

The length approach to ELT

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ABSTRACT

In China, many EFL learners experience a learning stage where they find themselves unable to put English to communicative use despite a good knowledge of its vocabulary and grammar following years' hard work on the language. This is also a stage characterized by learners' low confidence in their abilities to learn English well. To help learners out of this predicament, a teaching model that exploits writing to facilitate EFL learning is proposed in this paper. The model, designated as the Length Approach (LA), aims to increase learners' English proficiency through tasks that motivate learners to write increasingly long compositions. The resulting quantity of writing gives learners a good sense of achievement, which in turn boosts their confidence and motivates further learning, thus ensuring progress in English learning. Results from two investigations into the effectiveness of the LA show that the participants accepted the approach and their English improved following the training with the LA.

Introduction

Although the facilitative role of writing in L2 learning has long been recognized (e.g., Swain, 1985), in classroom practice, use of writing tasks to aid EFL learning is far from being fully exploited. This is so partly because it is laborious and time-consuming to mark learners' compositions and partly because relatively few non-native speaking EFL teachers themselves are able to write good English. Consequently, more manageable tasks involving listening, reading and speaking receive much more attention in EFL teaching, with speaking as the major mode of developing productive skills. Furthermore, writing appears formidable to learners, who are often found struggling for ideas to write about, particularly in a language beyond their automatic control. Often they give up half way for lack of confidence in their ability to write and many of them never reach a stage of L2 proficiency where they can write English reasonably well. This is exactly what is happening at secondary schools and universities in China where English is taught as a compulsory subject. In order to find a way out of the dilemma facing both EFL teachers and learners, this paper offers a solution called the Length Approach (LA). Basically, the LA aims to help learners improve their L2 English proficiency through written tasks motivating L2 use. By gradually adjusting the length requirement of compositions, the teacher pushes learners to write as long as their current level of L2 proficiency allows. This push to learners' limits and the resulting quantity of writing heighten their sense of achievement, which

in turn boosts their confidence in their ability to learn, thus facilitating L2 learning. In what follows, the underlying assumptions, procedures, and effectiveness of the LA will be delineated.

Motivation for the length approach

The LA is primarily motivated by profuse evidence in support of L2 writing as an effective means of learning the L2. This L2 learning effect has been well articulated in Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis, which arises from the observation that comprehension-based L2 learning tasks involving listening and reading have been found insufficient in enhancing L2 development and this lack of development is evidenced by children studying in the Canadian immersion program even after years of academic study in their second language. According to the Output Hypothesis, output serves three functions in terms of its facilitating effect on L2 learning. That is, it enables learners to (a) notice the gap between their interlanguage and the target language, (b) test hypotheses about how the target language works, and (c) reflect upon their L2 use. However, output encompasses both speaking and writing and each may exhibit differential effect on L2 learning. Writing has at least one advantage over speaking in that communication in a written mode imposes a stricter demand on the accuracy of L2 forms and on the message "that is not only conveyed, but that is conveyed precisely, coherently, and appropriately" (Swain, 1985, p. 249). One need not necessarily be syntactically correct to make oral communication possible because situational contexts can help in understanding message.

Another motive behind the LA comes from the observation that affect plays a crucial role in L2 learning and writing appears more advantageous over speaking in this respect. Factors under the cover term 'affect' pertain to our emotions and feelings such as self-concept, confidence, anxiety, attitude and motivation. "The way we feel about ourselves and our capacities can either facilitate or impede our learning" (Arnold & Brown, 1999, p. 8). The importance of affect in L2 learning has found convincing expression in the well-known Acculturation model (Schumman, 1978) and the Affective Filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). Well-attested findings from affect-based studies can be boiled down to a conclusion that achievement in L2 learning depends largely on learners' affective state and success in L2 teaching hinges on minimizing the negative effect of affective factors. Although affect is entailed in the learning of all school subjects, its effect on language learning is particularly prominent. What makes language learning distinct is that it involves learning speech sounds, which, in a sense, are an outward manifestation of the human language faculty. This manifestation bears on the self-concept or self-image we hold about ourselves, affecting the way we self-evaluate our abilities to learn a language (Wang, 2004). Negative self-concept gives rise to a low rating of one's learning ability and reduces confidence in language learning. For those learners who have difficulty with pronunciation, speaking is likely to cause psychological inhibition discouraging oral interaction. Compared with speaking, writing appears to be psychologically less threatening since it can be an individual activity and teachers can exploit writing to enhance learners' self-concept by providing positive feedback.

