools, which carries the expectation of obtaining Proficiency Level Nine (Wang & Chen, 2012). Specific EFL writing skills need to be mastered before students will be considered as having reached the requirements set out for each proficiency level. These skills include the ability to:

- Write memos, greeting cards, and letters; describe happenings and express one's ideas; and edit and revise what one has written (Proficiency Level Six)
- Convey ideas through words and diagrams; write for practical purposes; describe happenings and comment on them; and fill in forms (i.e., application forms) (Proficiency Level Seven)
- Describe something that has happened, express ideas and attitudes; summarize articles; and put information contained in texts and diagrams into one's own words (Proficiency Level Eight)
- Write abstracts, reports, notices, and business letters; vividly describe happenings; clearly express one's opinion and comment on others' ideas; fill out different kinds of forms; and write a curriculum vitae and letter of application (Proficiency Level Nine)

In addition to the specific genres of writing, the New Curriculum Standards suggest that students at all proficiency levels become familiar with a range of writing topics, including personality, family, socialization, festivals, celebrations, daily routines, interests, and hobbies. As students complete high school, their EFL writing should show progress in lexical and grammatical accuracy, appropriateness of formatting, and fluency. Students are also expected to learn EFL writing through technologically informed and peer-collaborative means. Starting from Proficiency Level Eight, students are expected to show an increased cultural awareness of countries where English is learned and taught as an L1. Against this background, the present study took a content analysis approach to examine the features of English writing tasks in the authoritative textbook *High School English* to determine whether the tasks are based on the requirements set out in the New Curriculum Standards. This study has been guided by the following two research questions:

(1) What are the characteristics of the writing tasks in *High School English*?
(2) To what extent do writing tasks in *High School English* correspond to the guidelines set out in the New Curriculum Standards?

The Study

The Textbook: *High School English*

High School English, developed and published by the People's Education Press (PEP), was selected as the case for this EFL writing task analysis because this textbook is commonly used in many regions of mainland China, and because the publisher, the PEP, is considered an authoritative materials developer throughout China. Embracing a "one syllabus, many textbooks" ideology, the five compulsory modules and six optional modules of *High School English* were written based on the New Curriculum Standards. This in turn means that multiple *High School English* textbooks could be written including different content and writing tasks, yet all aiming towards the same syllabus and goals clearly set out in the New Curriculum Standards. The first five compulsory modules correspond to Proficiency Level Seven

guidelines; optional modules six to eight correspond to Proficiency Level Eight; and optional modules nine to eleven correspond to Proficiency Level Nine. Students normally are expected to have finished the first eight modules before they graduate high school (Wang & Chen, 2012).

The writing tasks within the eleven modules (each containing five units) were located in two sections of the textbook, "using language" and the accompanying workbook. "Using language" writing tasks usually required students to combine writing with other language skills (i.e., reading, listening, and speaking), but sometimes independent writing tasks also appear in this section. On the other hand, the writing tasks found in the workbook did not ask students to combine skills, but did, however, sometimes reference previous reading, listening, or speaking tasks. A total of 114 writing tasks (i.e., 55 taken from "using language" sections and 59 from the workbook) in four sets of PEP *High School English* were selected for analysis. Two examples of writing tasks, one integrated skills and one strictly writing task, are shown here:

Speaking and writing Task (Module 1, p. 39)

1. Look at the life of Nelson Mandela and find out what happened to him in 1999. In pairs, discuss what qualities made Mandela a great man.
2. Use the timeline on page 39 to write a summary of Nelson Mandela's life or a short paragraph about your ideas on Nelson Mandela.

Writing Task (Module 1, p. 53)

1. What problems do you have in learning English?
2. Read the sample writing and study how the text is organized. Then write about your problems in your English study.

