

Analysis of Problems and Strategies in College French Writing

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Abstract: *This article mainly discusses the problems existing in College French writing and the corresponding strategies. Writing is an important skill that students must master, but there are three main problems in College French teaching: limited vocabulary leading to frequent pragmatic errors; significant negative transfer from native language; and difficulties in closely adhering to the essay topic or the beginning of the paragraph. To address these issues, teachers adopt a variety of targeted teaching strategies, including task-based language teaching, intercultural communication teaching methods, and process writing approaches. The implementation of these strategies has significantly improved the students' College French writing skills.*

Keywords: Limited vocabulary, Negative transfer, Deviation, Task-based language teaching, Intercultural communication teaching, Process writing approaches.

1. Introduction

In the teaching of College French, writing is an important ability that students must possess. The University French Syllabus (2002), published by the Higher Education Publishing House clearly stipulates that "College French students at the fourth level must be able to complete general French writing independently, and write a short essay of 80-100 words within half an hour. The content should be coherent and free from major grammatical errors [1]." However, in the process of College French teaching, writing has always been a relatively weak link, with students demonstrating aversion to writing assignments. On the one hand, it is difficult for teachers to focus extensively on writing teaching, due to the limited teaching hours of College French; on the other hand, students spend limited time on after-school study of College French, and there is an urgent need to improve the students' College French writing abilities.

The writing course in College French covers a comprehensive range of knowledge points. Hence, in response to the different problems encountered by students in the process of writing, the teacher adopts various targeted teaching methods, thus ensuring significant improvement across all levels for students and thereby enhancing their writing skills.

2. The Key Problems in College French Writing

Through practical teaching, teachers have identified and categorized students' problems in College French writing. There are primarily three main aspects to these problems.

2.1 Limited French Vocabulary, Leading to Frequent Pragmatic Errors.

In College French writing, a limited vocabulary is a common issue. This is particularly evident among students majoring in English, who have only four class hours per week dedicated to College French. Due to the limited teaching time, the amount of time that students spend studying College French is relatively small. Although they can memorize the vocabulary from the textbooks, in practical application, their output is

often insufficient, and they do little extracurricular reading or rarely use College French in oral or written expression. These subjective and objective factors combined contribute to difficulties in vocabulary usage when students engage in College French writing.

Firstly, students may not have a good grasp of basic French vocabulary, which makes it difficult for them to accurately express their opinions and thoughts in writing. Secondly, even if students have acquired a certain number of vocabulary words, they often struggle to use them appropriately in specific contexts. This is due to a lack of understanding of the cultural connotations of these words, resulting in pragmatic errors. Furthermore, in the process of writing, students often struggle to use synonyms and antonyms flexibly, which leads to repetitive vocabulary in their writing. As a result, their writing may seem monotonous and dull. Additionally, French is rich in fixed expressions and phrases. A insufficient understanding of these can lead to errors in verb-preposition and noun-preposition collocations, thereby affecting the quality of their writing.

2.2 Negative Transfer from Native Language in College French Writing

In the teaching and practice of College French writing, students are often influenced by their mother tongue, which to a large extent triggers the phenomenon of language transfer. Language transfer refers to the subconscious influence of a learner's native language habits when using a foreign language.

Firstly, there is transfer in vocabulary selection. When students engage in French writing, they have a tendency to translate vocabulary directly from their native language into French. In doing so, they often overlook the potential differences in associative meanings between the two languages. Additionally, they may lack a sufficient understanding of the contextual applicability and collocative habits of French vocabulary, leading to inaccuracies or inappropriate vocabulary choices.

Secondly, there is transfer in syntactic structure. Due to the significant differences between Chinese and French sentence

structures, students frequently apply the syntactic rules of their mother tongue unconsciously. This can compromise the accuracy of their French expression.

