Innovative Approaches in Teaching English Writing to Chinese Speakers: Book Review

Xiaowen (Serina) Xie 🟢
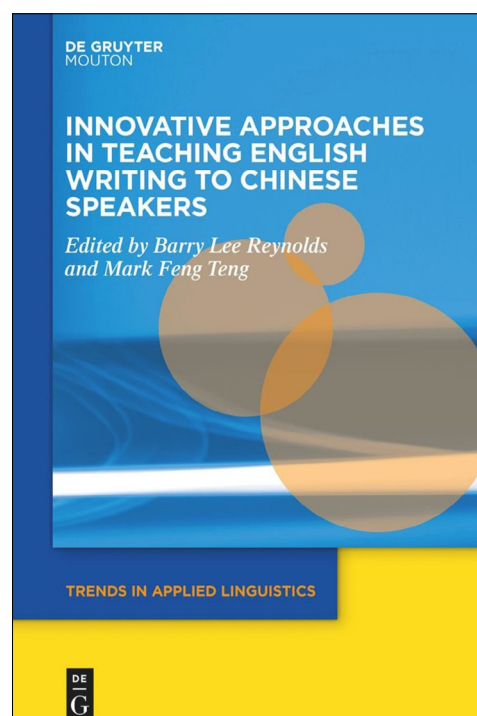
The University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT

Innovative Approaches in Teaching English Writing to Chinese Speakers, edited by Barry Lee Reynolds and Mark Feng Teng and published by De Gruyter Mouton in 2021, addresses the needs and directions for innovation in English writing teaching. Based on the Chinese-speaking contexts, this book's empirical studies highlight teacher-researchers' attempts on pedagogical innovations, showcasing stakeholders' mixed attitudes and perceptions regarding these innovative approaches when teaching English writing. The book illustrates the shared features and challenges of the assessment-driven teaching of English writing. The qualitative studies and small-scale action research in this collection provide deeper insights into the innovative teaching of English writing. Additionally, it includes practical suggestions for future reforms of curriculum designs, pedagogies, and education systems in the regions. Thus, it benefits various readers concerned with the design, process, and outcome of teaching English writing. This book review summarizes the eleven chapters firstly. It critically discusses three critical issues in the volume. This review concludes with an overall evaluation of this book's contribution to the innovation of teaching English writing.

In the first chapter, Barry Lee Reynolds and Mark Feng Teng clearly define Chinese speakers and Chinese-speaking regions, forming the basis of the collection. It clearly explains the contextual features of English writing education in these regions: mainland China, Hong Kong SAR, Macau SAR, and Taiwan. Drawing on the existing challenges and needs for innovative approaches in L2 English writing teaching across the levels of education from primary to tertiary, it introduces the aim of the collection to present the teacher-researchers' voices by closely looking into their practices. Furthermore, it suggests the book's aims to become "a valuable source of reference" (p. 13) to inspire teachers for their future innovation when teaching English writing to students.

In the second chapter, Anisa Cheung investigates technology implementation in a Hong Kong primary school through a

quasi-experimental case study, focusing on its influences on students' learning experiences and the writing outcome, alongside exploring teachers' concerns and obstacles to the implementation. Underpinned by process writing, the study compares student groups using e-learning tools and those using paper and pencil. The study presents a detailed dataset produced by focus groups, interviews, classroom observations, and student writings. It offers in-depth views into the effectiveness of e-learning in primary English writing classes and the staffs' views of its potential barriers.

In chapter 3, adopting activity theory in a dual case study, Amy Kong investigates two pairs of Hong Kong secondary L2 writers' views of the strategy-based training and how it influences their peer review practices. The researcher offers twelve training sessions to the student participants. Students' perceptions of peer review and training are generated from the semi-structured interviews conducted before and after the training sessions. Moreover, the recorded interactions enable the researcher to understand how students adopt the strategies during peer review sessions. The stimulated recall sessions after each peer-review session further demonstrate the reasons for their behaviors and feelings to some circumstances. The study highlights four mediators during peer review procedures, including "artefacts, roles, rules and community within the peer review activity system" (p. 57). The study demonstrates to teachers the value of strategy-based training in teaching English writing. Thus, it inspires to shift the teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered one by highlighting the feasibilies of collaborative writing among students.

Based on Macau's secondary school in chapter 4, the three-month case study conducted by Wilson Cheong Hin Hong attempts to minimize the complexity of grammar teaching for secondary students and see its effectiveness by comparing it with the traditional teaching of grammar categorization. To investigate the influence of this innovative grammar teaching approach on students' writing performances, this quasi-experiment study compares twenty-nine writings written by four students who are equally allocated in the experimental group and the control group. Although the findings do not showcase the significant effect of this innovation in grammar teaching, the study has important proposals for future innovations in grammar teaching. For instance, he advertises the aspects of the design and usage of textbooks, curriculum design, material design, and using L1 as a learning resource.

