Research on Optimization Path of TEM-4 Writing Based on Scoring Criteria

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Abstract: *As a core indicator for measuring students' writing ability in the basic stage of English majors, the scoring criteria of TEM-4 writing plays a direct guiding role in English teaching practice and examination preparation strategies. Therefore, based on the theoretical framework of scoring criteria of TEM-4 writing, this paper systematically analyzes the common problems existing in current students' writing (such as insufficient relevance of content, loose logical structure, and non-standard language expression), and proposes an optimized path for TEM-4 writing from the core dimensions of scoring criteria (content, organization, and language). The research aims to provide practical and optimized strategies for English writing teaching practice, helping students accurately meet the scoring requirements and improve their writing skills and test performance.*

Keywords: TEM-4 Writing, Scoring Criteria, Optimization Path.

1. Introduction

TEM4 is an internal teaching assessment test for English majors in higher education institutions that has been carried out since 1990 under the guidance of the Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education, in accordance with the relevant documents of the Ministry of Education [1]. It is a criterion-referenced standardized test for English majors in comprehensive universities across the country. The examination aims to assess students' comprehensive application abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as their mastery of language knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary and discourse after completing the first two years of English major courses.

In fact, the writing test is an important component of the TEM-4. But in practice, based on exam data, the writing part has become a weak point in their test for most students since they didn't have a clear understanding towards the scoring criteria of TEM-4 Writing. As a result, they emphasizes the language rather than the contents; they can't summarize the excerpt concisely and sometimes they miss several major points in this part; some information is irrelevant to the point and they can't support their points sufficiently in the body part. As the scoring criteria of TEM-4 Writing plays a direct guiding role in examination, this thesis will focus on optimization path of TEM-4 writing based on scoring criteria.

2. Literature Review

The research on the optimization path of TEM-4 writing has always revolved around the core logic of "exam requirements--ability deficiencies--teaching intervention". Based on different contexts and theoretical frameworks, the scholars at home and abroad have different research focuses. Domestic research focuses on "test adaptability" and "teaching implementation", while foreign research builds a universal optimization paradigm based on second language writing theories.

Domestic research emphasizes the dual-dimensional exploration of "exam targeting" and "teaching optimization". From the perspective of scoring, Fei Xi (2008) compared the writing scoring criteria of CET-4 and TOEFL and pointed out that there is a problem in the domestic examination scoring standards: emphasizing language accuracy but neglecting the description of content and structure [2]. Bai Lifang and Wang Jian (2019) proposed that the subjectivity of manual scoring in TEM-4 writing can be optimized through the computer-aided marking mode, and the reliability and validity of the scoring can be improved by quantifying the text features [3]. The scoring criteria for the TEM-4 writing have clearly been divided into four levels: viewpoint and content, structure and logic, language and appropriateness, and format standards. Among them, content and logic accounts for 40%, significantly higher than the 30% of language and appropriateness. From the perspective of teaching, they believe that to gain a high score in the TEM-4 writing, it is necessary to realize a triple logical loop of "focusing on the topic sentence, associating sub-points, and semantic connection between sentences", rather than relying on surface-level conjunctions like "first/second". The study also points out that the approach of memorizing model essays plus correcting mistakes is prone to causing students to mechanically apply model. Wei Xiaobao and Shi Qingbo (2016) further explained that traditional correction often focused on superficial language errors and lacked feedback on deep-rooted issues such as content and logic, resulting in a disconnection between teaching and examination demands [4].

There is no direct research on TEM-4 writing abroad, but the general optimization path based on the theory of second language writing provides theoretical support and methodological reference for TEM-4 writing. They regarded the effectiveness of feedback as the key to improving second language writing. Nathan (2021) showed that one-on-one feedback can simultaneously enhance learners' content construction and language expression abilities, especially having a significant effect on the argumentation depth of argumentative essays. Hyland (2013) proposed that the communicative purpose of different discourses determines their structural characteristics--argumentative essays need to achieve the logical closed loop of "opinion--evidence--demonstration", which provides a theoretical basis for the teaching in the TEM-4 [5].

