

Problem Analysis and Improvement Strategies in the Design of Pre-writing Question Frame for Junior High School English

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Abstract: The design of pre-writing question frame is an important part of writing teaching design. However, there are some problems in the design of pre-writing question frame at this stage, such as ignoring the individual differences between students, low level of question thinking, no connection with students' actual life, no match with students' language ability, and the questions are not specific enough. This paper puts forward corresponding improvement strategies for the problems existing in the design of pre-writing question support, aiming at improving the appropriateness of pre-writing question support, making pre-writing activities more adequate and effective, and improving the effectiveness of writing teaching design.

Keywords: Writing Teaching, Pre-writing Activities, Question Design, Question Scaffolding.

1. Introduction

The pre-writing activities aim to stimulate students' writing enthusiasm, help students sort out their writing ideas, and point out the direction for writing. The pre-writing question frame is the core of the pre-writing activity. Pre-writing question scaffolds are pre-set by teachers based on writing teaching objectives and writing tasks, and are put forward by teachers according to students' background knowledge, interests, hobbies and language ability. Carefully designed pre-writing question frame is an effective way to stimulate students' interest in learning, diverge students' thinking, activate students' background knowledge and help students build new knowledge.

The pre-writing question frame plays an important role in students' writing conception and is of great significance to writing teaching. First of all, the pre-writing question frame can help students plan, sort out and construct the main content of writing. A good pre-writing question frame can activate students' background knowledge, drive students to extract existing knowledge and experience, and help students open their writing ideas. The pre-writing question frame is the catalyst for students to construct the writing content and an important guarantee for the smooth development of the writing task.

Secondly, pre-writing question frame can promote students to think about problems and cultivate students' thinking ability. The pre-writing question frame is the scaffolding for teachers and students to collide their thinking and students to think deeply about the writing task, which helps to guide students to express their true ideas in the process of exploring problems and broaden their writing ideas.

In addition, the pre-writing question frame is also conducive to relieving students' tension, stimulating students' writing motivation and optimizing students' writing experience. The clear question frame can make students more confident about the writing task, improve their writing confidence and avoid anxiety. However, from the concrete teaching practice, inappropriate pre-writing question scaffolding affects the actual effect of writing class.

2. The Problem Analysis and Improvement Strategy of the Pre-writing Question Frame

2.1. Ignoring Individual Differences among Students

When designing the pre-writing question support, some teachers ignore the differences of students in language ability, background knowledge, learning ability, etc., and fail to meet the different needs of students, resulting in the lack of flexibility and hierarchy of the pre-writing question support. The main reason is that teachers do not take into account students of different learning levels, and only design questions based on their subjective feelings and teaching experience, which makes some students feel difficult to answer the questions, while for other students, the questions are not challenging. In addition, when students encounter difficulties in answering questions, the teachers do not further build a support, resulting in students with weak foundation to give up answering. However, for the students with strong ability, the teacher did not ask questions, resulting in the pre-writing generation in the class is slightly inadequate.

[Example of problem design]

the writing section of Unit 13, 'We're Trying to Save the Earth.' in the English for People to Teach Grade 9 asks students to write a letter to the mayor, stating the current environmental problems in the city and making suggestions. In response to the frequent smog in the city, the teacher plans to discuss the issue of air pollution with the students. The teacher designed the following two questions before writing: What will happen to us if air pollution goes on? What can we do to deal with air pollution? Questions and answers between faculty and students:

T: What will happen to us if air pollution goes on?

S1: Sorry.

S2: People won't have enough clean air.

T: OK, so what can we do to deal with air pollution?

S3: Plant more trees.

T: That's a good idea. What about you? What's your opinion?

S4: I don't know.

[Analyze and improve countermeasures]

It can be seen from the question and answer of teachers and students that the effect of question and answer is not ideal. Some students could not answer the questions, while others did answer the questions, but the answers were too simple. For example, when the students answered plant more trees, the teacher did not ask, and the interaction in the class was not enough and there was less generation. Although these two questions can trigger students' thinking, due to the differences in students' learning levels, the pre-writing question frame cannot meet the needs of students at different levels.

