Discovering the Appropriate Writing Procedures on Basic College Writing

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Abstract

Currently, there is a popular slogan in the field of education, i.e.; improving the self capacity is vital in order for students to become globalized and connect to the worldwide network. For the purpose of cultivating student's abilities to be competent when communicating with the people from different cultural backgrounds, not only must the students possess oral language skills, they also need to know how to compose their thinking into written words. Writing courses currently are not given equal weight as compared to speaking in traditional language classes, especially in the junior college system. Therefore, it is hard for the students to achieve the goals that concerned authorities would hope for. This paper discussed how to help those who are interested in writing in English but have difficulties undertaking this process by themselves. The participants all majored in Applied English. It was the first time for them to take a writing class. In this paper, I attempted to realize what kind of language students prefer to use in their writing. To what extent will the L1 in uence the L2 output? What are appropriate procedures to conduct in a writing class for novice students? Will the concepts of correct grammar in uence their written expressions?

Although all the participants majored in English, they were originally from vocational schools. Compared to the students in some other colleges, their English performance might be lower. Fortunately, the writing class was a medium forum of around 30 students. Thus, the teacher could address the student's needs individually and provide necessary assistance. In the findings, I detailed methods which were suitable for the students to apply so that they could hopefully connect with people from other cultures without any communication breakdowns and continue to broaden their worldwide vision.

Keywords: English writing, writing procedures, concepts of correct grammar.

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探討合宜的大學初級英文寫作步驟

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摘　要

　　最近流行的一句口號，即是學生如果努力提升個人能力，可以使其具全球化的視野並且順利和國際接軌。爲了培育學生和外國人溝通的能力，學生除了須具備口語能力外，他們也須要能夠將他們的想法以文字表達出來。目前，在傳統的課室語言教學課程中，寫作課不若會話課受到重視，此情況在技術學院尤甚。因此，要幫助學生達到主管當局所期望的目標不是一件容易之事。本研究探討如何幫助對英文寫作有興趣卻對寫作過程有困難的學生。參與本研究的對象都是技術學院應用英語系的學生。他們都是第一次接觸英文寫作課程。本研究試圖瞭解學生在其文章中喜歡使用那些語言？本國語言對英語寫作影響的程度？對初次學習英語寫作的人而言，哪些是比較合適的步驟？使用正確的文法想法會影響寫作的表達嗎？

　　雖然參與研究的學生都是主修英文，然而他們皆來自高職。和其他一些大學的學生比較，他們的英文能力較弱。可喜的是寫作班的成員祇有三十人左右，因此，指導老師可以掌握學生個別的需求並提供必要的協助。研究中，將詳述適合學生學習寫作的步驟，俾使將來他們和外國人的溝通可以暢通無阻，此外，他們也可以繼續擴展其視野。

關鍵詞：英文寫作、寫作步驟、正確的文法觀念。

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Introduction

English has been the most popular foreign language for decades in Taiwan. The concerned authorities not only emphasize the importance of English learning, but also provide the great deal of financial support on equipments installation in colleges. The main goal is to provide a well English learning environment for people to strengthen their English capacity. Thus, people can hopefully connect their network with the people from other cultures easily. Although English is considered as a heavy weight language to learn, it mainly focuses on speaking or reading learning. Writing skills has been in the margin position for a long time. However, it is the technical ego; the interpersonal communication does not require contacting with one another physically. People still can interact with one another by means of technology. Thus, the writing becomes an important role at this point. Because the writing class is not as important as other skills in language learning, many students do not know how to improve their writing ability effectively; especially, when they need to communicate with people via written form. The purpose of this study intended to realize to what extent students could accept the writing skill training and what an appropriate procedure was for teachers to conduct their writing class.

In my study, I attempted to explore how the college students perform their first time writing experience. What are appropriate procedures to conduct in a writing class for novice students? I observed this class for eighteen weeks consecutively. During this stage, I designed many different writing activities such as free writing, reading texts summarizing, and teacher's feedback. Also, when the study was in progress, some activities had minor changes so as to meet students' needs. Different from the traditional writing class – focus on grammatical instruction, I arranged the writing procedures by means of employing several kinds of activities.