The LA encourages learners not only to write but also to write as long as they possibly can. The length of a L2 composition has been found to bear a close relationship with the quality of writing. Crowhurst (1991) claims that length influences the overall quality of essays and is one of the effective indicators of L2 learners' level of writing ability. Ferris (1994, p. 45) contends that the longer an essay is, the more likely it is that the writer has done an adequate job of presenting his or her ideas. The topic depth is not likely to be fully explored in short essays (L. Wang, 2003, p. 112). Ma (1998, p. 129) found that length alone could account for 60% of the variance of the quality ratings of the L2 English compositions that were randomly sampled from the test papers of a large-scale national English proficiency test in China. Larsen-Freeman (1978, p. 440) observes that "students with a good writing ability tend to write longer compositions." Although a significant correlation does not mean a causal relationship between length and quality of L2 writing, the potential of using length as a means to facilitate L2 learning is worth tapping.

Accentuation of length in L2 writing should not be taken to mean that long compositions are necessarily better than short ones. Length in the LA is only a means to an end, not the end itself. Presumably, one needs to go through a stage of writing verbosely before acquiring the ability to write lucidly and concisely. What the LA does is to coerce learners to purposely experience this transitional stage under the guidance of their teachers. Note that one might choose to write several short compositions which are quantitatively equivalent to a long one. Arguably, the effect might not be the same. Long compositions have the advantages of deepening discussions of ideas, providing more opportunities to practice English, giving a sense of achievement, building up learners' confidence in their ability to learn English, and removing fear for writing. In short, the LA generates a virtuous circle: length of writing → a sense of achievement → confidence → L2 learning.

Ways to make a composition long

Since the LA emphasizes the length of writing, running counter to the current ELT practice in China, which imposes a word limit on writing for the convenience of marking, Chinese learners might not go along with it to begin with. Before embarking on the LA, it is therefore highly necessary to enlist cooperation from students with a one-hour orientation session. Points to clarify include why length is stressed, how to improve English through writing, how to write a long composition, and how to deal with errors in compositions. In particular, learners need to be made aware from the very beginning that fear for writing is normal and largely due to much exposure to refined products of writing, but little access to the process involved in repeated and sometimes painful revisions leading to the finished products. Textbooks do much to reinforce this fear with plenty of excellent writing samples by experienced and well-trained writers because the quality of these samples appears too high for learners to achieve. One way out of this predicament is to experience the writing process. Following the orientation session, teachers can proceed to implement the LA as specified below.

Generating an appropriate task

Essential to the LA is the design of tasks as “tasks form the heart of writing teaching” (Hyland, 2003, p. 139). Often a well-designed task gives teachers a surprise at how well learners can write. Basically, any task that leads learners to write a long composition once a week is desirable. A good task has at least three characteristics: (a) it is capable of arousing learners’ intrinsic interest and their desire to express themselves, (b) it is suited to learners’ level of English proficiency, and (c) it is relevant to learners’ life experiences so that they can have a lot to write about. Based on these three criteria, teachers can go about setting tasks through trial-and-error. If more than one teacher teaches parallel classes, they can work together to brainstorm for good tasks. Learners are then asked to rate their interest in a task on completion of writing. The ratings serve to inform teachers of the task effectiveness and eventually yield a list of tasks for use in the next round of teaching. Examples of effective tasks include asking learners to complete an interesting story with only its stimulating beginning provided or to write a composition after reading a thought-provoking material or to write on a stimulating topic such as “Should undergraduates be allowed to get married?”