In view of the unreasonable levels of pre-writing question scaffolding, teachers need to optimize the difficulty of asking questions and the scaffolding of answering questions on the basis of comprehensive analysis of students' writing needs and assessment of students' comprehensive language application ability, so as to provide different levels of questions for students at different levels. For students with weak writing ability, teachers can ask them to answer simple questions, and with the help of pictures, keywords, etc., build scaffolds for them to answer questions; For the students with strong ability, the teacher can increase the difficulty of the question timely, so that the students can think deeply. Teachers can also encourage students to actively ask questions to supplement relevant language expressions and remove obstacles for subsequent writing.

The author changed the question frame to Level A (What can you do to deal with air pollution?). And Level B (What is the environmental problem that you are worried about most? Why?) and Level B Two levels, and choose students of different abilities to answer. Level A is a knowledge and understanding question. In the process of thinking about the question, the teacher provided the publicity pictures of air pollution prevention and the support for answering the question as shown in Table 1, so as to help the students with weak foundation to better express their ideas.

Table 1. question scaffolding

What can you do to deal with air pollution?	
We can deal with air pollution by ...	
Another way is to ...	
The most useful way is that we ...	

The questions on Level B belong to the analysis category, which expands the scope of the questions from air pollution to environmental problems and requires explanation of the reasons for concern.

Aubato (2005) developed an effective questioning technique called the "funnel approach", in which the questioner first asks broad and very general questions, and then gradually concretises the questions to narrow the focus of the questions. Pagliaro (2017) also pointed out that when students provide too general information, teachers can narrow the funnel if they need more details. For example, tell me more about is a question that leads the respondent to give more information. Since it is an open question, it gives the respondent more freedom to get more details. In addition, teachers can "widen the funnel" to add information related to the topic, such as what other things, who else and what else.

It can be seen that funnel questions are questions used to

focus or expand information, and are a questioning technique that can be implemented in two ways: One is that the questioner starts with a broad topic and then gradually narrows it down, leading the student to think deeply about the question, effectively steering the conversation in a specific direction to elicit more specific information; The other is that the questioner wants to further spread the students' thinking by widening the "funnel" and allowing them to say more information related to the topic.

In the above case, when the student says plant more trees, the teacher I can narrow the funnel and ask 'Could you please tell me more about it? To plant more trees, what can you do as a student?' And other questions. Teachers can also expand the funnel by asking "What other ways can you think of to deal with the problem? Are there other ways that are better than planting trees? What would happen if we don't have clean air?" To help students broaden their minds, think deeply about environmental pollution and discuss how to improve air quality.

2.2. The Thinking Level of Question Scaffolding is Low

In the writing class, some pre-writing question scaffolds appear mechanical and lack analysis, creation and evaluation questions, resulting in students' thinking level is not high enough. Question 1 scaffolds cannot effectively stimulate students' thinking, nor can they arouse students' positive thinking, and students' enthusiasm in answering questions is low. From the students' essays, it can be found that the writing content is very similar, the language is not rich enough, and the viewpoint lacks new ideas. On the contrary, there are two problems in the concrete pre-writing question support, namely, the low level of questions and the low quality of questions.

From the question level, in order to make the classroom interaction smooth before writing, some teachers designed more knowledge understanding questions, while the evaluation questions and innovation questions were relatively few. The writing teaching process lacks the emotional input and thinking collision between teachers and students. Open questions put high demands on both teachers and students. Students need to deal with difficult questions, while teachers need to make appropriate responses to students' answers. This has caused concern among some teachers, who worry that it will affect the flow of teacher-student interactions. Judging from the quality of the questions, some pre-writing question scaffolds did not trigger students' thinking, students' writing idea ability was not developed, and they did not have the opportunity to express their ideas. The main reason is that teachers lack the design awareness of pre-writing question scaffolds and rely too much on ready-made question scaffolds, which leads to the development of students' thinking being hindered.

