

A Study on the Lack of Audience Awareness of English Majors in Higher Vocational Colleges and the Path to Cultivate It –Taking English Email Writing as an Example

Shuhan Yang

School of Culture and Communication of Hubei Preschool Teachers College Ezhou ,Hubei, 436070, China

Abstract: The lack of audience awareness has made writing English applications a major hurdle for both teachers and students in higher vocational colleges. Taking email writing as an example, this paper analyzes the reasons for the lack of audience awareness of English majors in Higher Vocational Colleges from the perspective of teachers and students and explores the effective path of cultivating it, aiming at improving students' writing and thinking ability.

Keywords: College English writing; Audience awareness; Reason analysis; Cultivation path

1. Introduction

English teachers of higher vocational colleges have struggled with the difficulty of teaching writing and it still serves as a crucial subject for students. Relevant studies have shown that most students generally lack audience awareness when writing English, the problems including unsuitable tone, improper word choice, narrow semantic range, and lack of coherence in discourse may be observed in their writings. (Wu Geqi, 2009). Tang Ren(2005) found from a socio-cultural perspective that most students are egocentric and tend to ignore the importance of audience awareness when writing. According to Han Liping (2004), a lack of audience awareness can result in purposeless and uncommunicative writings, with insufficient evidence to support arguments. The author reflects on the teaching practice of English application writing, analyzes the reasons for the lack of audience awareness of English majors and explores the path of cultivating it.

2. The current state of research on audience awareness in Chinese writing

In the history of language education in China, Xia Mianzun and Zhu Ziqing are credited with popularizing the “audience awareness” in writing. According to Xia Mianzun, “audience awareness” is the most basic method of writing, and the nature of the reader. The relationship between the reader and the writer, and the motivation for writing are the first things to be taken into consideration when writing. Writing practice, in the eyes of Zhu Ziqing, serves the purpose of applying it to an imaginary reader. He believes that if the writing exercise is only to treat the teacher as the reader, it cannot stimulate the students' impulse to write.

3. Studies on audience awareness in Western writing

The second stage of Chinese teaching syllabus in England requires that “pupils are instructed to practice writing for different readerships, such as teachers, classmates, other children and adults or community, and imagined readers.” The concept of audience awareness, as defined by Kirsch & Roen (1990: 127), involves the writer paying attention to the readers' information needs in their writing. According to Aristotle's Rhetoric, the reader plays a crucial role in rhetorical situations. Linguist Berlin (1982: 212) suggests that in teaching writing, no matter what method is used, the following four factors should be taken into consideration: the author, the reader, the authenticity of the writing material, and the linguistic origin of the text.

4. The Reasons for the Lack of audience awareness in the English Application Writing of English Majors in Higher Vocational Colleges

4.1 Students

4.1.1 The idea of “audience awareness” has never been touched by students. Many scholars have found through questionnaires and interviews that most English majors are very unfamiliar with “audience awareness”, and they think it is too complex for them to understand.

4.1.2 Students have a limited understanding of English writing proficiency. The majority of students equate their success in writing a high-scoring essay during exams as a measure of their writing proficiency. Most students write just for the sake of writing, they don't have real motivation in writing.

4.1.3 Confusing role changes in writing results in losing of audience awareness. For example, in an email writing class, one student wrote “I'm writing this email to suggest the Mella hotel for John and we kindly hope that you can find our suggestion acceptable.” Obviously, the student is confused about personal pronoun changes. “John” should be changed to “You” and “we” to “I”.

4.1.4 Logical leaps in the writing cause difficulties in understanding. For example, one student wrote “I'm writing this email to suggest that the Mella Hotel would be a good suggestion for your trip to the University of Westminster. I am writing this email to point out a few minor problems with the hotel.” The first says that the “Mella hotel” is a good choice, but it follows that there are problems with it, which is a logical leap.

4.1.5 Students lack necessary cohesion among sentences. For example, one student wrote “you will check in on January 6th and check out on January 8th, preferably two single rooms and need breakfast, within a ten-minute walk from the hotel.” This student simply listed the main points, but did not form coherent sentences due to lack of necessary cohesive words.

4.1.6 The writing does not contain enough evidence and reasoning. For example, one student wrote “I think the Mella hotel is the best option for you, therefore you must choose this hotel.” Why is the Mella hotel the best option for John? This sentence clearly lacks arguments and reasoning.

4.1.7 Students are unable to grasp the disparities in thinking and expression modes between Chinese and English. Many students are accustomed to incorporating Chinese thinking styles into their English writing, and then use translation apps such as Youdao and Google to translate into English, so these sentences can only be Chinglish.

4.1.8 Students lack peer-to-peer interaction in the writing process. The majority of students have become accustomed to thinking on their own before writing, disregarding the importance of exchanging ideas with their classmates. As a result, their thinking may be influenced and restricted by personal biases.

4.1.9 English exam questions influence students' audience awareness. The reading comprehension and listening exercises in English exams convey the idea that the writer does not need to consider whether the reader understands what he/she is writing because the reader will analyze and explore the theme and meaning consciously, so students follow this “unspoken rule” when writing, thinking that all they need to do is to complete the writing task in the test and get a good grade.