Furthermore, there is transfer in discourse structure. Chinese, a high-context language, typically provides a substantial amount of background information before introducing the main content. In contrast, French, a low-context language, favors a direct and concise expression of the theme. When students carry over the discourse patterns from native language, the resulting French texts can be overly descriptive or lack a clear and straightforward presentation of the main point. This can be confusing for French speakers, who are used to a more linear and topic-centered discourse. When students use the thinking patterns of mother tongue to organize French discourse, this can lead to errors in the structural layout of the text. The persistence of native language organizational patterns can result in flawed structural arrangements in College French writing.

2.3 Digression, Not Closely Adhering to the Essay Topic or the Beginning of the Paragraph.

In the current College French writing teaching, in line with the requirements of the College French Level 4 Exam, the assigned topic composition holds a central position. Such compositions often follow a structured format, where the opening sentence of each paragraph is predetermined, and students are expected to develop their content from there. Therefore, closely adhering to the essay topic and the opening of each paragraph becomes a key element in ensuring the logic and coherence of the article. However, in the actual writing process, students often fail to effectively grasp this key point, which gives rise to several subsequent problems.

Firstly, many students do not fully understand the requirements of the essay topic when writing, resulting in a weak correlation between the content of the article and the topic, or even straying from the topic. Although the first sentence of each paragraph clearly indicates its direction, students often miss this guidance when developing their writing, causing the paragraph's content to be disconnected from the topic's requirements. Secondly, students do not give sufficient thought to the opening sentence of each paragraph and neglect to use it as the basis for developing the paragraph's central idea. In such cases, the content of the paragraph often appears disorganized and lacks a clear logical thread, making the overall structure of the article seem loose and unfocused.

Additionally, the failure to adhere closely to the topic and the opening of each paragraph often results in students' writing being a mere chronological narrative that lacks depth and specificity. This not only affects the quality of the article but also makes it difficult for the writing to meet the requirements of the College French Level 4 Exam.

3. Varied Teaching Approaches to College French Writing

Currently, with the increasingly mature blended teaching model of online and offline, it is urgent that the teaching model of College French be reformed to keep pace with the

times. In response to the problems students face in College French writing, teachers have implemented targeted reform measures, integrating online and offline resources and employing diverse teaching approaches, with the aim of effectively improving students' College French writing skills.

3.1 Task-Based Language Teaching, to Address the Issue of Insufficient Vocabulary During the Writing Process for Students.

Stephen D. Krashen analyzed that: "The most effective way to acquire vocabulary is through meaningful and authentic communication tasks that encourage learners to engage with the language in a natural way [2]." According to this theory, in order to help students to use French vocabulary flexibly in real-life language situations, teachers have cleverly designed language learning tasks that are both authentic and meaningful. Throughout the teaching process, teachers meticulously select key vocabulary and phrases for each lesson, systematically listing them to build a solid foundation for students' vocabulary learning. For instance, teachers encourage students to work in groups and use the key vocabulary and phrases they have learned to create a lively and engaging dialogue. In this process, students not only get to practice their French skills but also enhance the natural fluency and accuracy of their language in real communication situations.

Additionally, the teacher has assigned group writing tasks, requiring students to use the vocabulary and phrases learned in class to co-author a French essay, which is then published in the discussion area of the online learning platform. This not only promotes interaction and collaboration among students but also improves their ability to use vocabulary correctly in real contexts through mutual evaluation and exchange. In this process, students inadvertently expand their vocabulary reservoir and also boost their confidence in language expression.

To further stimulate students' interest in reading French texts and effectively increase their vocabulary, teachers regularly post short French articles of moderate difficulty on the online learning platform. These articles are both in line with the students' actual proficiency and possess a certain degree of interesting content, allowing students to enjoy the pleasure of reading in their fragmented time. At the same time, the teacher has also designed five vocabulary and phrase exercises related to the article to help students consolidate their learning and ensure that they can effectively absorb and master new vocabulary while reading for comprehension. Through this comprehensive teaching method, students gradually improve their French proficiency in a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment.

