INTEGRATING WRITING AND OTHER LANGUAGE SKILLS IN A CHINESE FL CLASSROOM

Ying Wang, Mount Holyoke College
In the field of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, teaching and learning to write is probably the most challenging task for a number of reasons, and it also tends to be overlooked by pedagogical research. The development of a foreign language learner’s writing skill in Chinese depends on his or her proficiency of other language skills, knowledge of different writing genres and styles, cultural awareness and sophistication, as well as writing ability in his or her first language, etc. (Luo, 2002; Williams, 2005).

In a time-constrained and often audio-lingual-oriented FL classroom, teaching writing in Chinese tends to be the very last item or even completely neglected in the instructor’s teaching plan. More often than not, writing only means learning how to write Chinese characters and conducting grammar and translation practice sentence by sentence. A writing component with clear goals and integrated approaches seems to be lacking in both published textbooks and language teachers’ daily practice. In addition, the pedagogical research on teaching writing is a belated arrival in the field of teaching Chinese as L2 and FL. It started in the 1980s and has mainly focused on the theoretical and practical issues informed by teaching English as L2 (Luo, 2002, 2011).
Although several monographs and textbooks on teaching writing in Chinese have been published (Luo, 2002; Yuan and Qian, 2003; Yang, 2006; Chen, 2006), they mainly target L2 learners of Chinese (those who study Chinese in China and are exposed to the target language on daily basis), and a more typical Chinese FL classroom teaching in North America or Europe has been somewhat left out. In the field of teaching Chinese as FL classroom, to this day, the basic issues of what to teach and how to teach remain unclear and understudied.

Given the nature of Chinese FL classroom teaching in North America or Europe and the fact that writing is rarely taught separately and becomes the subject of a single course, writing skill must be taught systematically and integrated with the learning of other language skills. The issues of (1) where to start and what should be emphasized in teaching writing; and (2) what pedagogical concerns and strategies are relevant and effective will be discussed.
Establishing the starting point and learning goals of teaching discourse writing needs to be guided by standardized proficiency guidelines. Two standardized measurements are available for our purposes. One is the outline of the Chinese Proficiency Test (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi 汉语水平考试, or HSK), and the other is the proficiency guidelines by American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTEL).

The HSK outline does not provide clear information or a description about the tester’s ability in each of the specific skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) at each of its six levels, although it starts to test on the exam taker’s writing ability at Level Three, when he or she is expected to have mastered 600 words. However, even at Level Three, the exam taker only needs to write single sentences by filling in the proper words in sentences, arranging the order of the words provided, or by describing a picture. The same way of testing is used for Level Four (the tester is expected to know 1,200 words) and Level Five (the tester is expected to know 2,500 words). Only at Level Six (the tester is expected to know more than 5,000 words)—the highest level of HSK—a 400-word abbreviation is required after reading a longer essay. Obviously, HSK cannot provide a guide for when to teach discourse writing, although it expects the learners to deal with writing beyond Level Three.
HSK-Level Three: Writing Examples

三、书写

第一部分

例如：
河水
河上有一条小船。

71.弟弟笑了高兴地

第二部分

76.医院离这儿很远，我们坐（ ）租车去吧。
ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012), however, do provide a clear description of when and at what level the learner of a foreign language, Chinese included, is expected to acquire the ability of discourse writing. It describes the expected writing ability for a learner at the Intermediate-Low proficiency level:

Writers at the Intermediate Low sublevel are able to meet some limited practical writing needs. They can create statements and formulate questions based on structures. These are short and simple conversational-style sentences with basic word order. They are written almost exclusively in present time. Writing tends to consist of a few simple sentences, often with repetitive structure. Topics are tied to highly predictable content areas and personal information. Vocabulary is adequate to express elementary needs. There may be basic errors in grammar, word choice, punctuation, spelling, and in the formation and use of non-alphabetic symbols. Their writing is understood by natives used to the writing of non-natives, although additional effort may be required. When Intermediate Low writers attempt to perform writing tasks at the Advanced level, their writing will deteriorate significantly and their message may be left incomplete.
The Chinese writing sample provided as an intermediate level writer is below:

朋友：好久不见！我刚刚班到美国。
我很喜欢我听的家。我的家比较老，
可是我的同国是中国人。我的家只有两个房和一个。所，不太大可是和我在一起
很家便。我的学校离我的家不太远，很方便。你最近怎么样？你还
在家上学吗？你还在日本吗？你
工作怎么样，很忙吗？你有空的时候
你最好来美国玩一玩。我十二月
有要和一月不太着忙，要是你要来玩
我可以帮你订你的机票。美国很
好玩，所以你来一个星期。我又要
做功课，到那个时候给我打电
话。
Based on the ACTEL Proficiency Guidelines, a learner is expected to be able to write discourse at the Intermediate-Low level, and this means that the teaching and learning of discourse writing should start before then. Although no specific information about the timing of the starting point can be offered here, it is clear that it has to start at the novice level, or at least at the late stage of novice level.