In the fifth chapter, underpinned by English as a lingua franca (ELF) in Taiwan, Melissa H. Yu employs a qualitative TESOL inquiry by student questionnaire, teacher questionnaire, and teacher interviews to explore students' needs of learning writing for international communication. She investigates the development of students' writing skills and the support provided by materials and university curricula. She also explores teachers' pedagogical choices and perceptions regarding teaching writing for international communication. Classroom observation data helps relate teacher perceptions to their classroom practices. She finds the development of students' L2 writing skills is prioritized by neither students nor teachers in Taiwan's secondary and tertiary education. Meanwhile, the curricula and materials are insufficient to support such teaching. They justify the limited feasibility of implementing ELF-informed teaching in writing classes in Taiwan, though the possibility remains. The study proposes integrating in-service teachers' teaching ideas and practices in teacher education programs. It will inspire pre-service teachers for future curriculum innovation and resources development. Furthermore, in-service teachers are advised to integrate ELF into their existing teaching practices rather than initiating ELF courses, which will direct in-service teachers to consider the feasibility of ELF-informed curriculum innovation gradually.

In chapter 6, adopting an ecological perspective in their action research in Hong Kong, Maggie Ma and Mark Feng Teng explore the influence of a process writing course on the metacognitive knowledge development of tertiary students with low writing proficiency. After focus groups, student drafts, teacher and peer feedback, and teacher reflective journals, this study provides more profound insights into the similarities and differences in two students' metacognitive knowledge development. It concludes the significance of student sample analysis activities, genre instruction, and tailormade learning resources and activities in the process writing course. Meanwhile, students treat the teacher as the authority in writing classes, but peer support is not fully utilized for their writing development. The study also indicates that individual differences contribute to the different degrees of engagement in students' learning process and metacognitive knowledge development. Accordingly, they offer multiple pedagogical implications, mainly aiming to increase the communication between teachers and students and understanding students' learning needs and reasons for their views. Then, it will assist teachers' pedagogical innovation in process writing courses.

In the seventh chapter, also in Hong Kong tertiary education, Dureshahwar Shari Lughmani and Dennis Foung introduce several tools to facilitate students' metacognitive strategies and investigate if these strategies can help students improve their writing performances, alongside the exploration of student perceptions of these strategies. This study is distinguished from other qualitative research because a correlation analysis is performed to investigate the relationship between assignment scores and other numeric variables. They propose practical suggestions to writing teachers, including writing assignment guidelines, checklists, and an interactional feedback process.

Still in Hong Kong tertiary education in the following chapter, by a narrative inquiry, Anora Yu presents an L2 English teacher's perspective on high-stake and low-stake testing

and this teacher's teaching approaches. Also, 'as an experienced L2 English teacher in Hong Kong' (p.184), the researcher regarded herself as a rich source of data in the study to 'co-construct new meanings and new knowledge' (p.184) with the data provided by her teacher participant, while this could have been utilized more in the data presentation. Through three vignettes, the study demonstrates that teacher beliefs and intuitive assessment influence her teaching approaches. Student motivation related to exams also helps explain their behaviors. The researcher proposes that teachers switch to the process approach from the product approach in English writing classes. Accordingly, it is advised that teachers understand student motivation more and focus on the process approach.

Switching to mainland China, in chapter 9, under an integrated genre-based approach in a case study, (Luna) Jing Cai localizes her teaching for the academic writing skill development to Chinese graduate students in the Applied Linguistics discipline. This study explicitly states these students' suggestions to improve the effectiveness of this writing course by answering the open-ended questions in the survey. They propose changes regarding course schedule arrangement, the use of research papers as materials, and pedagogies. Finally, she highlights how content teachers in other disciplines collaborate with linguistic teachers to improve students' writing skills in academia, which echoes the trendy proposals of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) (Lo, 2020).

In chapter 10, also focused on a postgraduate writing course in Taiwan, Yun-yin Huang and Hsiao-Hui Wu conduct action research under the activity theory to explore the factors contributing to students' writing and publishing process. Unlike those one-sided stories, this study involves the department faculties, writing instructors, and graduate students. Focus groups and interviews with them show their difficulties in teaching and learning in writing courses. The detailed demonstration and figures skillfully unpack the complexity of the findings. Through the instructors' voices, more supports from the school authority, resources, online tools, and pedagogical alternatives are required. Vividly, it also reveals the current situation of postgraduate students who lack such supports from their supervisors and the school. The study shows the mismatch between the school's expectations and the needs of postgraduate students and their instructors regarding academic writing and publishing. Similarly, these researchers also propose collaborative teaching between linguistic and content teachers, which again resonates with CLIL (Lo, 2020). Along with the proposal for blended pedagogy, writing instructors are advised to receive "continuous professional development regarding ESP pedagogies" (p. 252).

In the eleventh chapter, Barry Lee Reynolds and Mark Feng Teng critically reflect on the innovative approaches studied and proposed in this volume to point out the future directions of pedagogical reforms and research in teaching English writings. Consequently, they conclude the research gaps for future studies, which will benefit researchers interested in investigating English writing innovations across the levels of education from primary to postgraduate. They also highlight the extended absence of research in English writing teaching in Macau's context, especially large-scale quasi-experimental studies. Apart from promoting technology in innovative writing teaching practices and research, they also emphasize the need to explore language teacher agency (Tao & Gao, 2021) by comparing what they say and what they do in the actual classroom, which is not yet addressed in this volume but will significantly contribute to the field.