The idea of using various activities was from a   ower, plum blossom, which possesses five petals. The purpose of using the plum blossom was because the various kinds of courses could resolve the monotonous atmosphere and enhance the effectiveness of language learning. In addition, the different petal size represents the weight of the courses in the writing. For example, many students indicated that they preferred free writing because they could write whatever they liked in their mind without any constraints. In contrast, peer revision was not so popular. Thus,

the petal size of free writing is larger than the peer revision's. The plum blossom-like courses offered in the class are illustrated below.
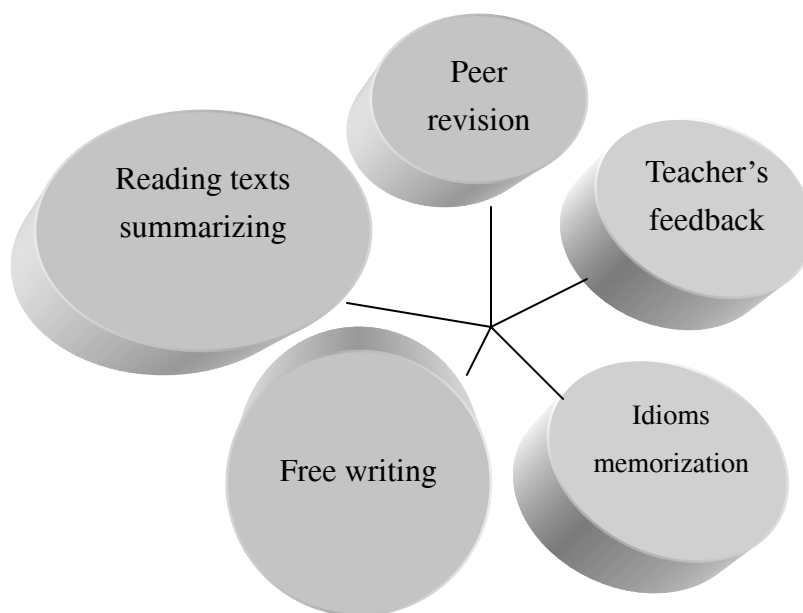

Fig. The plum blossom-like courses

Literature Review

In my study, I attempted to realize what extent the very beginning writers will perform on their college writing and what will be appropriate procedures to process the writing class. In Taiwan, many teachers complain that their students cannot compose an appropriate Chinese writing. Therefore, they may have even more difficulties in their English composing. Yu (2005) analyzed all her students writing and found that many students not only have grammatical problems, they are also fond of using Chinese English. It shows that the L1 will in uence the writers on their L2 writing performance. Likewise, Yu (2005) illustrated many examples which appeared in his college writing class as well, such as "I friend's father is peter" "She want to be a use girl and earn a lot of money" and "She very like swimming" (p.11-12) Although the L1 structure will be adopted in L2 composition, will it become less clear on meaning transmission? If the writers, especially the beginning writers, are requested to compose correct grammatical

writing, will it reduce their confidence on composing especially when their grammatical knowledge is not clear enough?

I focused on realizing the appropriate activities that could help students convey their meaning freely, instead of focusing on error correction in my study. As Calabrese (2004) indicated that "the best teaching of writing puts error detection in its place: last place." In addition to the principle of evaluating the writing texts, how will teachers effectively guide the naive students into the totally unfamiliar field? Many studies (Chen, 2004; Huang, 2004; Li, 2002; Tso, 2002; Tu, 1997) indicated the function of peer response on L2 writing and affirmed that it was an appropriate activity to be applied in the writing class. However, some studies gave an opposite claim on its function on L2 writing class. For example, Zhang (1995) pointed out that peer response in L1 writing does not apply to L2 writing. At this point, I will describe its function conducted in my study. Although there were many research projects investigate the activity of peer response, less studies indicated how free writing used in the L2 writing class. Elbow (1998) pointed out "that much of the preparation time was a waste of time. The important things happen during writing…" (p.31). Elbow encouraged writers to start writing and keep writing and do not waste time to try to find an exact phrase because by the end the writers will have a different focus on what they are writing. It was the first time for my participants to conduct the English writing. In order not to make them feel anxious on composing a well structured writing, I added the activity of free writing in this project. I attempted to elicit their real voices out instead of focusing on grammar practices.

Methodology

In order to adapt an appropriate pedagogy in the college writing class, I used the action research to conduct this research. The action research has been characterized as "…a form of self-re ective inquiry carried out by practitioners, aimed at solving problems, improving practice, or enhancing understanding" (Nunan, 1992, p. 229). By means of employing action research, I worked in close collaboration with the participants and acquired them involved in recognizing their needs. The data sources included two survey questionnaires (please see appendix A and B), students' writing texts, the statistics of the numbers of words for free writing (please see appendix C), and participant observation. After collecting relevant data, I interpreted

and analyzed them in order to obtain an overall suitable process on basic writing practice.