3.2 The Intercultural Communication Teaching Method Aims at Overcoming Negative Transfer from the Native Language in College French Writing.

In College French writing, the negative transfer of native language typically manifests at the levels of vocabulary, syntax, and discourse. To overcome these issues, teachers have adopted the intercultural communication teaching method in their French teaching. Zhiliang Liu (2011)

analyzed that “Chinese college students’ English writing is a cross-language and cross-cultural communicative behavior, and also a behavior of the transformation of thinking and cultural model [3].” This view also applies to Chinese students’ College French writing.

Firstly, at the lexical level, the negative transfer of native language vocabulary in College French writing manifests as inappropriate word choice and direct translation from the mother tongue. For example, when students try to express the parental expectation of “望子成龙,” they might mistakenly choose the word “dragon”, committing a pragmatic error. In Chinese culture, the “dragon” is primarily a positive and revered symbol, whereas in Western culture, a “dragon” is usually depicted as a malevolent beast associated with greed, destruction, and evil. In vocabulary teaching, teachers have adopted the intercultural communication method to explain that words with the same denotative meaning can have completely different connotative meanings and cultural connotations. By comparing the use of vocabulary in French and Chinese language across different cultural contexts, students can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances of French vocabulary. Consequently, in the process of writing, they can produce vocabulary that is more appropriate and in line with French culture.

Next, at the syntactic level, the negative transfer from native language syntax is another common problem in students’ College French writing. Students often feel confused by French sentence structure, word order, and grammatical rules, leading to the creation of unnatural or even incorrect sentences. For example, in French, a relatively low-context language, adjectives typically follow the noun they modify, whereas in syntactic expression, adverbs or accompanying adverbial phrases are often placed after the verb. This is the opposite in Chinese, where the sentence “她常常和朋友们聊天” would be translated into French as “Elle parle souvent avec ses amis,” with the adverb “souvent” following the verb. Teachers apply high-context and low-context cultural theories within an intercultural communication framework to analyze real French texts, thereby helping students grasp the differences and similarities between French and Chinese syntax, this enables students to gain a deeper insight into the fundamental principles of French sentence structure and to construct sentences that adhere more closely to French syntax.

Furthermore, at the discourse level, influenced by the high-context expression style of mother tongue, students often show a significant amount of background information before gradually getting to the point. For instance, when writing an essay titled “I Love Autumn” (J’aime l’automne), many students begin by detailed descriptions of scenes from spring, summer, and even winter before gradually presenting the core theme of “I like autumn”. Such an indirect approach to expression contrasts sharply with the directness typical of French low-context communication.

To help students overcome this obstacle, teachers utilize the intercultural communication teaching approach. When discussing essays on the same topic, teachers perform a comparative analysis of French and Chinese original texts, using low-context and high-context theories to help students deeply understand the disparities in discourse structure

between the two languages. Through this comparison, students can more clearly see the simplicity and directness in French writing. They have learned to organize their discourse more effectively in French, avoiding excessive background information, which results in a more concise article structure and a more prominent theme.

In conclusion, the intercultural communication comparative analysis teaching method facilitates a profound comprehension of the cultural nuances between Chinese and French in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and discourse expression. This approach can significantly reduce the adverse effects of the mother tongue on College French writing, allowing students to consciously avoid native language transfer, thereby improving the quality of their writing.

3.3 The Process Writing Approach to Help Students Write with Focus on the Topic.

Cheng Yan (2023) analyzed that the process approach to teaching emphasizes a student-centered classroom, where the writing process is divided into several stages, including independent writing and peer as well as teacher-student interactions. It emphasizes repeated revisions to fully develop the students’ own language and thinking abilities.[4] In response to the issue of students going off-topic and failing to closely align their writing with the opening of the paragraph, the teacher has adopted the process writing method in the classroom.