From what is studied abroad and at home, it is clear that scholars may study writing from different aspects, but the topic--optimization path of TEM-4 writing based on scoring criteria is still needed to be filled, so this will be the point of this paper.

3. Analysis of the Core Dimensions of the Scoring Criteria of TEM-4 Writing

The total score of TEM-4 writing is 20 points, accounting for 20% in the exam. It mainly contains three parts: content, organization and language. In the exam, marks will be awarded for content relevance, content sufficiency, organization and language quality. Failure to follow the above instructions may result in a loss of marks.

3.1 Content

The content accounts for 10 points, comprising 50% in the whole writing part. It contains two parts: summary and discussion. It examines students' ability to understand the theme, construct their points and argue logically.

In summary, students are expected to summarize the main message of the excerpt. They are required to accurately express the theme of the excerpt, to accurately express the central content of the excerpt, to grasp the key points of the excerpt comprehensively and accurately and to accurately describe the relationship between the excerpts if there are two excerpts.

In discussion, students are expected to conduct discussions based on the original viewpoints. The discussion should be relevant to the topic and the central idea should be clear; the viewpoint should be clear and novel; the key points should be stated clearly; the evidence should be sufficient and powerful; the types of evidence should be rich; and the conclusion should be natural and complete.

3.2 Organization

The organization accounts for 3 points, comprising 15% in the whole writing part. It contains two parts: coherence and cohesion. It examines students' ability to divide paragraphs, link words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs and frame the essay.

For coherence, the arrangement of the summary and discussion should be reasonable. The internal structure of two parts should be complete. If there are two excerpts, the transition between the two excerpts should be natural. The key points of the discussion should be clear and arranged in a logical order. The structure of the essay should be reasonable.

For cohesion, the cohesive devices in the essay should be accurate, rich and natural, which helps to comprehend the essay.

3.3 Language

The language accounts for 7 points, comprising 35% in the whole writing part. It contains three parts: vocabulary, grammar and writing norms. It examines students' ability to employ grammar correctly and adopt words extensively.

For vocabulary, students are expected to use words accurately, extensively and naturally.

For grammar, students are expected to write sentences grammatically correct and the sentence patterns should be rich, diverse and natural.

For writing norms, students are expected to spell the words correctly and use the capitalized letters correctly. The punctuation marks should be correct and the answer sheet should be clean and neat.

What's more, TEM-4 writing can be roughly divided into five grades according to scoring criteria. The first grade is between 18 and 20 and this grade means the students should have a clear viewpoint, a reasonable structure, rich content, and use language appropriately. There are basically no language errors in the essay. The second grade is between 15 and 17, which requires a clear viewpoint, a reasonable structure, rich content and appropriate language usage. Students may make few mistakes in the essay. The third grade is between 12 and 14, which requires a clear viewpoint, a complete structure, and decent content. But the appropriateness of language usage is average and there are some language errors, which affect the understanding of the essay. The fourth grade is between 9 and 11, which means the viewpoints in the essay are not very clear; the structure is incomplete; the content is scarce; the language is not appropriate; and there are many language errors, which affect the understanding of the essay. The fifth grade is between 6 and 8 or below, which means the essay basically fails to meet the writing requirements, with almost no structure or content to speak of. It is filled with language errors throughout and has no language appropriateness and it is hard to understand.

4. Students' Problems Existed in TEM-4 Writing

According to scoring criteria of TEM-4 writing, students mainly made mistakes in the following three aspects, namely, problems related to content, problems related to organization and problems related to language.

4.1 Problems Related to Content

In the exam, students have problems in both summary and discussion part.