Participants

There were 28 students in the basic writing class. In addition to two retaken students, the others were the first time to take the writing course. There were 19 females and 9 males.

Time frame

This action research lasted for eighteen weeks. There were two contact hours per week and the class gathered in a traditional classroom. In addition to the regular meeting, students needed to sign up for the teacher's tutorial conference. Teacher would meet each student for once or twice during semester. Each meeting would last for thirty to sixty minutes. At the conference, teacher would read and discuss the writing texts with the students involved and gave them feedback.

Equipments adaptation

In addition to use the traditional blackboard, the main equipments used were the projector and laptop. Many students might get bored of the traditional teaching aids and became distracted by irrelevant matters. In addition, most students preferred to sit in the back of the classroom. In order to have an ideal classroom management and help students on their writing improvement, using technical equipments can be an appropriate strategy. When the class proceeded to halfway, I attempted to use the projector and laptop to display part of my courses. I found that all students would stare at the screen deliberately to do their practice.

Research questions

In this study, I attempted to discover an appropriate and effective method for the beginning writers to apply in their basic college writing class. I proposed some questions illustrated below and attempted to find out their answers.

1. What is an appropriate pedagogic practice in the basic writing class?
2. Will the strategy, peer revision, used by the native English speakers have the same effectiveness for the EFL learners?
3. What extend that the first language will in uence the second language performance when Taiwanese students composed their English writing?

Findings and Suggestions

Based on the surveys and my observation, I will disclose my findings for each activity conducted in the classroom.

As I noted previously, I adapted different courses to conduct two hours meeting weekly. One principle for effective learning is to maintain various activities for a certain subject. However, those activities should be related to the subject. Most importantly, the students need to assure how to conduct them. The procedures I conducted the writing class were based on the five different activities. Those activities involved were free writing, reading texts summarizing, peer revision, teacher's feedback, and idioms memorization. The result of satisfaction investigation is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The affective concepts presented in each activity.

Free writing	preference	Y	10	N	0	NS	14			
	difficulty	q1	14	q2	20	q3	14			
	more uent	Y	16	N	1	NS	7			
	helpful	Y	17	N	0	NS	7			
Reading texts summari-zing	preference	Y	14	N	3	NS	7			
	difficulty	q1	13	q2	12	q3	11	q4	13	q5	1
	improved	Y	15	N	1	NS	7			
Peer revision	preference	Y	8	N	4	NS	12			
	difficulty	q1	10	q2	16	q3	5	q4	3	
	helpful	Y	12	N	3	NS	9			
Teacher's feedback	preference	Y	19	N	6	NS	4			
	hurt	Y	5	N	16	NS	2			
	necessary	Y	21	N	1	NS	1			
	helpful	Y	21	N	1	NS	3			
Idioms memoriza-tion	preference	Y	19	N	0	NS	5			
	helpful	Y	21	N	0	NS	3			

Note: Y: yes; N: no; NS: not sure; q1: question 1; q2: question 2;

Free writing and idiom memorization discussion:

Four students were absent when I conducted the survey. Although no students indicated that they did not like the activities of free writing and idioms memorization, the weight of preference for these two activities showed that students like the idiom memorization much more than the free writing. Students needed to create their writing by themselves for free writing. In the way, I would give them ten idioms each week. Although some students indicated that the difficulty for them in this part was that to memorize, they still liked this activity a lot. One reason may be that they do not need to use their mind to do the creation but spend more time to memorize the ready made works. Although it is like a passive learning, most of them agreed that this activity is helpful for their writing. Why do students like to memorize more than create? Is it because they get used to remember many academic subjects under the examination-orient learning style since they were young? In addition, this passive-like learning may be easier than the active free writing. Students do not need to spend time and mind to compose their writing. Or, because their limit vocabulary weakness illustrated in Table 1 causes them have less interest on free writing? It is worthwhile to give further exploration.

Free writing discussion:

Regard to the activity of free writing, students would have ten minutes to conduct their writing at the beginning of each meeting and they did this activity for twelve times in total. The detailed numbers of words done by the students for each time is demonstrated in appendix C. The highest numbers of words, 100+, shows that students reached this level six times in a row. It indicates that students possess writing potential greatly. However, it also shows that students might get tired of this activity so they produced fewer words in their following practice. While students were conducting this activity, I found a certain student would hold his head or take a nap instead of having a quick writing. I checked with him and learned that he could not do it. However, he could have a good performance in other activities. Because most students claimed that they liked this activity, thus, I remained it throughout the writing session.