In the prewriting stage, students are instructed on how to quickly understand the requirements of the topic within a limited time frame, to capture key information and to ensure that the writing is on-topic. At this stage, students are guided to use the mind-mapping method to sort out and clarify the theme of the essay and the main keywords of each paragraph, so that they can learn how to use the first sentence at the beginning of a paragraph to build the structure of the paragraph, and make sure that each sentence maintains a close correlation and coherence with the keywords at the beginning of the paragraph.

At the draft creation stage, College French courses are usually taught in large classes, and it is often difficult for teacher to provide one-on-one composition instruction to each student in the classroom. In order to increase students’ awareness of the importance of essay revision and to motivate them to actively participate in the writing process, the teacher encourages students to work in small groups to discuss and create ideas based on the mind maps from the previous stage and to express their discussions into words. At this stage, the focus should be on writing closely to the theme and the key words at the beginning of the paragraph, encouraging students to express their views boldly and emphasizing the coherence and logic of the essay rather than striving for perfection. Students who encounter writing challenges could ask the teacher for help in small groups. This approach allows the teacher to stay informed of the challenges students face during the writing process, enabling more effective guidance towards achieving their writing goals.

Once the group has completed the first draft, they engage in an

anonymous mutual revision process with other groups on the online platform. The primary evaluation criteria are whether the essay adheres to the theme and the key words introduced at the start of each paragraph. Attention is then turned to details at the language level, including grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. Intergroups should first point out problems and suggest changes in the essays, followed by revision of the essays. Then, The group revises the composition to finalize the draft. Both the first draft and the revised draft need to be submitted to the teacher, so that the teacher can have a deeper understanding of the students' progress and problems in the writing process. Such an interaction and feedback mechanism helps to enhance students' writing skills and promote their mutual growth.

In the reflection phase, at the conclusion of the lesson, the teacher carefully compares the students' initial drafts to their revised versions, meticulously examining the changes made. In the following class session, the teacher led a review of the entire learning process with the students, summarizing the areas of weakness and effective strategies for enhancing their writing, as well as discussing the specific feedback and support offered through the online intergroup peer assessment. Additionally, the teacher listened to the guidance and support that the students would like to receive in their learning.

By employing the process writing approach and group collaboration technique, teachers noted a marked advancement in students' ability to maintain focus on the topic and effectively use key words at the start of paragraphs, with all levels of students demonstrating growth. Moreover, students' enthusiasm and confidence in writing significantly increased.

4. Conclusion

College French writing is not only a comprehensive demonstration of students' French language proficiency but also a profound process of integration between thinking and expression. This includes various dimensions, such as the precise application of vocabulary, the flexible construction of syntax, and the strategic arrangement of discourse structure. In teaching practice, students encounter several writing challenges: first, a limited vocabulary limits the richness of expression; second, significant negative transfer from native language; and third, difficulties in closely adhering to the essay topic or the beginning of the paragraph.

To actively address these challenges, we have meticulously designed and implemented a series of innovative and diverse teaching strategies aimed at comprehensively enhancing students' French writing abilities. The task-based teaching approach stimulates students' motivation to explore language knowledge by setting specific, life-related writing tasks, effectively promoting the expansion and application of their vocabulary. The intercultural communication teaching method emphasizes the comprehension and integration of French culture and social context, enabling students to transcend the limitations of their native language and to express themselves more naturally and authentically in French. The process writing approach guides students through the entire process of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and reflecting, not only strengthening their ability to write

relevantly to the topic or the beginning of the paragraph, but also cultivating habits of critical thinking and self-correction.

The implementation of these teaching strategies has significantly increased students' French vocabulary reserves and effectively mitigated the interference of native language. More importantly, it has greatly enhanced their ability to think deeply and express clearly around a theme in College French writing, laying a solid foundation for their journey in learning French. Looking ahead, we are committed to continuously innovating and refining our teaching methods to adapt to the evolving landscape of education and the diverse learning needs of students, thereby further enhancing the efficacy and quality of College French writing teaching.

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