



Chapter One

Introduction

In this introductory chapter, we first present the background of this study, followed by a brief discussion of the development of the Graded English Writing Proficiency Test (GEWPT) and the significance of summary writing instruction. Then we go on to present the purpose of the study as well as the research questions that underlie this study.

1.1 Background of the Study

In this modern society, when someone is said to be illiterate, that person is probably unable to read or write properly. Therefore, the ability of reading and writing is very important to most people, especially students. According to the Senior High School Curriculum Standards promulgated by the Ministry of Education, senior high school graduates here in Taiwan are expected to show a certain degree of success in the integration of the four language skills-- listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, as Su (2003) mentions, most high school English teachers here still lay greater emphasis on teaching students how to read and write because these two skills are the essential parts of the so-called “exam English.” Likewise, high school students spend much more time and effort practicing their reading and writing abilities at home.

If they make up their mind to work hard to pass the college entrance examination successfully, they are required to demonstrate certain degree of proficiency in their reading and writing skills. So far, due to some technical problems, the assessment of students' speaking and listening abilities has not yet been implemented in the Joint College Entrance Examination (JCEE). Therefore, in high schools across this island, English teachers give their students more training in reading and writing than speaking and listening. As a result, students get far more opportunities to practice reading and writing skills but spend less time and effort practicing speaking and listening.

Tsao (2004) points out that reading is believed to be the foundation stone of all sorts of learning, because if a person has some trouble in reading an article, he or she will encounter more difficulty when absorbing any related knowledge. This is also true of those who learn English as a foreign language. If an EFL student has serious problems in reading a passage, he or she could not learn efficiently and would always feel disappointed in his or her learning journey. Therefore, EFL teachers in Taiwan rack their brains to look for the most effective ways to help their students to improve their reading ability. Currently, "critical thinking" has been promoted here in Taiwan as a very successful and efficient way of teaching reading, especially in senior high school English classes. And EFL teachers in Taiwan no longer pay much attention to

the instruction of grammatical rules and the memorization of new words. Instead, they lay much emphasis on teaching reading and writing abilities. An experienced high school English teacher often combines “critical thinking” with “writing” in the worksheet he or she has designed so as to stimulate students’ flow of thought and bring out their language abilities in an integrated way.

Senior high school students in Taiwan have much trouble in reading and writing, though they have spent most of their time polishing these two skills. However, being able to read does not necessarily guarantee the ability of writing a coherent paragraph in English. Moreover, as most high school English teachers are well aware, writing an English composition more often than not causes high school students in Taiwan to feel frustrated. When reading, students play a passive role because all they have to do is to comprehend what is written. On the other hand, while writing, they need to assume an active role—to put what’s in their mind systematically and skillfully in writing.

Writing skills cannot be acquired naturally, and English teachers must give direct and explicit instructions to high school students with respect to how to write a short composition in English. As a general practice, senior high school students are taught important concepts such as “topic sentences,” “supporting ideas,” “conclusion,” and “coherence” in their English composition classes. These students are asked to develop their writing skills through the process of “guided writing” to

“free writing” to express their own thoughts clearly when assigned a certain topic to write on.

This study focuses on summary writing, which involves both reading and writing skills. About four years ago, the researcher’s students took part in the Graded English Writing Proficiency Test (GEWPT) held by the College Entrance Examination Center (CEEC). Most of her students felt very much disappointed after they had taken the test. They were especially puzzled as to what a summary is and how to summarize a text—a task they had never encountered before taking the test. They said it was hard to be precise and brief when they were asked to write a summary. Some of them decided to directly copy several sentences from the original text. Others just chose to give up and put nothing down on their answer sheets. This particular difficulty the students encountered in fact aroused the researcher’s interest and she has since then attempted to work on the teaching of summative skills in class, hoping that with explicit and effective instruction, her students would perform better in future tests which may incorporate summary writing as one of the main tasks.

1.2 Development of the GEWPT

Although there are many items in the English test of JCEE, students’ performance in the composition part constitutes only one-fifth of their total score. As

this percentage is rather low, it is very difficult for the departments to which these students are admitted to have a clear view of what their writing proficiency really is. This poses as a big problem to those departments which take students' writing ability as an important consideration in the admission process. Therefore, Chang, et al. (1999) suggested that a writing ability test be separated from the English test in the JCEE. They further proposed that an independent writing proficiency test—the Graded English Writing Proficiency Test (GEWPT) be administered. A research team was thus set up in 1999 and they came up with four forms for the GEWPT. Form D aimed at assessing students' sentence-combining ability, and Form C was designed to assess students' ability in writing memos and postcards. Form B was basically a “guided composition” type of writing task, while Form A was designed to assess students' ability to write a short essay after reading an assigned reading passage. Questionnaires were also mailed to high schools and universities island wide to elicit responses regarding whether the different tasks were appropriate in assessing different levels of proficiency among high school students (for the surveyed high schools) and different levels of writing proficiency required of the incoming freshmen (for the surveyed universities and colleges). After analyzing the responses in the questionnaires, Chang, et al. (1999) learned that the both the high schools and the universities in general considered appropriate the assessment of the different levels of writing proficiency

through the different forms and that there was general consensus that administration of the GEWPT was worth trying.