Reading texts summarizing discussion:

When the semester passed halfway through, I added the activity of summarizing reading texts in the writing class. Because students were trained to do the ten minutes free writing for

a while, they might have the ability to do a certain kind of writing. The dictionary was not allowed in this activity. I would show them a short story (120 words approximately) projected on the screen at each meeting. I gave them five minutes to read it. When the time was up, I shut down the projector and asked them to summarize the story. They would have five minutes to work on it. When time was up, I would select two to three students' summaries and read it out to the class. When I started this activity, I suppose that the students might not have the ability to do it. After several practices, I found that they could accept this activity and more than half students liked and agreed that the activity is helpful for them to have their writing improved. Interestingly, although they could not use dictionary, many students indicated that they liked this activity because they could learn many new words and read interesting stories.

In order to confirm the effectiveness of the activities for the EFL writers, I conducted another survey a week after. The result is illustrated below in Table 2. Twenty eight students participated in the survey. According to the subjects of peer revision and the activities preference, I explored the writing strategies in deep. I found the same subjects requested in the two surveys appeared different results. For example, when students were asked if they liked the peer revision or not, more than half (18 out of 28 students) answered positively. However, it didn't mean that this activity was their favorite when the question of favorite activities appeared. None students selected the item of peer revision as their preferable activity. Interestingly, in the first survey, although half numbers of students answered 'not sure', they still thought that it is a helpful activity on their writing. The difference between first and second surveys is that there was one extra choice 'not sure.' When the answers were different on the same issue, the extra selected item may be one of the reasons. Can "not sure" be interpreted "yes"? Or, after they answered 'not sure' on January fifth, they found that actually they liked this activity, so they answered 'yes' on January twelfth. The reasons may be that students don't understand its meaning, think differently at different time, ignore the question, or students will take the middle way to answer. It indicates that the statistics appeared in the research projects sometimes may not be very accurate.

Table 2. Specific activities exploring.

Peer revision	Y	18	N	9									
Activities preference	fw	10	sm	8	pr	0	tf	7	cp	1	im	1	all	3
Interest	mo	24	le	1	so	2							

Note: fw: freewriting; sm: summarization; pr: peer response; tf: teacher feedback;

   cp: composing; im: idioms memorization; mo: more; le: less; so: so-so

Similar situation also occurred in the next question. When students were asked about their favorite activities, free writing, reading texts summarizing, and teacher's feedback were the three most preferable choices. However, the first survey indicated that ten students answered 'yes' and the rest fourteen students 'not sure' on the subject of free writing. Nineteen out of twenty four students selected teacher's feedback. It was more popular than free writing. A week later, free writing became more popular than teacher's feedback. Again, does it mean that the meaning of 'yes' is strongly positive and 'not sure' is generally positive? Will the item 'not sure' in uence their decision?

Many students liked free writing. Then, why could they not express their aptitude firmly? When students indicated that they liked peer revision, none of them chose it to be their favorite. In addition, why did many students like teacher's feedback and agree with its effectiveness on writing? Are these activities related to the in uence of L1 expressions transferring to L2 writing performance? Many students expressed that they felt enjoying creating their writing. Many of them also agreed that peer revision could provide the opportunity to learn their peers' writing style. However, many students doubted that their peers and they themselves held the ability to give error correction. The L1 syntax did in uence L2 written performance. For example, "We also look at the moon because the moon on the Moon Festival is most beautiful." "My parents are very liberal." "They will treat them with the house vegetable." and "I have a beautiful cake to wait for me to slice in the desk, whole family will help me sing the birthday song for me." and so forth. Because I share with the same language background, their meaning is quite comprehensible to me. However, written form is a kind of official text. The writers attempt to convey their exact intentions to their readers. Thus, it is important for the students to learn how to compose the more accurate writing. That is why twenty one out of twenty four students

consent the effectiveness of teacher's feedback positively.

In my study, I also found one big change about students' interest on writing. Most students became more interest in writing at the end of the semester. It implicates that they possibly will have better performance on writing in the following semesters. It was their first time to take the English writing class. The motivation is an important factor on language learning. The purpose for having many different activities tends to constantly maintain their passion on writing.