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE OF THREE KEY ISSUES RAISED IN THE BOOK

Among the varied research foci in this collection, three key issues are brought up. Firstly, it is found that students' individual differences may implicitly influence the innovative approaches in English writing teaching, whereas this issue is not explicitly explored in the book. For instance, chapter 2, chapter 6 and chapter 7 could benefit more if students' individual differences were studied. Then, process writing assisted by technology is investigated by the researcher in chapter 2 and highly recommended in chapter 11. Furthermore, in chapter 11, the editors also propose collaborative teaching between content teachers and linguistic teachers for the innovation of teaching writing to students.

Although individual differences are not explicitly mentioned or explored in this volume's empirical studies, they are found as the partial implicit findings, potential factors, or even obstacles to teacher-researchers' innovation in teaching English writing. Most of these action research studies attempt to influence students' writing learning experiences and metacognitive development by introducing metacognitive and strategy-based training sessions or courses. However, even though some of them explore students' perceptions of these innovative approaches, such as chapters 2 and 6, they do not provide a clear understanding of students' individual differences. Instead, understanding these would allow researchers to realize why the same innovative approaches would result in different outcomes. If students' individual differences were explored in detail before the training sessions, it would become another lens for the researchers to propose more practical suggestions, highlighting learners' needs.

The book has offered in-depth data to rationalize the suggestions for process writing assisted by technology, whereas more works need to be done by replicating the studies in other areas or institutes in the same regions to see its feasibility and effectiveness. As the book indicates, process-writing is more challenging to stakeholders, including

both students and writing instructors. It is necessary to see how language teacher agency (Tao & Gao, 2021) is achieved or inhibited in such a curriculum innovation environment by both attitudinal and classroom observation data through more longitudinal studies. More should be done to understand the barriers to language teacher agency achievement from an ecological approach (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015) when implementing process writing in varied contexts, primarily where administrators' encouragement, support for students and in-service teachers, and suitable materials are absent.

Moreover, the idea of collaborative teaching between discipline and linguistic teachers has already been proposed recently. In recent years, a few case studies and action research have started to investigate CLIL's effectiveness and explore some stakeholders' perspectives, for instance, focusing on teachers and students in Europe and Asia (Ito, 2019; Piacentini, Simões, & Vieira, 2019). However, the complexity of such an innovative approach still needs to be unpacked by robust data including the actual comparison of students' learning outcomes and views from multiple stakeholders such as policymakers, administrators, content teachers, language teachers and students. Although inviting experts from disciplines and linguistics to support students' writing skill development is an alternative to English writing teaching, it would benefit more by fully demonstrating the practice, reasons, and effectiveness of collaborative teachings for students' writing skill development.

A FINAL EVALUATION OF THE OVERALL CONTRIBUTION

This volume sheds light on the needs for and the explorations of innovative pedagogies through small-scale case studies and action research in the Chinese-speaking communities, covering primary, secondary, and tertiary educations. It significantly bridges the gap between theoretical development in teaching English writing and the actual practices in the classroom. The book makes a significant contribution by involving studies from different stages of education, addressing the need to reform the pedagogies and curricula of English writing courses from even the primary and secondary levels, which has been long ignored. Meanwhile, it enables theorists and researchers to understand stakeholders' perspectives and practical experiences from these empirical studies to assist with the future theorization and research design when aiming to shed light on the pedagogical reform for teaching English writing. It provides valuable pathways for researchers to consider the urgent need for longitudinal classroom studies to follow up and investigate the feasibilities of these proposed innovative pedagogies and approaches. Furthermore, many of the studies are highly valuable as they set an excellent example for practitioners who would like to implement process writing in their classrooms to explore efficient pedagogies to teach students who are somehow demotivated by the product approach. It will integrate these learners' communicative and social needs in the changing world. It is a must-read for teacher educators and policymakers, reminding them of the vital need to shift the focus from helping students graduate from the exam-oriented education to shaping successful English writers who can communicate through English writing effectively. Overall, this volume will benefit theorists, researchers, teachers, students, teacher educators, and policymakers, who are keen on exploring, adopting, or adapting innovation to English writing teaching.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

REFERENCES

Ito, Y. (2019). The effectiveness of a CLIL basketball lesson: A case study of Japanese junior high school CLIL. *English Language Teaching*, *12*(11), 42. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v12n11p42

Lo, Y. Y. (2020). *Professional development of CLIL teachers*. Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2425-7

Piacentini, V., Simões, A. R., & Vieira, R. M. (2019). Teachers' view of language(s) in (CLIL) science education: A case study in Portugal. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 77(5), 636–649. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/19.77.636

Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury Academic. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474219426

Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2021). *Language teacher agency*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108916943