

Chapter One

Introduction

Recent researches on composition have shown that writing is a highly complex cognitive activity, which requires that the writer engages in many cognitive activities, such as conducting memory searches, engaging in generating, organizing ideas and translating the ideas into written text. For EFL students, learning to write is a complicated and challenging process. In Taiwan, it has been observed that quite a number of students in senior high school become anxious and frustrated in English writing. When they are asked to compose paragraphs, they become panic-stricken and depressed. How to help senior high school students develop writing ability and enhance their writing motivation becomes a main concern for many educators. There are various ways to help students to enhance their writing ability, and one of them is using picture prompts.

Many studies have been conducted on the issues of the relationship between visual or pictorial stimuli and writing skills (Stewig, 1980; Sintra, 1981). Hus (1991) mentioned that picture-elicited writing tasks can help students in getting involved in the writing process, enriching the writing content and enhancing their writing attitude. Byrne (1998) also stated that pictures were helpful for writers to practice narratives and descriptive rhetorical modes, especially for the beginning writers. Chiang (2003) conducted a study to compare the difference in the writing performance between topic-guided group and picture-elicited group in junior high school and found the picture-elicited group wrote better than the topic-guided group. Liu (2008) also found that picture prompts had significant effects on the vocabulary richness in senior high

school students' writing.

1.1 Motivation and Goal

In 1960s, there was a visual literacy movement, in which educators found a favorable impact of visual stimuli on the acquisition of language (Cameron & Plattor, 1969; Collins et al, 1980; Golub, 1969; Lin & Fox, 1999). The visual stimuli are primarily a stimulus presentation to connect already existing language facility with ideas pictures in the form of programmed sequences and provide the stimulation and the involvement to write (Sinatra, 1973). In 1980, she indicated that sequential pictures helped students compose a unified piece of written discourse. Visual aids have a positive influence on language writing.

Moreover, Funderburk (1986) found that EFL high school students could learn the best from concrete activities. Picture can serve as a concrete stimulus for the formation of imagery and this imagery can be recalled more powerfully than words (Sinatra, 1981). As Emery and Sinatra (1983) claimed, pictures bring the concrete world to the classroom and stimulate the students to form immediate knowledge bounds with the visual imagery. McFadden (1998) and Olshansky (1995, 1997) agreed that writing was positively influenced by visual arts and that positive effect that drawing has on improving the quality of writing served as an outlet for helping students think about and organize their ideas.

Since pictures serve as efficient visual stimuli in language learning, more and more local researches and studies were conducted on picture-guided writing in elementary Chinese composition classes. For example, Yang (2004) concluded that the instruction with pictures aids was an effective instructional strategy for primary school students' composition learning. On the other hand, Chiang (2003) studied the junior high school students' English writing with picture prompts, claiming that

pictures also provided visual contextual cues for improving students' writing content length and creativity. Liu (2008) indicated writing prompts had significant effects on the vocabulary richness in senior high school students' English writing. However, few studies, if any, have been conducted on the effects of picture prompts on different levels of senior high school students. It is worthwhile to investigate whether the pictures as writing prompts have effects on high and low achievers in senior high school and to provide some pedagogical implications for teachers and educators.

Recently, writing tests with picture prompts have been widely adopted in Taiwan. For example, in many kinds of assessments such as the GEPT (General English Proficiency Test), the JCEE (Joint College Entrance Examination), and the SAT (Scholastic Achievement Test), the examinees are required to compose paragraphs by understanding the pictures, interpreting the sequence and transferring visual information into verbal mode of expression. According to a survey conducted by the College Entrance Examination Center (CEEC) in 1993, both college professors and high school teachers have held picture-writing in high esteem. One professor indicated the writing ability of senior high school graduates in Taiwan was equivalent to that of 4th-to-6th grade native speakers and controlled writing, including picture writing, should be appropriate for senior high school students in Taiwan. One might presume that pictures accompanying writing prompts will be beneficial in improving students' writing.

However, according to an analysis conducted by CEEC, the SAT examinees scored zero in the English composition accounted for 12.83% in 2004 and 11.12% in 2005. In 2009, over 15% of SAT examinees scored zero in the writing section. The increase in the number of those getting zero revealed a fact that those examinees had trouble writing English compositions. English writing gradually became a distressing

experience for those low achievers. However, if they were not guided by picture prompts, would their performance be worse? As for high achievers, would they write better with or without picture prompts? There are few studies conducted on the effects of picture prompts on the writing performance of different levels of writers. This study aims to examine the influences and impacts of picture prompts on the writing performance of high and low achievers in senior high school.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the effects of using pictures as writing prompts on the English writing performance of high and low achievers in senior high school. Specifically, its purpose is to investigate the influences of picture prompts on students' writing in content, organization, vocabulary and overall writing performance. It is hoped that this study can put forward a method to improve the English writing performance of different-leveled students in senior high. The following four purposes are highlighted in this study:

1. To investigate whether verbal-plus-picture prompts will make high and low achievers in senior high school write better than only verbal prompts.
2. To explore which aspects of the writing performance will be enhanced by picture prompts if picture prompts do help high and low achievers in senior high school write better.
3. To find out if there is a change in high achievers' and low achievers' attitudes toward English writing after they are given pictures as writing prompts.

1.3 Significance of the Study

It is hoped that the findings of this study will arouse awareness, among EFL teachers as well as material designers, of the importance of carefully designing and

choosing effective and appropriate picture prompts for high achievers and low achievers. Besides, EFL teachers and picture prompt designers will be provided with a reference, helping them to design and choose appropriate and effective pictures as writing prompts for different-leveled senior high school students.

1.4 Organization of the Chapters

With an aim to investigate the effect of using pictures as prompts on English writing performance of high and low achievers in senior high school, the thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1, the overview of the study, includes motivation and goal, purpose of the study, significance of the study, and organization of the chapters. Chapter 2 is the literature review divided into six aspects: discoveries and stimuli in prewriting stage, the effects of visual stimuli on language learning, wordless picture books for language learning, pictures for guided writing, picture prompts for different language learners, and research questions. Chapter 3 describes the methods adopted in the study, including participants, instruments, procedures, and data analysis. Chapter 4 is devoted to the findings of the study. Chapter 5 presents summary and discussion, pedagogical implications, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further studies on teaching senior high school English writing.