L2 writing is a very complicated and hard mission to accomplish. Students require spending a great deal of time working on writing. In the findings, I detailed methods which are suitable for the students to apply so that they can connect with people from other cultures without any communication breakdowns and continue to broaden their worldwide vision in the future. However, the learning environment and atmosphere need to be accounted in learning. After observing for one semester, I have discovered that more and more students are getting interested in their writing creation. For the purpose of making students familiar with the various activities' function, those five activities were set in an orderly procedure.

Suggestions

Many students indicated that their English is not good enough and worried that they could not achieve the goal. Therefore, in addition to having well prepared coursework, teachers have to take the affective factors of writing phobia, such as the stress, scaring, anxiety, into careful consideration. When students can overcome these issues, they will transcend to a new scope of writing successfully.

Many students pointed out that they liked the activity of free writing. They could do whatever they liked. However, they wondered if they had composed a correct writing grammatically because teacher did not read their writing. Although their partners gave them feedback on their drafts, they doubted they received a better revised text. In addition, I offered many extra hours for the students to do the tutorial, I could not read all the papers for them. Hence, it is worthwhile to use a ready made computer soft ware as a tutor. Students can do self study on their pace. Likewise, teachers can mitigate their workload and improve the teaching quality. Therefore, it possibly reaches to the win-win situation.

Some students stated that they never knew it was so interesting to do the English writing

although they thought that their English was not good enough. They even requested that I could provide more personal time to tutor their writing. They hoped that their writing could become broaden and legible. Under this circumstance, it is worthwhile to establish a cross-cultural collaborative e-mail exchange program. After practicing English writing for a while, students can stretch their domestic learning to transnational. By doing this, they not only can learn different cultural knowledge, their English performance may also get improved.

Teachers need to possess a subtle mind to observe students' reaction on their learning. Not only did I design various activities for each meeting, I also slightly changed certain part. For example, in order to guide beginning writers to the writing world, I gave them some idioms and examples to start the lesson. I explained the meaning and how to use them appropriately in sentences. Later, I found that students seemed to learn it passively. I gave them handouts instead of chalkboard explanation. In addition, I added new activity to replace the old one so that students would maintain their curiosity on what they were going to have at each meeting.

As noted previously, L2 writing is very complicated task to complete. In addition to classroom practice, students may be encouraged to link to the relevant writing websites to have self study. There are many helpful websites provided for the L2 writers. For example, the famous one, Dave's ESL Café offered many useful navigators for the teachers and students to access. It can also link to other writing websites. However, for the beginning writers, the easier one will be more suitable. While having constantly on-line practiced, students may have the ability to direct their cognitive perspective into more correct and acceptable writing.

Conclusion

In my study, I attempted to realize what an appropriate pedagogic practice was for college beginning writers. I worked with students with five activities on each contact hours and found that students could accept this mode of learning. Interestingly, at the beginning, I hesitated to give students the activity of ten minutes free writing because I wondered if they could do it by themselves under no instruction. However, after many practices, I found many students were fond of it although they indicated that they doubted they could compose correct grammatical structure. In addition, I conducted an experiment with the activity of peer revision which is considered as effective strategy and is popular used in the class with native English speakers.

At this point, it showed that students preferred to have teacher's feedback instead of peers'. Although many students indicated that they did not dislike this activity, they questioned their own ability and their peers' on revising the writing texts. One student stated that she did not like this activity because it might discourage her counterparts. Although they felt they had less ability to read their peers' work, they liked to read the short stories and summarized them. They indicated that they could learn many new vocabulary and interesting stories. Actually, I found this activity was the one that all class could concentrate the most. Without the dictionary, without the text copy but the reading text projected on the screen, and with the time limit, students needed to pay attention to read the stories silently and summarized them with limited minutes. I found that students had the potential to deal with this job well.

I employed the procedure with five activities to precede the writing class for one semester. Although many students indicated that they were getting more interested in writing than before, they might get tired of fixing on specific activities. For example, the free writing, at the very beginning, many students showed a great progress on composing a great deal of words. However, in the mid till the end, their passion seemed reduced. I supposed that they lost the sense of novelty on this repeated game. And, new activities are required to replace the old ones.

In the writing class, students conducted their composition with murmuring style, talked to themselves, and could not figure out what extent their writing could be understood by other readers comprehensively. Thus, after practicing writing for one semester and making sure those students were ready to have listeners/readers; they will join the cross-cultural e-mail exchange program to promote their writing ability. Through the genuine writing with the native English speakers, students may make a further progress on their L2 writing commitment.