Another indispensable factor involved in learning and teaching writing is written expression and the style difference between spoken and written forms. Learning about written expression needs to start from reading. Although a more formal and written style of reading will not be assigned to learners until the Intermediate-High level, learning of the Chinese written expression can also start from the novice level. Students can learn the written form of the vocabulary while dealing with syntax, sentence structure, and genre later. For example, the HSK vocabulary list contains only 150 words. However, by introducing the concepts of morpheme and word construction but without teaching new characters, one can generate and learn some written or more formal expressions such as 子女, 儿女, 师生, 友朋, 影视, 男女, 吃住, 饭菜, 冷热, 家国, 喜爱, 谢客, 读书, 识字, 院校, 名医, 名气, 再现, 上下关系, 大小不一, etc.
In terms of genre, at the novice level, the general practice of the field is to mainly teach writing dialogue and narrative such as a story about oneself and one’s family, a simple letter, diary, note, and email, etc. In the late stage of the novice level, simple advertisements are also offered as readings. Indeed, the availability of these learning materials further confirms the feasibility of teaching discourse writing at the novice level.

Compared with establishing the starting point of learning to write, clarifying the learning goals of teaching L2/FL Chinese writing is much easier, as the goals are universal for all L2 and FL learners. According to Jessica Williams (2005: 11), “L2 writing classes have two goals: to enhance the language acquisition process and to help learners improve their effectiveness in written expression.”
Starting Point and Learning Goals (6)

To further indicate the importance of writing as an enhancement of L2/FL acquisition, Zhu Bingyao (1997) indicates that: “The focus of a writing course does not lie in writing technique, but in laying a good language foundation. This means to emphasize the closely related issues such as training of basic vocabulary and grammar, paying attention to the organic connection between sentences and paragraphs, and being consistent with the manner of speech. A writing course like this ought to be a language practice course on comprehensively using Chinese characters, words, and grammars.” (写作课的重点不能放在技巧方面，而只能放在基础方面。着重进行基本词汇、基础语法的训练，同时要注意解决句子如何有机连接，段落如何紧密衔接，语气如何贯通等如此密切关联的问题。这样的写作课，应该是一种字、词和语法综合运用的语言实践课。) Luo Qingsong (2002: 17) emphasizes that: “The teaching/learning goal of L2 writing is to develop students’ ability of discourse expression. To be specific, it means that firstly we need to enhance students’ ability of using the target language; secondly we should be clear that the level of language ability means ‘discourse,’ but not correct sentences at the level of learning basic grammar” (第二语言写作教学的目标是培养学生的语篇表达能力。具体地说，一是培养学生的语言运用能力；二是要把这种语言能力定位在语篇层次，而不是像语法学习阶段那样写正确的句子。)
To summarize and highlight the aforementioned discussions on the learning goals of teaching L2/FL Chinese writing: firstly, teaching writing is an integral part of language acquisition; therefore, language acquisition is its first and foremost goal. Secondly, learning to write aims to enhance students’ ability to use Chinese in a comprehensive way; as a result, it has the function of reflecting students’ overall language acquisition and further facilitates learning. Thirdly, the objective lies in acquiring the ability of writing discourse, which ought to start at the novice level and will be continuously learned and improved in the rest of one’s learning career.
Once we are clear about the starting point and learning goals of teaching/learning Chinese L2/FL writing, some of its significant characteristics stand out: (1) the teaching/learning is an integral part of language acquisition, (2) it focuses on discourse, (3) it should start at the novice level, and (4) it will continue up to the highest level of the target language learning. Based on these characteristics, some of the pedagogical principles are generated, including: firstly, Chinese L2/FL writing needs to be divided into different stages with appropriate pedagogical strategies according to the respective proficiency levels; secondly, teaching/learning Chinese L2/FL must be integrated with other skills of language learning, and its relationship with other language skills is interrelated and interact on each other, but not unidirectional; thirdly “writing” is distinctive by setting its learning goal at the “discourse” level, and the purpose of achieving such a goal calls for rethinking and reshuffling our overall curriculum design and adoption of teaching/learning strategies.
According to Jessica Williams (2005: 40), sequencing of teaching L2/Fl writing can be addressed in two basic ways: (1) in terms of the learner developing writing and language proficiency or (2) in terms of phases of the writing process. We will use the former in our discussion, and roughly divide the teaching/learning Chinese L2/FL writing into two stages: lower-level stage (including novice and intermediate proficiency levels) and higher-level stage (containing advanced proficiency level). The lower-level Chinese L2/FL writing ought to be different from that of the higher-level stage in the aspects of learning task, methodology, and material.
At the lower-level stage, the central task of Chinese L2/FL writing should focus on the aspect of language application and improvement and the “activities can facilitate continued language acquisition and promote the monitoring output through the effective use of explicit linguistic knowledge” (Williams, 2005: 43). Learning materials include readings of the texts in chosen textbooks and extensive readings from online and print materials fitting the lower-levels, and “materials from the readings should be incorporated into subsequent output activities” (Williams, 2005: 44).

