

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Motivation

Telling stories is one of the most basic human impulses (Helmets, 1994, p. ix).

Socially, stories carry the important function of assisting people in exchanging information and establishing relationship with others. Emotionally, they not only bring us enjoyment but also comfort our souls. Therefore, educators and language professionals have advocated using stories as learning materials for elementary and special education. Proponents suggest that story-based activities could encourage creativity and imagination, foster personality and cognitive development, develop cultural awareness, and improve communicative skills effectively (Bush, McCall, & Thompson, 1992; Garvie, 1990; Montgomery & Kahn, 2003; Paley, 1990; Taylor, 2000).

Among the classroom activities based on stories, story-writing was our main concern. The application of story-writing in classrooms has been studied by many researchers. Most of the studies have focused on exploring the ways of instructing

beginning level students in first-language contexts (Dailute & Dalton, 1993; Fitzgerald & Teasley, 1986; Lien, 2003; Pullum, 1998) or describing and evaluating the quality of their works (Ellis, 2003; Martin & Rothery, 1986). On the contrary, little information is available on that of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learners. This lack of research interest probably results from the uncommon application of story-writing in ESL/EFL settings. As pointed out by Cameron (2001), asking elementary level learners to produce a story in a foreign language is a very demanding task. "They are unlikely to be able to do this and the experience will be difficult and perhaps demotivating" (Cameron, 2001, p. 176). Moreover, for higher level learners, the learning tasks are primarily conducted for academic purposes. Therefore, writing training in higher level contexts often focuses on expository or argumentative writing instead of creative writing.

The situation depicted above also applies to the current English education in Taiwan. Although story-writing does not receive much attention in our English education, we are interested in discovering how college English majors perform in story-writing. For one thing, English majors have presumably "mastered the mechanics of writing in English" and have "gained a fair amount of experience in writing narrative and expressive tasks" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p.304). For another, they are largely exposed to a variety of Western literary works from poetry, short story,

fiction, novel to drama. Whether they can transfer the input knowledge into output performance is what we are eager to find out.

1.2 Purpose of the Present Study

To explore how college English majors perform in story-writing, we choose twenty junior English majors from one national university in Taiwan as our target subjects. For an advanced EFL learner, the greatest challenge of writing a satisfying story may not come from monitoring the micro-level aspects of the target language (i.e. spelling, grammar, etc.), but from conforming to its structural conventions.

Moreover, cultural background is often found to have a great effect on the writings of non-native learners. Therefore, in this study, the structural patterns presented in the student compositions will be analyzed based on the typical English story structure.

Similarities and differences among the structural uses in the collected data will be closely observed. Strengths and weaknesses of the participants' story-writing performance will also be discussed accordingly. Cultural influence on the writings will also be explored. It is hoped that the findings of this study may provide information about the story-writing performance of English majors in Taiwan and shed some light on college level EFL writing training.

1.3 Research Questions

There are four research questions to be answered in this study:

- (1) What are the structural patterns presented in the collected data?
- (2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the students' story-writing performance?
- (3) What are the major writing difficulties of these students?
- (4) Are there cultural characteristics displayed in the writings?

The answers to these questions will help us find out more about the story-writing performance of the participants of the present study.

1.4 Organization of the Thesis

In this chapter, we have introduced the background information, motivation, purpose, and research questions of the present study. In the next chapter, important studies concerning the typical structure of Western stories are discussed. Besides, previous research on describing and evaluating stories produced by students from different cultures are reviewed. Chapter Three provides information about the participants, the writing task, the setting for writing, and the analytic approaches for this study. Chapter Four presents a structural analysis of the collected stories. Finally, summary of the findings, pedagogical implications, limitations of this study, and

suggestions for further research are given in Chapter Five.