In the summary part, students failed to accurately identify the main idea, key arguments or core events of the excerpt and they neglected the important information that affected the understanding of the entire excerpt, resulting in an incomplete summary. What's more, they kept too much original details or repeated unimportant content, such as examples, data, descriptive modifiers, making the summary lengthy and confusing. In addition, they directly copied the original sentence or merely paraphrased simple words without effectively extracting and reorganizing the information.

In the discussion part, students' writing were frequently off the point because students didn't know the meaning of the key

words in the direction or sometimes they neglected one important point mentioned in the direction, or they were not familiar with the topic. Hence, the content of their writing were not relevant to the topic which they were supposed to illustrate or support. Second, there were insufficient supporting details in students' writing. The evidence sometimes cannot support the point or there was even no evidence to back the point. Students usually didn't collect examples, data or opinions, leading to no supporting details in the writing. Last, the content in the writing was empty or one-sided. Students just listed these abstract ideas without any examples or data or other supporting details. Thus, the content was empty. Sometimes, the topic should be treated objectively, which means like a coin has two sides, it also has both advantages and disadvantages. However, students just focused on one point, either benefits or drawbacks. Consequently, their writing was one-sided.

4.2 Problems Related to Organization

Students' problems associated with organization mainly covers the following aspects: structure, logic, coherence and distribution of content.

Firstly, the structure of their writing was incomplete. It lacked core components. For example, students didn't summary the main idea of the except and they didn't state their opinions clearly. Besides, there were arguments but no evidence in their writing. Or the structural elements were in a mess, such as the conclusion paragraph being mixed with new arguments and the body part being piled up with evidence.

Secondly, there was a logical gap in students' writing. In summary part, students didn't properly organize the logical framework of the original text. The summary content was fragmented and lacked reasonable connections, failing to reflect the causal and transitional logical relationships of the original text. In body part, there was a loose connection between ideas, arguments or evidence. Students cannot analyze the evidence in depth, as a result, they just listed these supporting details without explaining the logical relationship between the evidence and the point or without reasonable deduction, leading to abrupt leaps in thinking and making the writing less persuasive.

Thirdly, it lacked coherence within the paragraph or between paragraphs. For instance, there was no transitional words or sentence between paragraphs. The point changed suddenly without any indication; or the sub-point changed without any sign, making the examiner in a mess.

Fourth, the distribution of content was unreasonable. The content in summary part was too long or the details in the body part was inappropriate. For instance, one point was elaborated with a large amount of text while another was merely touched upon with just one sentence; the content related to the core part were not sufficient while non-core parts were redundant, resulting in an insufficient argument.

4.3 Problems Related to Language

In language part, students made mistakes in following three aspects, namely, grammar, vocabulary, and sentence patterns.

From the perspective of grammar, the tense and voice were mixed up. For instance, the past events were wrongly expressed in the present tense, and the passive voice structure was incomplete. Besides, mistakes were made in subject-verb agreement and collocation of articles or prepositions. Or there were broken sentences or there was no conjunctions to connect two simple sentences.

From the perspective of vocabulary, the words were collocated wrongly because students were affected by Chinese thinking; the words were frequently repeated because of students' lack of awareness of using synonyms; to make sentences prominent, the sentences were overloaded with complex or weird words, leading to comprehension difficulties.

From the perspective of sentence patterns, the sentence structure was monotonous and rigid. They often used simple sentences or compound sentences. Sometimes the sentence pattern was mixed, because when students attempted to write complex sentences, they often missed some components or there was more than one the same component in the sentence. What's more, the sentence was informal and colloquial.

5. Optimization Path of TEM-4 Writing Based on Scoring Criteria

Based on scoring criteria of TEM-4 writing and students' problems existed in TEM-4 writing, the optimization path is put forward to improve students' TEM-4 writing.

5.1 Optimization of Content: Focusing on the Closed Loop of "Topic Analysis - Theme- Argumentation"

To optimize content, students should focus on the closed loop of topic analysis, theme and argumentation.