[Problem design example]

The writing task of Module 3 Unit2' This Year We Are Training More Carefully." is to introduce our school's basketball team. The teacher changed the unit writing task to write about his favorite sports and explain the reasons, and designed the following questions: What sports do you like? Why do you like it? When do you...? Questions and answers between students and students:

T: What sports do you like?

S: I like basketball.

T: Why do you like basketball?

S: It's fun and I enjoy playing with friends.

T: When do you play basketball?

S: After school and on weekends.

T: OK!

[Analyze and improve countermeasures]

The questions raised by the teacher involved the types of sports, the reasons for sports and the time for sports, which led to the students' compositions being very similar, all centering on these three questions. The main reason is that the questions before writing are relatively simple, lack depth and breadth, and the teacher fails to further guide the students.

According to the English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 edition) (Ministry of Education, 2018), teachers should be good at raising hierarchical questions from understanding to application, from analysis to evaluation, and guide students' thinking to develop steadily from lower order to higher order. Mei (2015) pointed out that only when teachers' questions have enough driving force, certain difficulty and prompt students to think, can they really inspire students' thinking. Fusco (2012) proposed Questioning Cycle, a systematic approach that uses questions to encourage students to consider different points of view and build a community of thinkers. It consists of eight implementation steps, namely, establishing class objectives and leading questions, planning questions, raising questions, setting aside waiting time, listening to students' answers, evaluating students' answers, conducting follow-up questions based on answers, and replanning according to students' responses.

Teachers can use the question cycle method to improve the thinking level of question scaffolding. First, the teacher extracts the main writing content, and then carries out the pre-writing question design. Teachers can change the Angle of setting questions, add questions of analysis, creation and evaluation, inspire students from different perspectives, activate students' personal experience, stimulate students' imagination and enthusiasm to answer questions. When asking questions in class, teachers need to reserve sufficient waiting time. When students bring up their own views and opinions, teachers should listen carefully and follow up appropriately to ask more targeted questions, so as to improve students' ability to express themselves and depth of thinking.

The author redesigned the pre-writing question frame in teaching. First of all, the original question frame asks students to say what sports they like and why. The students often use adjectives such as interesting and relaxing when explaining why. In order to make students think more deeply about the reasons for liking and enrich the content of expression, the teacher can put forward the following questions: Is there anything else you like about basketball? And leave enough time for students to think. students think and answer: I like basketball because I can play with other students. I can make more friends. The teacher affirms the student's answer and asks: Do you have difficulties playing your favorite sport? How did you deal with them? The question is closely related to the students' daily life, asking them to describe their own difficulties in sports and how to deal with them. When the student answered, "It is difficult to play basketball well. I practice with my friends." The teacher asked again: What can you learn from playing your favorite sport? Lead students to think about the value of sports.

During the process of questioning and answering, teachers should pay attention to the feedback style and encourage students to express and record different points of view. As Dougherty et al (2016) pointed out, students should record all the ideas they thought, heard or expressed during the seminar,

as well as the language used to express these ideas.

2.3. No Relevance to Students' Actual Lives

The pre-writing question scaffolds designed by some teachers have nothing to do with students' actual life, ignoring students' true feelings and failing to effectively stimulate students writing will, resulting in students being passive in the whole writing process, with low writing motivation and unsatisfactory writing experience.

The above problems are very common in the current writing teaching, and the main reasons are as follows: First, the question design starts from the teacher's subjective experience. Teachers do not regard students as the main body of writing, and do not design around students' actual life. If the pre-writing question frame is not related to the actual life of students, it cannot arouse the resonance of students, resulting in the content of writing tends to be simple. Second, the question frame has not been carefully considered, and the teacher lacks prediction of its possible effect. The writing content designed by teachers is not related to the actual life of students, and they fail to fully consider the possible effects of the problems, which leads to the failure of students to apply the language knowledge they have learned in real situations.

