Teaching of Writing in Hong Kong: Where Are We?

Icy Lee

In this short piece, I take stock of the teaching of writing in Hong Kong, highlight key issues and concerns, and suggest ways forward.

English Writing in Hong Kong

Since the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, English has remained an official language and been formally referred to as a second language, though in reality it has, arguably, the status of a foreign language. This is especially true for writing because students do not have to write in English outside the classroom. Nevertheless, English writing has a significant role to play in education. Students begin to learn to write in English from kindergarten, and by the time they reach Grade 12, they are expected to produce essays of 400 words. To get into university, they need to attain a minimum of Level 3 (seven levels in total) for the English language subject, with writing as one compulsory component requiring students to write two essays of 200 and 400 words respectively in two hours. Universities in Hong Kong are English-medium; hence, students have to produce academic writing in English.

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment of Writing at School and University Levels

Hong Kong students' lack of motivation to write in English is well documented in the literature (I. Lee et al., "Hong Kong Secondary Students' Motivation" 183; Lo and Hyland 220). English writing serves a primarily pragmatic purpose—mainly to help students pass examinations and get into university. Typical English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classrooms are teacher-centered, with a much stronger focus on testing than teaching. Even for the classroom writing assessment that takes place on a regular basis, it tends to stress the summative functions of assessment (with a focus on scores) rather than its formative potential (Icy Lee, "L2 Writing Teachers" 231). Teacher feedback is heavily error-focused, which easily damages students' confidence in writing and kills motivation. The Hong Kong Education Bureau has been advocating for process writing for decades; however, a majority of schools have not enthusiastically embraced it. At best, the prewriting stage is implemented, which is most frequently reflected in the use of brainstorming activities. Multiple drafting that allows students to experience drafting and revising is not a regular practice in most schools, which teachers often attribute to time constraints and students' lack of motivation to engage in rewriting.

It can be imagined that by the time students get into university, writing motivation remains low. Without the pressure of public examinations, the practical value of EFL writing has dropped significantly. Based on my informal communication with experienced university language instructors, students' willingness to make an effort in writing largely hinges on the importance their major professors attach to written language. Language instructors have heavy teaching loads and find it hard to adopt process writing. Even when process writing is incorporated, it is not easy to get buy-in from students—especially given their lack of experience with process writing at a secondary level. To provide students with additional support in academic writing, writing tutorial services, consultation sessions, and/or peer tutoring services are provided at different universities (Cynthia Lee 431; Jones et al. 2).

While feedback and assessment in primary and secondary schools are dominated by a summative orientation, universities in Hong Kong have adopted outcome-based assessment that puts a premium on the use of rubrics to guide university writing assessment. Feedback practices vary by individual instructors: primary and secondary teachers are often expected to provide detailed feedback, whereas university instructors cannot afford the time to do so due to heavy grading loads and longer student essays.

Teacher Preparedness and Preparation to Teach Writing

Second language (L2) writing teacher education is under-developed in Hong Kong. Many teachers are influenced by the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie 55-81), repeating practices adopted by their own previous teachers, such as providing error-focused feedback to students. At the university level, there has been a move to provide more English for specific academic purposes and English for specific purposes courses. At my university, for instance, while foundation courses require students to write general argumentative essays, more advanced courses involve discipline-specific genres such as product design specifications for engineering students and business proposals for business students. Language instructors are prepared to teach general academic writing, but they feel ill-equipped to teach disciplinary writing, particularly when they lack knowledge of the discipline concerned and how discipline-specific genres operate in real-world settings.

Research-Practice Gaps

Although L2 writing research in Hong Kong has grown significantly in the last two decades, insights generated from research do not seem to have filtered down to the classroom. My review of relevant literature from *Web of Science* and *Scopus* has yielded a total of 64 empirical journal articles about L2 writing in Hong Kong over the last two decades. Notably, there has been an increased

amount of research conducted in the under-studied school context, particularly primary schools, that sheds light on a range of practical issues such as students' use of self-regulated strategies, technology supported writing (e.g. digital storytelling), teacher and peer feedback, and assessment for/as learning (Bai and Wang 6; Cheung 3; Man-Kit Lee 3). Research in the university context has yielded valuable findings about different aspects of academic writing, such as students' use of source texts (Li and Casanave 166), challenges of academic writing and coping strategies (Lin and Morrison 60; Xie and Lei 3). However, the research-practice gaps appear to be wide; although concerns have been raised by researchers, and in some cases solutions proposed and researched into (e.g., as self-regulated learning), in practice, viable, long-term solutions still seem out of reach.

A case in point is student motivation, which is a perennial problem in local writing classrooms. If we fail to motivate students to write, to have a real taste of the writing process, and to receive feedback that is encouraging, enabling, and empowering, and if we fail to impact schoolchildren positively at an early age before they develop ingrained fears of and resistance to writing, we are fighting a losing battle. Dominant discourses of writing in Hong Kong attribute good writing to grammatical accuracy, relegating writing to serve primarily as a vehicle for language reinforcement. Little wonder writing is a fearful and stressful activity for EFL student writers as they are bound to make tons of grammatical errors in writing. To further complicate the matter, policy discourses about writing (as evident in curriculum guides for English language education in Hong Kong schools) may send unhelpful messages about how writing should be taught and assessed. The following two paragraphs about process writing and feedback on compositions, respectively, are extracted from the 2021 curriculum guide for senior secondary for English language education (Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021):

> To handle time constraints, teachers are encouraged to focus on ONE specific aspect of the writing process at a time (e.g. idea generation, planning, drafting or revising). They should only ask students to apply the whole process when they have gained mastery of all the strategies along the way (39-40). [. . .] When marking compositions, it is advisable to provide students with comprehensive feedback on content, accuracy, appropriateness, presentation and organisation (54-55).

If students have only one focus of the writing process at a time (e.g. brainstorming or idea generation), they are in fact not going through the entire

writing process as they learn to write. In local classrooms, most teachers end up focusing on prewriting and making students correct errors based on single drafts. A good way to address time constraints, instead, is to ask for a smaller number of writing assignments but make students go through multiple drafting for each writing task (in addition to other stages of the writing process).

Comprehensive feedback on content, accuracy, appropriateness, presentation, and organization, as promulgated in the curriculum guide, means that feedback on each of these aspects is comprehensive rather than selective. This is contrary to good feedback practice advice in the literature (Ferris 7) that suggests teachers provide selective feedback on accuracy, with teacher feedback covering content, accuracy, organization, etc. in a balanced manner. When the most recent curriculum guide in Hong Kong provides the two tips cited above, I cannot but think that as far as writing pedagogy in Hong Kong is concerned, we are probably still at square one!

Closing Thoughts

The importance of school writing cannot be overstated because it helps students build a strong foundation on which academic literacy skills can be further developed. The way writing is taught and assessed in school also shapes students' beliefs and attitudes regarding writing, which have potentially strong influence on students' writing development. Indeed, motivation is what matters. There is a lot more writing teacher education can do to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to work on motivating students to write through engaging them in the writing process, equipping them with relevant writing strategies, and providing feedback that sees teachers and students share responsibility during the writing process, as well as feedback that fosters learner agency and autonomy. There is a long way to go.

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