It is advisable to keep varying task types. Different tasks can serve as changing contexts that ensure various uses of English expressions and enhance interlanguage variability, which is a natural and necessary part of L2 development (e.g., Taroon & Liu, 1995). Occasionally, learners can be required to write a short composition or stop writing for a week to relieve boredom that may creep in due to excessive writing. As learners are normally unable to write a long composition within a class hour or two, writing should be done outside class. To enhance motivation of writing, learners are required to prepare two good excuse books that are used alternately every other week to keep a record of their creative work worthy of keeping up for their whole life. They are also required to revise a composition written in the previous month to make progress visible. Excellent compositions can be collected for publication and circulated among students.

Providing relevant input inside class

Two class hours are allotted to the LA course each week and they are spent in doing mainly two things: (a) analytically reading materials selected from books or magazines that are related to the task at hand, (b) critically evaluating one or two best-written compositions selected from students’ work. These two activities proceed under the guidance of the teacher. In the process of the analytical reading, some essentials of writing techniques can be instilled such as how to construct good sentences and how to achieve coherence and cohesion in a discourse. The best-written composition is printed out for every student to have a copy so that the class can be asked to mark all good points and errors in the composition at great length both in terms of its contents and accuracy in English use. By so doing, students would notice the gap between their own compositions and the good example set by their classmates. Through a comparison of the best composition with their own work on the same task students would pick up commendable points and avoid pitfalls. The good points can serve as peer pressure

motivating L2 changes for the better. Criticisms of the weak points in the best composition enable students to learn vicariously from errors and at the same time would not hurt its writer, who usually takes pride in his or her writing as a whole.

Manipulating length by adjusting the scoring scheme

One effective way to encourage writing increasingly long compositions is to adopt a scoring scheme that puts a premium on length. A marking scheme can be so devised that it divides a percentage score into four components: length (40%), organizational structure (20%), contents (20%) and accuracy (20%), with length carrying the heaviest weight. For example, the score of a composition may take the form like $40+18+14+15=89$. These composite scores, in the order familiar to all students, serve to inform the writer that he or she has produced, on the whole, a well-written composition, with an excellent length, a very good organizational structure, some fairly interesting ideas, and satisfactory use of English. By this time-saving scoring scheme, teachers can manipulate the length requirement of the writing assignment by setting the minimum number of words required of a composition, which is determined largely by teachers' estimation of students' current level of L2 proficiency. Learners may start with, say, 200 words, then 250 words three weeks later, then 300 words another three weeks later, and work all the way up to 1,000 with the passage of time. No upper limit of words should be imposed. Although the LA aims to improve learners' English proficiency, it is the length component that is exploited for this goal. As the length requirement of a composition changes, learners are pushed to write longer gradually.

Marking good points

The basic function of marking compositions lies in conveying to learners the message that teachers care about them and their hard work. Given this caring function, it is more important to satisfy learners' affective needs (e.g. building up confidence) than correcting errors in compositions. L2 learning is not always a pleasant experience for all learners, particularly for adult learners, who usually have a stronger longing for encouragement than for criticisms upon completion of a composition following hard work. One way to satisfy this psychological need is to provide positive feedback by highlighting good points in compositions. Marking good points is a lot easier than correcting errors, particularly for non-native speaking teachers of English. As an alternative, learners can be asked to underline or mark those places they think good and those expressions they use for the first time. Teachers can concentrate on marking these places to enhance noticing.