[Example of question design]

English for People's Education, Grade 8, Volume 2 Unit 4 "Why Don't You Talk to Your Parents?" Section B 1a-1e is entitled How to deal with study pressure. In the post-listening task design, the teacher asked the students to put forward some suggestions to relieve pressure for Wei Ming, the hero in the listening material, and write an essay. Wei Ming has a lot of stress. What is your advice for Wei Ming? Wei Ming has a lot of stress. What is your advice for Wei Ming? The student gave the following answer: He can listen to music and go for a walk. He can also talk to someone.

[Analyzing and improving countermeasures]

In the actual class, the writing output of the students is not so ideal, and most of the students have put forward similar methods to reduce stress. Teachers need to connect students' real experiences with pre-writing problems, stimulate students' interest and drive to complete writing tasks, and build a platform for students to internalize language and transfer knowledge.

According to Walsh & Sattes (2015), designing a question powerful enough to, drive careful discussion requires the following three steps:

The first step is to identify an issue. To test the extent to which a topic will engage a student's thinking, a teacher may consider whether the; student has the depth and breadth of knowledge necessary to address the topic, and whether the student engages with the topic because of its relevance, importance, or intrinsic interest.

The second step is to frame the question. In this step the teacher makes worded and syntactic decisions about the question. Strong focus questions have several important characteristics: (1) vocabulary appropriate to students age and grade level; (2) teachers deliberately choose strong verbs that activate students' thinking skills at a specific level; (3) simple and clear sentence structure; And (4) ask questions in a meaningful context.

Step three, anticipate the alternative paths students might take when thinking and interacting. In this step, the teacher needs to think about questions such as: How might my student answer this question?

In the first step to determine the issue, in order to strengthen

the relevance of the question to students, so as to enhance students' interest in the question, the author changed the perspective of the question from giving advice to Wei Ming to how students should deal with the pressure themselves. The revised perspective of the question is closer to the reality of students' life, which stimulates students' thinking about their own pressure. In the second step, considering the age and language level of Grade 8 students, the author chose simple and clear vocabulary and sentence structure, such as "Is your life full of stress? Why or why not? In the predicted response in step 3, the author predicted that students might mention homework or exam stress questions, so he designed the "When you have a lot of stress, how do you relax yourself? This question is designed to make students think more deeply about how to cope with stress.

It can be seen that the design of pre-writing questions needs to consider students' personal experience, emotional experience and writing interest, and is closely related to students' actual life, so that students can express their feelings in writing. After designing the questions, teachers need to stand in the position of students to predict their possible answers.

2.4. Mismatch with Students' Cognitive and Language Levels

In the pre-writing activities, some pre-writing question scaffolds are inconsistent with students' cognitive and language levels, beyond the immediate development zone of students' writing ability, and cannot be a bridge between students' existing experience and writing content. The main reason is that teachers do not grasp the students' writing learning situation. When designing the question frame, teachers ignore the recent development area of students' language ability, and do not fully understand students' background knowledge, interests, hobbies, personal experience, etc., resulting in the design of questions that do not meet the actual cognitive level and language ability level of students.

[Example of question design]

Teaching version of English ninth Grade Unit 2 "I Think that Mooncakes Are Delicious!" The unit writing task requires students to write a letter to their pen Pal to introduce their favorite Chinese holidays. Before writing, a teacher designed the following questions to guide students to think about the Dragon Boat Festival:

Q1: What do you know about the Dragon Boat Festival?

Q2: When is it celebrated?

Q3: How do people celebrate it?

Q4: What are the symbols of the festival?

Q5: Do you know any stories about this festival?

[Analyze and improve countermeasures]

The students were able to answer Q1, Q2 and Q3, but they had great difficulty in answering Q4 and Q5. The students did not know how to describe the origin of the Dragon Boat Festival and related stories in English, and they had little language reserve, which made it difficult for them to answer the questions.