4.2 Teachers

4.2.1 English teachers do not systematically incorporate audience awareness in writing class. Most teachers are used to emphasizing grammar, vocabulary, structure and format when teaching writing, while neglecting to cultivate students' audience awareness.

4.2.2 Most of the teachers will point out some sentences which are syntactically correct but hard to understand from the readers' point of view, as well as sentences with inappropriate words and tone in the process of marking and evaluating but they do not analyze the reasons for these errors from the readers' point of view, so students have no idea how to improve their audience awareness.

5. Exploring the Path of Cultivating Audience Awareness

5.1 Students

5.1.1 Enhance audience awareness. It is crucial for students to enhance their audience awareness and consider how they can incorporate it into their daily writings.

5.1.2 Peer assessment. Students can exchange their writings with each other and evaluate as readers to give peer assessment.

5.1.3 Self-monitoring through self-questioning. Students can ask themselves the following questions:

“What is the thesis statement of this article?” “Is the thesis statement clear in the article?” “Who do you think the article is written for?” “Can my writing meet the potential readers' needs?”

5.2 Teachers

5.2.1 Pre-writing

(1) Pre-writing discussion. Before students' discussion, the educator can search for images, audios, and videos that are relevant to the writing topic and engage students in discussion about them and inspire students to brainstorm or draw mind maps to activate their related schemas, so as to broaden their minds.

(2) Imaginary readers. Guide students to imagine readers and think about questions from the readers' perspective, such as "What are the potential readers of this article I wrote?" "Can I meet the needs of my potential readers?" "What are the key points that my readers understand?" "How can I make my readers understand my points better?"

(3) Practice thinking. Before writing, teachers said, "Imagine you are Rachel who is going to write an email to suggest a hotel for booking. You need to choose one hotel that can best meet the reader's accommodation needs from three hotels named Mella Hotel, Golden Hotel and Bankside Hotel in this email to the reader. Teachers can ask them "What's the common point among three hotels?"

"What are the problems with Golden Hill Hotel and Bankside Hotel?" "Based on the requirements from Johnny, which hotel can meet his requirements best?"

(4) Authentic tasks. Instructors should assign students authentic writing tasks that target a specific audience. Topics closely related to students' actual life can be arranged to make their writings more reader-conscious.

5.2.2 During-writing

(1) Teachers should strengthen the training of English application writing, appropriately reduce the explanation of grammar, format and punctuation, instead, increase explanations of examples, the comparison of sentences and words and the importance of audience awareness;

(2) Teachers should lead students to notice the differences in expressions of Eastern and Western language, to understand the differences in language expressions between Chinese and English.

(3) Teachers should ask students the following questions, "Is this relevant?" "Can your readers understand this?" "Can this be convincing to the reader?"

5.2.3 Post-writing

(1) Teachers can offer an authentic communication platform. Traditionally, most students' writing is only carefully corrected and marked by the teacher, but they tend to forget it after taking a look at it. Generally, students will feel that no one will read their writings except the teacher, and they will lose the audience awareness. In order to bolster students' audience awareness, the teacher can offer a specialized and authentic communication platform for their written pieces, so students will have more readers.

(2) Teachers can conduct peer assessment activities to allow students to reflect on through writing. This is because students become reader-aware when they are forced to write reflectively.

(3) Once students have completed their writing, teachers can ask students questions such as "Is my writing convincing to the intended audience?" "How does the reader perceive my writing?" and "What other ideas can I incorporate?" This can promote audience awareness of students.

6. Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses the reasons for the lack of audience awareness in English application writing and the cultivation path of it of English majors in higher vocational colleges, aiming at helping English teachers to better integrate audience awareness throughout writing teaching, to really improve students' writing proficiency, and ultimately to cultivate their thinking ability. This paper aims to establish a cultivation path specifically for English majors with a basic skill set. It is imperative to consider reader awareness only after students have acquired a certain level of writing proficiency, mitigating any potential problems with lexis and syntax. Therefore, the cultivation path suggested by the author is only for the classes where students' writing proficiency has reached a certain level. Considering the disparity in students' writing proficiency, it is recommended that qualified colleges implement tiered teaching or set up additional writing improvement classes to meet the needs of students with different writing levels.

References:

- [1] Kirsch, G. & D. H. Roen. A Sense of Audience in Written Communication [M]. Newbury Park: Sage, 1990.
- [2] Han Liping. The Cultivation of Reader Consciousness in College English Writing Teaching [D]. Central China Normal University, 2004.
- [3] Ross. J. Performing the reflective self: audience awareness in high-stakes reflection [J]. *Studies in Higher Education*, 2014(2):219—232.
- [4] Huang Lizhen, Liu Zhuoying. Reader Awareness Training in College English Writing [J]. *Journal of Zhangjiakou Vocational and Technical College*, 2022, 35(02):44-46.

About the author:

Shuhan Yang (1994.12.10--), female, Han nationality, Xiangyang City, Hubei Province, Master's degree, lecturer, School of Culture and Communication of Hubei Preschool Teachers College, research direction: English education.