Handling errors with care

Attitude towards errors in compositions influences the way in which the LA is implemented. Teachers tend to lay their eyes more on errors than on good

points in the belief that error-correction is an effective way to help students improve their English. In order to make error-correction possible, the length of compositions has to be limited to a preset number of words, thus unwittingly mitigating the role of writing as a means to enhance L2 development. The point is: if one does not use English, one will never make English errors. The more one writes, the more likely errors occur. Errors are simply a natural part of the L2 learning process just as children learning to walk have to experience falling over. Even when one does not write, it does not mean errors do not exist mentally. With increasing exposure to L2 input, many errors would disappear by themselves. Further, errors often result from testing hypotheses about English uses. Hypothesis testing of this kind should be encouraged rather than suppressed. In this sense, error-making paves the way to success and should not worry teachers at all. Just as learners are often encouraged to practise their spoken English without having to bother too much about errors, the LA advocates the same practice.

Playing down error-correction does not mean that the LA neglects errors. The LA sets out to eliminate errors through means other than explicit correction. Measures taken to ensure disappearance of errors include (a) eschewing culture-specific tasks that are likely to trigger native language influence on L2 use, (b) providing learners with appropriate input such as reading materials containing useful expressions relevant to the current writing task, (c) raising consciousness of such expressions through demonstration of their uses, (d) explaining how to use dictionaries to clarify uncertain uses, (e) evaluating good compositions from students with a focus on the errors made, (f) requiring revision of compositions written at least one month ago to facilitate self-correction. All these activities are carried out in class and they are done partly because careful marking quickly becomes impossible as the length of a composition increases.

Effectiveness of the length approach

At this point, one might ask if the LA has produced the effect as it claims. Effectiveness of teaching depends largely on whether learners accept the approach on the one hand and whether it brings about visible progress in L2 learning on the other. In what follows the results are reported from two investigations into the effect of the LA at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS) where the LA has been in use for six years.

Study 1

The focus of this study were on five issues: (1) whether the learners accepted the LA, (2) whether their confidence had increased in their ability to learn English following the training with the LA, (3) whether their English proficiency had improved, (4) whether they were positive about the marking scheme, and (5) whether they liked to write compositions outside class. The participants were a total of 199 first-year English majors from eight classes of the GDUFS English Department. They had learned English for at least six years in secondary schools and passed a competitive university entrance examination before they were

enrolled in the university. The LA training was implemented during a 5-month semester, two class hours a week. Within class, in conformity with the LA principles described above, the participants were engaged in a variety of activities under the guidance of their teacher such as identifying and correcting errors in the best written composition selected from students' work, analyzing model essays relevant to the task intended for a writing assignment, and discussing expressions that were potentially useful for performing the task. These activities were intended to demonstrate to the students how to express themselves accurately and appropriately in English and how to write better. Each lesson ended up in a writing assignment for the students to do outside class. The students were required to write their compositions as long as they possibly could and underline those expressions they first tried out in their writing. Revision was done of the composition written at least one month ago. The teachers scored compositions focusing mainly on the length and good points.

To look into the five issues, a questionnaire was designed to reveal the students' attitude towards the LA and how they felt after being trained with the new approach (see Wang, Niu, & Zheng, 2000). The questionnaire consisted of 50 statements and more than one statement was used to address one issue. Each statement was juxtaposed with a 5-point scale indicating different degrees of agreement, with number 5 standing for 'strongly agree' and 1 for 'strongly disagree'. Examples of the questionnaire are shown below:

Writing long compositions helps improve my English more than short ones.	1	2	3	4	5
The longer I can write the more confident I become in my English writing.	1	2	3	4	5
Writing long compositions has enabled me to express myself in English better.	1	2	3	4	5
I think it is good to have length as a criterion for scoring compositions.	1	2	3	4	5
I prefer writing outside class to writing inside class.	1	2	3	4	5

To see if changes concerning the five issues had occurred due to the LA, the same questionnaire was administered both at the beginning and the end of the semester. The participants were asked to make judgments by circling one appropriate number that reflected their opinion on a statement. Their judgments are summarized in Table 1, which shows that differences in the responses before and after the training are highly significant with respect to the five issues. This means that, following the 5-month training, the learners felt more confident in their ability to learn English, believed their English had improved, preferred to