Lu (2016) pointed out that fully understanding students' language ability and cognitive level is a prerequisite for teachers to conduct teaching analysis and set scientific and reasonable questions. Teachers need to consider the following two aspects: First, the difficulty of the writing content; The second is the student's current actual writing ability. Teachers need to pay attention to the difficulties in writing tasks and

the weak points in students' writing. By analyzing the writing portfolio and interviewing students, teachers can understand students' actual writing level, master students' understanding of a certain writing topic, identify the gap between students' writing ability and writing requirements, and take students' writing "recent development zone" as the design guidance and teaching entry point. The pre-writing question frame should play the role of activating students' background knowledge and bridging students' old and new knowledge.

In this case, teachers can help students recall relevant background knowledge, such as traditional customs such as dragon boat racing and wrapping zongzi. Teachers can also tell some legends or stories related to the Dragon Boat Festival, and more importantly, encourage students to delve deeper into the customs and stories related to the Dragon Boat Festival before class. The author removed the last two questions and added the following two questions:

Q1: What does the Dragon Boat Festival make you think of?

Q2: What are some of your good memories of the festival?

The first question leads students to think about what the Dragon Boat Festival will make them think about, stimulating students' interest in traditional culture. This provides students with specific and interesting discussion points to help them open up discussions; At the same time, teachers can build "The Dragon Boat Festival makes me think of..." To help students with weak foundation to express themselves. The second question encourages students to remember the wonderful experience of the festival. Students can use what they have learned to express.

2.5. Not Specific Enough in Pre-writing Question Design

Sometimes the questions before writing are too broad, and the specific direction is not clear enough, resulting in big and empty questions, which deviates from the goal of writing teaching. Students think from a vague perspective, unable to clarify the writing ideas, it is difficult to relate to their own actual organization of writing content.

[Example of problem design]

The reading passage in Section B of Unit 10 "I've Had This Bike for Three Years" is "Hometown Feelings". Teachers design writing tasks in the post-reading activities, asking students to write about their hometown. Before writing, the teacher designed the following questions: What do you like about your hometown? Can you write about it?

[Analyze and improve countermeasures]

This question asks students in a broad way what they like about their hometown. It does not open their minds. The design of the question is not specific enough, and the connection between it and the writing task is not close, which cannot effectively help students think about the writing content and organize the writing materials.

In the process of designing questions, teachers can focus on the writing content and writing method, and make clear what the specific writing content is and what writing goals they hope students can achieve. Pre-writing questions should always focus on the final writing output, and the design of question brackets should be specific and closely connected with the writing task, so as to help students improve their writing ability and achieve the writing teaching goal. The author has made the following improvements in teaching:

Q1: What is your favorite place in your hometown?

Q2: Why do you think it is one of the most interesting

places?

Q3: What can you do there?

Q4: Why is it a special place in your heart?

Q5: Think about local food in your hometown. What is your favorite dish?

Q6: Why do you enjoy it so much?

Q7: What is the most interesting festival in your hometown? Why do you think so?

These questions are close to the reality of students' lives, give students a clearer scope of discussion, help students come up with more details, and help students activate the background knowledge related to their hometown.

After the preliminary design of the questions, teachers can modify and optimize the questions, appropriately adjust the difficulty of the questions, pay attention to whether the expressions of the questions are clear and easy to understand, whether the questions are conducive to promoting students' enthusiasm in writing, protecting students' self-confidence and writing interest, and delete the expressions that may affect students' understanding in the questions, so that each question can focus on the writing task. To help students determine the content of writing and clarify the ideas of writing.

3. Conclusion

When designing pre-writing questions, teachers should fully highlight the principal position of students in the class, relate students' actual life, take into account the individual differences among students, give students more time for thinking and writing materials, build language and content support for writing, develop students' thinking quality, achieve writing teaching goals, and promote the sustainable development of students' English writing ability.

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