Method

Content analysis was adopted in this study to analyze the writing tasks, and each writing task was compared with the New Curriculum Standards to assess congruence. Informed by relevant L2 writing theories and the published literature about writing tasks (Chang, 2004; Hyland, 2003; Jung, 2012; Jwa, 2007; Kobayakawa, 2011; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007), the newly established framework formed from the following criteria was used to analyze each writing task:

- Task type
- Genre
- Topic
- Input
- Writing prompt
- Teaching method
- Writing approach

English writing tasks can be categorized into seven types, including graphological, controlled, guided, translation, free, controlled-guided, and integrated (Kobayakawa, 2011). Since the line between controlled and guided writing could become blurred by researchers, for the present study tasks containing information transformation from texts or diagrams were coded as guided writing tasks, while tasks that mainly focused on structures were considered controlled writing tasks. Tasks that focused on both grammar and information transformation were coded as controlled-guided tasks.

Genre has been defined as "a group of texts which share similar discoursal features that are easily identifiable by members of a community" (Chen & Su, 2011, p. 185). Sample genres of English writing

tasks are narration, description, exposition and argumentation (Hyland, 2003). Each writing task may focus on one specific topic which is related to students' life and learning, and such topics include personality, family, socialization, festivals, and celebrations. (Jung, 2012; Jwa, 2007). Any additional reading materials (i.e., 'hints'; 'thought stimulators'), listening materials, and pictures/charts were considered as input. Writing prompts were defined as words or phrases that served as directions for the organization of the to-be-completed writing tasks. To further distinguish between 'input' and 'writing prompt', the researchers treated model compositions as part of the writing prompts. As for teaching method, product-, process- and genre-based writing was differentiated using the following criteria: product-based writing tasks emphasize linguistic accuracy (e.g., grammar and structure); process-based writing tasks require completion of prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing; and writing tasks that clearly specify writing context and target audience were considered genre-based writing tasks (Hyland, 2003). Writing approaches were either individual or collaborative, and paper-and-pencil- or computer-based (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007).

Results and Discussion

In all, 114 writing tasks were found in the English textbooks. In this section the characteristics of the writing tasks are discussed in relation to the prescribed requirements indicated in the New Curriculum Standards.

Task Type

Integrated tasks, which account for 48 percent of tasks, were the most frequent task type found in PEP *High School English*, followed by free writing (20 percent), controlled writing (17 percent), guided writing (11 percent), and controlled-guided writing (4 percent). This result highlights an emphasis on enhancing high school students' abilities to combine the skill of writing with other language skills.

Genre

Figure 1 shows that description (22 percent), letter/email/postcard (19 percent), and narration (17 percent) were the most frequent genres of L2 writing found in the textbooks, followed by report (11 percent) and argumentation (seven percent). Exposition, play/drama, review, summary, poem, schedule/plan, and instruction/guide/rules/signs appear two to five times, and speech/script, proposal, application letter, notes/tips/message/notice, and dialog/conversation appeared only once (one percent).
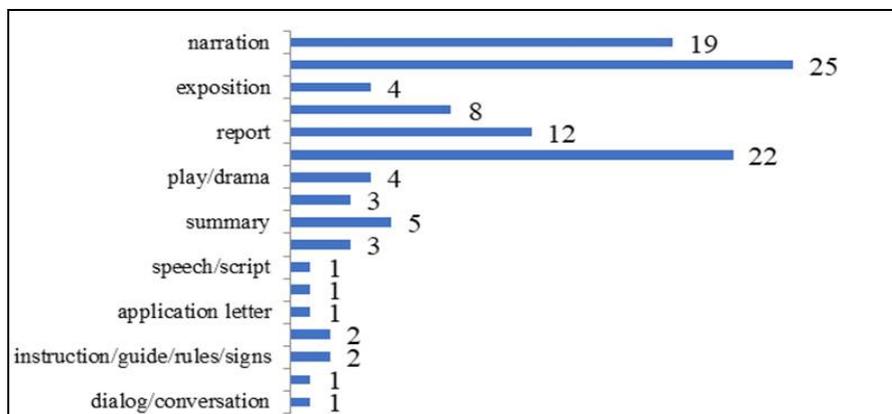

Figure 1. Genre in PEP *High School English*.