Table 1

Differences in questionnaire responses before and after the adoption of LA (N=199)

Issues	Pre-test		Post-test		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Acceptance of LA	3.21	.88	3.68	.83	7.352	.000
Confidence	3.31	.74	3.61	.71	5.504	.000
English proficiency	3.79	.69	3.97	.64	3.418	.000
Marking scheme	2.84	.91	3.74	.84	11.824	.000
Writing outside class	3.80	.91	4.19	.71	6.882	.047

write outside class, and liked the approach along with its marking scheme. On the whole, the learners were very positive about the LA after it was introduced. Despite the positive results in favor of the LA, Study 1 has only assessed the learners' perceptions and attitudes. True effectiveness of the LA requires evidence that the learners' actual writing performance matches their perceptions. To clarify this point, Study 2 was conducted.

Study 2

To see if the LA has actually contributed to an improvement of English, a teaching experiment was run with participants from two classes of second-year English majors studying at the GDUFS Business English Department. One class of 30 served as an experimental group (EG) and the other class of 27 as a control group (CG). Both groups were taught by the same teacher of EFL writing. The LA training was implemented during the two class hours for the English writing course each week. The EG followed the LA procedure, writing outside class and meeting the minimum length requirement which was adjusted in accord with the subjects' level of English proficiency. For the CG, the teacher stuck to the time-honored teaching practice at GDUFS, which required students to write within class and keep to a word limit. All the other courses taken by the two classes were kept the same. To evaluate the effectiveness of the LA, pre- and post-testing at the beginning and the end of the experiment were conducted in the form of a questionnaire, a cloze, and a timed writing task. The 50-item questionnaire for the present study had been used in Study 1 four years earlier. A cloze test with 30 blanks was administered as an indicator of the subjects' general English proficiency. A one-hour writing task was used to evaluate the subjects' English writing ability. For the pre-testing, both groups did the cloze test and wrote a composition, but only the EG did the questionnaire. For the post-testing, the EG did the same questionnaire again and both groups did the same cloze test, but wrote a composition on a different topic. Each subject's writing was double checked by two teachers who were ignorant of the LA to yield an average score representing the subject's English writing ability.

The results of the questionnaire, the cloze and the writing were summarized in Tables 2, 3 and 4. Table 2 shows that the subjects' response patterns bear a striking resemblance to those in Study 1 (see Table 1) in spite of the fact that a

Table 2
Differences in questionnaire responses (N=30)

Issues	Pre-test		Post-test		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Acceptance of LA	3.09	.76	4.14	.46	6.486	.000
Confidence	3.39	.62	4.21	.39	6.176	.000
English proficiency	3.80	.86	4.48	.53	3.841	.000
Marking scheme	3.84	.69	4.62	.43	5.253	.000
Writing outside class	4.39	.42	4.62	.47	2.047	.047

Table 3
Differences in Cloze scores

	Cloze		Mean diff.	SD	t	p
	Pre-test	Post-test				
EG (N=30)	10.70	17.03	6.28	3.10	1.698	.095
CG (N=25)	11.43	16.92	4.96	2.59		

Table 4
Differences in English writing

	Writing		Mean diff.	SD	t	p
	Pre-test	Post-test				
EG (N=30)	45.60	49.00	3.60	2.69	4.314	.000
CG (N=25)	46.80	47.00	.56	2.53		

different group of students did the same questionnaire after a lapse of 4 years. This clearly demonstrates the students' positive attitudes toward the LA. The cloze results in Table 3 show that the EG performed the cloze numerically better than the CG although the score difference barely reaches the .05 significance level. Table 4 unequivocally demonstrates that the EG improved significantly more than the CG with respect to English writing. In short, the EG took a liking to the LA and, following the 5-month training with the LA, wrote English better and exhibited considerable improvement in English.