The limitations of this study

Although it was a kind of small size class (the original class was split into two groups), there were still many students in each group. It was a heavy workload for teachers to give individual tutoring. Likewise, I could not conduct the interview with students. Hence, I might not learn students real needs on writing. After all, this study re ected on all the activities I applied in the class. What I could do was to observe the class and read their responses for each activity. They might conceal their opinions in their mind and did not want to share with me.

I mentioned previously that I used two survey questionnaires to realize how students felt about the writing activities. Although many students have positive responses on each activity, they might not give the real answers. They might worry about their final grade for this course if they gave negative response. If I did not get involved in it, students might give me more objective feedback on their writing.

I focused on the content instead of the correct grammar. Other writing teachers may believe that the form is more important than the content. Thus, the result of evaluating students' performance will be different. It is hard to evaluate students' performance on their writing. Although there are writing criteria to assess the writing performance, it may be hard for the EFL beginners to reach while they are such a naive on English writing. Thus, when I indicated that my students had made a great progress, it focused on the rich of their contents.

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Appendix A Survey Questionnaire I

I. Students' background:

Gender: male_____female_____   Prior school/department: _____

English learning experience: _____   English e-pal: Yes____   No____

II.Focus on:

A.Free writing

　　1.Do you like this activity? Yes____   No____   not sure_____

　　2.What is the most difficult thing for you to do in this part?

　　　(1)no any ideas in mind   2) limit vocabulary

　　　3) poor grammar   4) others：_____）

　　3.Do you think your writing become more   uent than before after doing this activity?

　　　Yes____   No____   not sure____

　　4.Do you think this activity is helpful for your English writing?

　　　Yes____   No____   not sure____ ；why?_____

B.Summary

　　1.Do you like this activity? Yes____   No____   not sure____

　　2.What is the most difficult thing for you to do in this part?

　　　(1)too many unknown words   2)no ideas to organize thinkinginto words

　　　3)time is too short to complete   4)cannot understand the readings

　　　5) others: _____）

　　3.Do you think this activity can get your writing improved?

　　　Yes____   No____   not sure____ ；why?

C.Peer response/feedback

　　1.Do you like this activity? Yes____   No____   not sure____

　　2.What is the most difficult thing for you to do in this part?

　　　(1)dislike others to read my own writing   2)no ability to read otherÃs work

　　　3)donÃt trust peerÃs correction   4) others:_____）

　　3.Do you think this activity is helpful for your English writing?

　　　Yes____   No____   not sure____ ；why?

D.Teacher feedback

　　1.Do you like this activity? Yes　　No　　not sure

　　2.Do you get hurt because of too much correction from teacher?

　　　Yes＿＿＿　No＿＿＿　not sure＿＿＿

　　3.Do you think that the teacher feedback is necessary on writing?

　　　Yes＿＿＿　No＿＿＿　not sure＿＿＿

　　4.Do you think this activity is helpful for your English writing?

　　　Yes＿＿＿　No＿＿＿　not sure＿＿＿；why?

E.Idioms memorization

　　1.Do you like this activity?

　　　Yes＿＿＿　No＿＿＿　not sure＿＿＿

　　2.What is the most difficult thing for you to do in this part?

　　　(1)no time to study　　　　2) too many idioms to memorize

　　　3) others: ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿）

　　3.Do you think this activity is helpful for your English writing?

　　　Yes＿＿＿　No＿＿＿　not sure＿＿＿；why?

Appendix B Survey Questionnaire II

01/12/06

a.Do you like to do the peer revise? Yes No Why or why not?

b.What is/are your favorite activit(ies). Why? (free writing, summary, peer revise, edit, exercise, teacher's tutorial, etc.)

c.This semester is almost gone, comparing with the beginning, you like more or less about English writing? Why?

d.What do you think is the best way to learn English writing?

e.How do you feel that you are going to communicate with the American students through the use of e-mail?

Appendix C The amount of persons and words illustrated for individual date

Persons / Words	Date											
	9/22	9/29	10/6	10/13	10/20	11/3	11/24	12/1	12/8	12/15	12/22	12/29
10	1	1				2				1		1
20		2	2				2			1		
30	5			1	1	1			3			
40	5	4		2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	
50	6	2		3	3	2	1	4	6	4	4	5
60	1	2	4	2			3	5	6	2	4	3
70	6	5	3	1	2	4	5	1	2	4	3	2
80		3	4	5	2	4		5	1	2	4	4
90		1		1	4	5	5	2	1		1	3
100	1		3	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	
100+	1	6	9	5	8	6	6	4	3	3	3	3
Attendance	26	26	25	22	24	26	24	25	26	20	22	21