Some differences were found between what appears in the textbooks and what is recommended by the New Curriculum Standard. While certain genres are not explicitly mentioned in the New Curriculum Standard, students are expected to be knowledgeable of these genres (e.g., argumentation, exposition). Two genres in particular, description and letters, are mentioned in nearly every stage of the New Curriculum Standards and are thus more frequently assigned than other genres. However, some practical genres like curriculum vitae, application letters, and cover letters, which are also mentioned in the New Curriculum Standards and knowledge of which could be of practical use during students' future studies and careers, are not given much attention by writing tasks found in PEP *High School English*.

Topic

Excluding one task that enables students to write about a topic of their choosing, Figure 2 indicates that students are most frequently required to write about people and celebrities (14 percent), followed by language and literature (11 percent), unreal situations (11 percent), and society (ten percent). Students write about family/interpersonal relationships (six percent), culture/cultural relics (six percent), travel and transport (five percent), science and technology (four per cent), nature and environment (seven percent), food and health (four percent), daily routine (four percent) and future career/personal planning (four percent). Students write about scenic spots (three percent), campus (two percent), countries/cities (two percent), study (two percent), sports (two percent), and arts (two percent) of the time. Common sense, festivals and celebration, holiday and celebration and English-speaking countries appear once each (one percent).
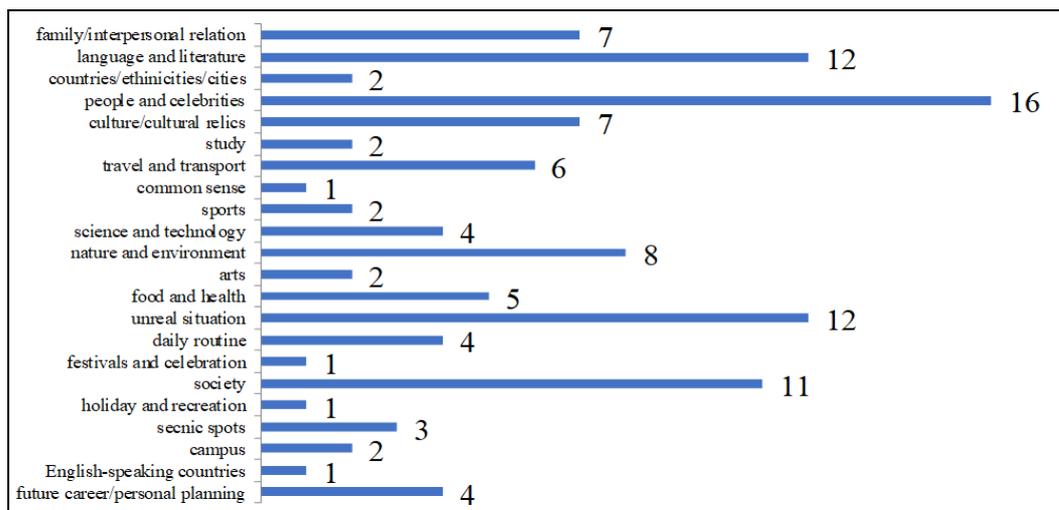

Figure 2. Topic for Writing in *PEP High School English*.

This result shows that the PEP *High School English* does cover a variety of writing topics that coincide with the aforementioned requirements of the New Curriculum Standards (*ibid*). These writing topics contribute to the development of writing skills, collaborative learning, and cultural awareness. For instance, topics such as travel and transport, sports, arts, festivals and celebration, and holiday and recreation may arouse students' interest in writing and offer them chances to share personal experiences with their classmates. The exposure of topics like cultures at home and abroad or English-speaking countries enables students to put to use writing about English idioms or allusions, cultivate their cross-cultural awareness, and develop their knowledge of politics, economy, mass media, and customs.

Inputs

Reading materials were provided more frequently than listening materials and pictures/charts in PEP *High School English.* Specifically, 37 writing tasks offered reading materials to students; nine tasks offered pictures/charts; and seven offered listening materials. Among the writing tasks with inputs, two tasks provided both reading materials and pictures/charts, and one task exposed students to both listening materials and pictures/charts.