The first Graded English Writing Proficiency Test was held on September 30th, 2000. The test format was somewhat different from what had been recommended by the previous research. The test included two parts to evaluate students' writing proficiency. Part I aimed at assessing students' writing ability at the sentence level and included tasks such as "sentence-combination", "sentence-making" and "question-and-answer." Part II, on the other hand, aimed at assessing students' discourse-level writing ability, and participants were asked to write in the first paragraph a summary (including the moral) of a fable ("The Country Mouse and the City Mouse") and in the second paragraph their reflections based on this fable.

In 2001, the CEEC held the second GEWPT, which involved basically three kinds of tasks. Form C contained "sentence combination", "sentence-making" and "question-and-answer." Form B had a sentence-level error correction task along with a guided paragraph writing task. In Form A, students were asked to make corrections on a passage (a supposedly discourse level task) and write a summary and their reflections after reading an article ("Teenagers' Privacy").

The results of the second GEWPT were analyzed by Lin, et al. (2001), and the general findings indicated that most students did not perform well on Form A,

showing that summary writing remained a difficult task for the students. Another important finding was that most students mixed their summary with their own reflections, and because of this, Lin, et al. (2001) proposed that a two-paragraph format be implemented in future tests so that the summary can be distinctly separated from the reflection to facilitate the accurate scoring of the writing task. Furthermore, they recommended that high school English teachers devote more time and effort in the instruction of summary writing, since it is one of the important writing skills specified in the Senior High School English Curriculum Standards for the high school students to develop.

1.3 Significance of Summary Writing Instruction

Chang (2001) discussed the results of the GEWPT and mentioned that most high school students in Taiwan were not familiar with summary writing and therefore couldn't express clearly the gist of an assigned passage in their own words. Moreover, as Su (2003) points out, the majority of English teachers in senior high schools here in Taiwan focus their instruction on the so-called "exam English." They do not teach their students how to write an effective summary in school, because summary writing has not yet been included as a test type in the JCEE compositions; another great possibility is that the teachers themselves have no clear idea about how to teach

summary writing.

This largely explains why high school students have tremendous difficulty in writing a summary even though they may be good at English grammatical rules and have in store enough words and phrases in their head. That is to say, students who are quite good in writing an English composition do not essentially perform well in writing a summary. Moreover, students would probably make only little progress in writing a summary if they were only asked to write summaries repeatedly without effective instruction from the teacher as to how to summarize a text. That is why teachers themselves need to know how to summarize a text before they apply this knowledge to teaching summary writing skills to students of different proficiency levels.

Although in 2002, the CEEC did not administrate the GEWPT, high school English teachers and students here in Taiwan should not neglect the importance of summary writing, mainly because summarization is a crucial skill for students in their college lives as well. College students need summative skills to pass their mid-term or final exams and they also need to constantly digest and reorganize all kinds of information and knowledge that come to them daily. In addition, when college students are asked to make either an oral or written report, they have to devote themselves to sorting out and extracting the gist from the diverse types of materials

they find in the library or on the Internet. Therefore, instruction on summary writing skills is an essential component either in senior high school curriculum or in the students' future college lives.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to call attention to the importance of summary writing instruction in senior high schools, in particular through the comparison of the writing performance of two different groups of high school students in Taiwan: one with summary writing instruction and one without.

Summary writing instruction is expected to have great influence on subjects' reading and writing ability as well as their summative abilities. Consequently, the compositions and summaries of the experimental group will be compared with those of the control group to assess the effectiveness of summary writing instruction. The two groups' performance on reading comprehension tests will also be compared to examine whether they have made progress in both reading and writing.

To sum up, the present study is an attempt to investigate the effects of summary writing instruction. It is hoped that through this study, senior high English teachers can understand the importance of the instruction of summary writing. Moreover, the summative skills proposed in the study are expected to aid teachers in learning more

about how to teach summary writing. At the same time, it is also expected that high school students can benefit from the instruction of summary writing. With the training of summary writing, subjects in the experimental group are expected to perform better in reading and writing abilities. They are also expected to feel more confident and get higher scores when they are asked to write a summary in the future.

1.5 Research Questions

The study will investigate the effectiveness of the instruction of summary writing. The research questions of the study are stated as follows:

1. Will subjects who get better scores in Chinese summary writing tasks also get better scores in English summary writing tasks as well?
2. Will control or experimental subjects who perform better in the GEPT writing tasks also do well in their English summary writing?
3. Will the experimental group perform better in writing the summary than the control group in the posttest?
4. Will subjects in the experimental group show significant improvement in the posttest than they do in the pretest?
5. Will subjects in the experimental group show any marked differences in their writing performance in the JCEE compositions when compared with those in the

control group?

6. Will subjects in the experimental group show greater interest in learning summarization in the future than subjects in the control group?

1.6 Summary and Organization of the Study

This study explores the effectiveness of English summary writing instruction on the reading and writing abilities of EFL senior high school students in Taiwan. It also investigates students' feelings and attitude toward English summary writing instruction. This thesis is comprised of six chapters. After this introductory chapter, a brief review of previous research related to summary writing and its instruction is presented in Chapter Two. Chapter Three focuses on the research methodology, introducing the subjects, the procedure of the study, and the research instruments. In Chapter Four, the research design, along with the subjects' performance in summary writing instruction is presented. Chapter Five describes the results of data analysis and the discussion of the results. In Chapter Six, a conclusion of this study is presented, including a brief summary of the results of this study, some pedagogical implications from this study, limitations of this study, and suggestions for future studies.