Following the quantitative study, some students who went through the LA training were interviewed for their opinions on the approach.¹ Positive comments were profuse and a few are cited below as evidence in support of the conclusions in the two studies described above.

After writing at length for one semester, I find my writing improved. In the beginning I was not used to writing long compositions. I was worried about getting ideas to write. What's more, it took too much time to write. Gradually I find the approach helpful. It forces me to go and search for English reading materials relevant to the writing task. The LA has not only aroused my interest in writing English but also expanded my English vocabulary.

Because writing at length provides me with much more opportunity to express myself in English, I have to cudgel my brains to vary sentence structures and phrases and use different wording so that my composition will not sound monotonous and verbose.

I would say the Length Approach must go with reading. In order to be able to get ideas for a long composition, I need to do a lot of reading. Writing at length makes me aware of my own weaknesses in using English and gives me an urge to read books.

¹ The author thanks Tang Guimin for helping collect the interview data following his active involvement in the teaching experiment.

Compared with writing short compositions, writing long ones enables me to go much deeper into the problems discussed in a composition.

As we are required to write as long as possible, I have to do a lot of thinking and think deeply so that I can come up with ideas for a long composition. By so doing, writing has done much to train my thinking.

After getting used to writing at length, I find it a lot easier to write short compositions.

As can be seen in the interviewees' comments, the learners might not get used to writing at length to begin with, but they came to see the merits of the LA as they proceeded. Under the pressure of the length requirement, they felt impelled to read extensively and think deeply. Consequently, their vocabulary increased and writing short compositions became easier.

Conclusion

This paper has described the procedures involved in the Length Approach and years' teaching using the approach has afforded evidence for its effectiveness. Nevertheless, the practice of the LA has still left some questions unanswered such as: Are more proficient writers better able to write at length and/or writing at length increases proficiency in writing? Is the LA more effective with learners of low writing proficiency than learners of high writing proficiency or the other way round? These questions are empirical issues that require further investigations and answers to them will undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding and more effective use of the LA.²

The foregoing discussion shows that the LA is a task-based, experiential, and write-to-learn approach to ELT, with special attention paid to satisfying learners' affective needs. Behind the length-manipulating technique lies a host of beliefs and principles about EFL learning and teaching. In this principled approach, use of the LA to improve English proficiency accords with Swain's (1995, p. 141) view on the three L2 learning functions which output serves, that is, the functions of gap-noticing, hypothesis-testing, and reflection. However, Swain makes it clear that there is no guarantee that all the three functions operate whenever learners produce the target language. This suggests that unless the three functions are at play, writing alone will not necessarily facilitate effective L2 learning. Within the LA, the gap-noticing function is reinforced by the provision of reading materials relevant to a writing task and by the collective evaluation of the best-written composition in class. The hypothesis-testing function is realized in the requirement of learners to underline in their compositions those English sentences and expressions they first try out. The reflection function manifests itself in the requirement of learners to revise their compositions one month after completion, chewing over their previously written work and self-correcting errors.

In conformity with the LA principles, teachers' main job lies in bringing learners' L2 learning potential into full play through tasks that stimulate them to

² The author is grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the good questions raised here.

write. Use of English follows an urge to express ideas. Based on a motivating task, the length of writing is manipulated and emphasized, producing a chain of effects on L2 learning. Writing longer for each assignment gives learners a sense of achievement and thereupon motivates more L2 use and absorption of L2 input. Moreover, marking good points, coupled with the use of the LA scoring scheme, not only makes learners feel confident in L2 learning but also frees teachers from the heavy burden of correcting errors. Thus, the LA is especially suited to the EFL context like China, where non-native speaking teachers often find it difficult to tackle errors for a large number of students, and where learners with a reasonably good knowledge of vocabulary and grammar have a strong desire to further expand their English proficiency but little opportunity to use English orally. Following extensive writing practice in the ways dictated by the LA, learners' English no longer remains the same in a matter of months.

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