In designing writing discourse activities, the process and communicative approaches are applicable for both lower and higher levels, but more so for the latter. The lower-level writing is more fitting to use controlled task-solving activities with discourse output (Luo, 2002: 21–64); Williams, 2005: 44). For instance, rewrites (rewrite a dialogue into a narrative; rewrite a story by changing the subject, time, and location; rewrite someone else’s story into one’s own, etc.), stories (personal and family stories, strip stories, chain stories, and story completion), letters and emails to different recipients and on different topics, picture responses and descriptions, transcribed narratives from lists (daily schedule, summer plan, shopping list, etc.), scripts, and diaries or journals are some of the suggested types of writing for the lower-level learners (Williams, 2005: 43–49).
At the lower-level stage, monitoring output through the effective use of explicit linguistic knowledge can include grammars (such as the positions of time and place words and adverbs, complements, particularly resultative-complements, use of relative clauses, “ba” 把 construction, use of “le” 了, conjunctions, measure words, the omission of pronouns), differences between English and Chinese (such as differences in word order, relative clause, omission of pronouns and possessive pronouns, and sentence structure), differences between spoken and written styles (mainly in vocabulary), word collocation, knowledge of morpheme, and word construction.

Genre form and punctuation should also be dealt with at this level, but will not be a focus for it is mainly narrative genre being taught and written at the lower-level writing.
The higher-level Chinese L2/FL writing aims at both of enhancing the language acquisition and helping learners improve their effectiveness in written expression. Striking a good balance between the two learning goals is important and crucial at this stage of writing. The learners may need to “practice more authentic academic writings tasks;” therefore it is important that assignments reflect this need (Williams, 2005: 49).

In addition to the selected instructional materials for the class (textbooks on various subjects and genres), the instructor can adopt other supplementary readings (including journalistic reports, fictional works, movie scripts and synopses, business reports, legal documents, social science articles, etc.).
Although controlled writing can still be used as a preparatory strategy or at the early state of a large writing project, the approaches of communicative and process writing are considered more effective and meaningful and should be used more frequently. For instance, the instructor assigns his/her student an academic paper at the beginning of the semester, which will go through three writing stages—outlining and gathering materials, drafting, and enhancing and revising. While the overall planning and holistic organization remains the focus of the whole writing process, the first two stages can deal with more local and explicit linguistic issues, and the last phase can focus on style polishing. After the paper is complete at the end of the semester, the writer will orally report it in class as a way of “communication” and “publication.” Another publication channel is a school course site such as Moodle. By posting the paper there, it will be read by the writer’s peers as a real audience. Other types of communicative writing or “task-oriented writing” include: literary commentaries, movie reviews, summaries of outside sources, reports with analysis, proposals or plans, reactions to readings, case studies, and reviews and critiques (Williams, 2005: 50).
Writing at the higher level demands a closer integration with reading and translation. Reading provides the correct written style, vocabulary, syntax, and expression for writing, and it is also the source for cultural and subject information. Translation releases the writer from the burden of overall plan and holistic organization but draws his or her attention to the differences in written language and style between English and Chinese. Activities such as writing and translation after reading or writing that involves reading and translation can be helpful to improve the learner’s effectiveness in Chinese written expression.
Language acquisition at the higher-level writing should focus on a more holistic level (discourse level) and on written forms in all aspects. While the former requires more training in the smooth and organic connection and conjunction between sentence and paragraph and between paragraph and the whole essay, the latter includes the written style in vocabulary, syntax, idioms, and frequently used expressions.

Meanwhile, formal features of different writing genres should also be given adequate attention and properly dealt with at the higher-level stage of writing.


Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK-Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi). Available at: http://www.chinesetest.cn/gosign.do?lid=0