The benefits of offering input before commencing writing are documented in the literature. Raimes (1983) acknowledged that both reading materials and pictures provided shared experiences in classroom practices. The use of pictures creates opportunities for students to form common language to be used in class and to raise students' writing interest and motivation, while reading materials bring about an information gap, which later results in a series of communicative activities. For tasks with listening materials as inputs, the materials come in an audio form of the text and therefore serve similar functions as visual texts. As mentioned, in the New Curriculum Standard, students of Proficiency Level Eight are expected to be able to describe what is conveyed by text or diagram. Input before writing requires students to extract core information from texts or diagrams, and to reiterate it in their compositions using their own words. Indeed, this manner of reiteration is another information transformation process.

Writing Prompt

For the writing prompts, there were 68 prompts setting up the context for individual tasks, 40 prompts helping students with the organization of their compositions, and 15 prompts informing students of how to choose proper expressions. Three tasks were aimed at helping students with both organization and choosing appropriate expressions. In addition, model compositions were provided for 41 writing tasks. The positive effects of writing prompts on student writing have been cited by Way, Joiner, and Seaman (2000), who indicated that prompts significantly affected novice L2 learners' writing performance. In particular, model composition helped students achieve accuracy, fluency and syntactic complexity to the greatest extent, as well as the most satisfactory overall writing quality. Hyland (2003) also claimed that good models offer students a reliable genre schema to become efficiently prepared for authentic writing. Accordingly, the writing prompts could allow for students to feel more at ease when writing and are beneficial to their overall writing performance.

Teaching Method

Among the writing tasks, 68 were genre-based and 46 were product-based. Surprisingly, none enable teachers to use the process-based writing method, which is probably due to the fact that a complete cycle of process writing includes prewriting, drafting, editing, and revising (Tribble, 1996; Badger & White, 2000) and requires proficient writing skills. The writing cycle process may be difficult for high school students, but they should be exposed to it after having undergone sufficient product-based writing practice to prepare them for advanced writing skills (Badger & White, 2000).

Approach to Conducting Writing

There is no explicit statement in the textbooks on whether students should write using paper-and-pencil or compose on a word processor. In terms of social organization, only 29 writing tasks required students to collaborate, among which 12 tasks suggest that students collaboratively produce a composition, and 17 tasks require students to swap their compositions with peers and mutually revise each other's compositions. The remaining 85 tasks require students to write individually. Although some integrated tasks in the textbook require students to work in pairs or groups prior to writing, the actual writing tasks usually required individual writing. Students are provided limited opportunities for collaboration and this

neglect of collaborative writing is indicative of a mismatch between actual classroom practices and what is strongly recommended by the New Curriculum Standards. In fact, collaboration has been verified to have a positive influence on student writing. It enables students to produce more accurate texts than individual writing (Fernández Dobao, 2012; Storch, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009), and it also results in better quality and organization of articles (Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2005). Therefore, more collaborative writing tasks should be included when future materials development of EFL textbooks is undertaken.

Conclusion

The L2 writing tasks within PEP *High School English* aim to promote Chinese high school students' writing proficiency in developing skills for information transformation, achieving appropriateness in format, accuracy of structures and lexical choice, and fluency. In addition to providing opportunities for students to compose collaboratively, these L2 writing tasks were in accordance with the requirements stipulated in the New Curriculum Standards.

Overall, it appears that the materials developers did a satisfactory job in compiling the high school English course books according to the requirements in the New Curriculum Standard. Nonetheless, several pedagogical considerations for materials development can be drawn from this study. While language teachers and students are directed by textbooks in classroom instruction, they should not be constrained by them. Teachers are encouraged to use textbooks critically. They can adapt textbook materials based on individual students' language proficiency and customize the tasks included within to offer students more efficient and suitable writing practice. In the era of modern technology, teachers and students are also encouraged to make full use of computers in classroom practice. For example, students may prefer to write on a computer, and teachers may find it more convenient to mark students' compositions and provide instant feedback.

Acknowledgements

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