CHAPTER 3

THE STUDY

To explore the story-writing performance of Taiwanese college English majors, twenty stories produced by the third-year English majors from one national university are investigated. These stories are part of the students' normal school work rather than specially designed tasks. In **3.1**, the EFL learning background of the subjects involved is provided. In **3.2**, information about the context for writing is given. Detailed description of the writing task is presented in **3.3**. Analytic approaches adopted, mainly generalized from the discussion in Chapter Two, are given in **3.4**.

3.1 Participants

The participants are twenty third-year undergraduates enrolled in the advanced writing course in the English department of one national university. Six of them are male while fourteen of them are female. At the time of this writing task[2], they ranged in age from 21 to 23. All of them come from Taiwanese families, which means that

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[2] This writing task was conducted four years ago.

they speak Mandarin or Taiwanese as their first language. None of them speak Hakka or any of the Formosan languages.

In addition to further English learning in cram schools, these students have received at least six years of EFL instruction before entering the university—three years in junior high school and three years in senior high school. In junior high school, English writing activities are always confined to sentence-level "grammar-oriented exercises," such as sentence completion, sentence combination, translation, and so on (Jiang, 2002, p. 2). As for senior high school education, although English writing practice moves on to discourse-level compositions, the purpose of writing is often toward preparing for the joint college entrance examination. As a result, students rarely have the chance of practicing story-writing before entering college.

After attending college, they are required to enroll in the course of Basic English Writing in the freshman year. The learning objective of Basic English Writing is to acquire the use of complex sentence structures of English. Writing activities comprise dictation, journal writing, and exercises from the workbook *Modern English Part II: Sentences & Complex Structures* (Frank, 1986). In their sophomore year, they have to proceed with the intermediate English writing course. The writing practice of Intermediate English Writing is based on the topics covered in the textbook *Paragraph development: a guide for students of English* (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1990),

including (1) the topic sentence, (2) supporting topic sentences (examples, details, anecdotes, facts, and statistics), (3) enumeration, (4) cause and effect, (5) comparison and contrast, and (6) definition. The students are required to write a composition every week through applying what they have learned from the textbook and in class. In other words, they are trained for different forms of academic writing but not in creative writing. On the whole, these students do not have much experience in story-writing before the time of this story-writing task.

3.2 The Setting

The student writings collected in this study is usual class work of Advanced English Writing. This course is conducted in a computer-assisted environment. Each student, as well as the teacher, is equipped with a computer in the classroom. The teacher uses the computer as the medium of instruction. The students, on the other hand, use the computer as a tool for writing, revising, learning, and sharing ideas with their classmates.

Basic computer operating knowledge and web page editing skills are taught in the beginning of this course. The students are asked to design a web page consisting of their assignments and upload their web pages to the class FTP server every week. Therefore, the teacher as well as the students enrolled in the advanced English writing

course can read all of the compositions on the class web site.

3.3 The Writing Task

The writing task is to develop a creative story related to "penguins." Students

received the writing task in class, and had one week to fulfill it. Detailed description

of the writing task is given below:

1. Find three pictures related to the topic (penguins) from the Internet.

2. Write a creative story with the three pictures.

3. Design a web page composed of the pictures along with the story.

4. Upload the individual web page to the class web site.

It is worthy of notice that the teacher did not instill any knowledge concerning

story structure or story elements in class. The classroom instruction is mainly on

brainstorming and information-searching. Besides, no limitation is set on the

composition length. The compositions collected range from 300 to 500 words.

3.4 Analytic Approaches

The writing sample is collected through the class web site[3]. Each story is broken

down and numbered according to T-units (Hunt, 1965; Loban, 1976). A T-unit is "a

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[3] The pictures on the web site were removed at the time of data collection. Therefore, it would be impossible to show the pictures used by the students in this paper.

main clause with all of its appended modifiers, including subordinate clauses"

(Hillocks, 1986, p. 64). For example, the sentence "He stood up and he walked out of

the door" consists of two T-units: (1) He stood up and (2) He walked out of the door.

After numbered by T-units, the sample stories are coded by structural features based

on the components of the typical story structure, which is generalized in **2.1** and

reproduced in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2

Typical Structure of a Story

Exposition: Introduction of the (a) time, (b) place, and (c) characters.

Complication: A series of events leads to a problem, including three phases—

   (a) Inciting Moment: Breaking up the planned and predictable.

   (b) Developing Conflict: Intensifying or deteriorating the situation.

   (c) Climax: Bringing contradictions and adding all sorts of tangles until

     confrontation is inevitable.

Resolution: Involving three stages—

   (a) Denouement: Happening of a crucial event which makes resolution possible.

   (b) Final Suspense: Working out details of the resolution.

   (c) Conclusion: Bringing the story to some sort of decent—or indecent—end.

Coda: The writer's attitude toward the story may be expressed; practical or moral

     advice is given implicitly or explicitly.

The *exposition* through the *coda* makes up an episode. One T-unit may be coded with more than one category because it may contain multiple structural features. Besides, structural features observed in the sample stories but not included in the coding schemes are marked by additional categories.

    The stories were analyzed independently by two raters. Both of the raters are third-year students of graduate institute of linguistics of National Chengchi University. A training session on the typical structure of a story as shown in Table 2 was carried out. The definition of each structural feature was clarified and examples were shown to the raters. Inter-rater reliability for narrative structural types was assessed.