In terms of topic analysis, it is suggested that students should circle the core elements in the writing task to define the writing task. For example, students should circle the keys words such as nouns, verbs and determiners to clarify the writing target, discussion direction and core task, and avoid expanding or narrowing the topic. Besides, they should identify the imperative expressions in the topic to determine the writing genre and the specific task of the writing.

In terms of theme, it is advised that based on topic analysis, students should think from multiple dimensions to form a unique perspective. Besides, they should state their viewpoints clearly to avoid ambiguity.

In terms of argumentation, it is recommended that the evidence should directly support the points, and the evidence should be diverse and reliable, making the writing convincing. That means specific examples, data and authoritative opinions can be adopted together to make it persuasive.

5.2 Optimization of Organization: Strengthening the Outline of "Framework - Coherence - Logic"

To optimize organization, students should strengthen the outline of framework, coherence and logic.

As for framework, students should summarize the main idea of excerpt and state their opinions clearly in the first paragraph. Then, they are supposed to illustrate their viewpoints in the following one or two paragraphs, which is known as body paragraphs. In this part, topic sentence should be placed at the beginning of the paragraph and data, examples and facts should be mentioned next. Finally, students should restate his central idea and sometimes they may emphasize its importance, making it meaningful.

As for coherence, students should sort out the transitional words frequently used in the writing and choose the one that is suitable for the situation. What's more, they'd better use pronouns to avoid repetition and they should bear the consistency in their minds.

As for logic, students are expected to arrange the points according to their importance and adopt the writing pattern like cause and effect, comparison and contrast to avoid piling up the evidence and make the writing logical.

5.3 Optimization of Language: Achieving the Balance of "Accuracy - Diversity - Appropriateness"

To optimize language, students should achieve the balance of accuracy, diversity and appropriateness.

As for accuracy, it is advised that after writing, students should check their essay from three aspects: subject-predicate agreement, tense and collocation. They should write grammatical errors and incorrect collocation of words down and memorize them so as not to make the same mistakes once again.

As for diversity, it is recommended that students rewrite simple sentences into compound sentences or non-predicate verbs. They can adopt cleft sentences or formal subject or formal object. When memorizing words, they should not only memorize simple words, but also memorize similar expressions.

As for appropriateness, it is suggested that students should express in formal words not colloquial language. They should accumulate words used in different types of writing. A case in point is that objective words are preferred in argumentative essay, and descriptive words are favored in descriptive essay or narrative essay.

6. Conclusion

Analyzing the core dimensions of scoring criteria of TEM-4 writing provides practical and optimized strategies for English writing teaching practice because it has a clear correspondence with students' weakness in writing. Hence, they offers a scientific basis for optimizing teaching practice of TEM-4 writing. Thus, teachers can conduct their teaching practice according to the core dimensions of scoring criteria of TEM-4 writing, namely, content, organization and language.

From the perspective of content, the teachers should give students the writing task, asking them to circle the key words to analyze the topic. Then students are required to consider the topic from multiple aspects to form their own point of view. Next, they should list the points and the evidence which will be used in the writing. Later, the teachers should point out the mistakes in students' practice and finally students revise their exercise according to the teachers feedback.

From the perspective of organization, the teachers can provide sentences in disorder and ask students to reorganize them based on logical relationships, thereby enhancing their awareness of structure. Besides, they can ask students to revise their peers' writing, finding out the places where they used the transitional words wrongly and where there is a logic gap, and then students should correct them.

From the perspective of language, teachers should help students understand the accuracy, diversity and appropriateness through setting up specific situations. Through the comparison and contrast of expressions in different levels of essays in the same situation, students are supposed to figure out the differences and comprehend the reasons behind it. Later, students can imitate the accurate, diverse and appropriate expressions in the sample and transfer them into different situations to master them.

By adopting the above strategies, it is hoped that students can meet the scoring requirements and improve their writing skills and test performance.

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