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Research on the Teaching Strategies of College English Writing Under the Guidance of Schema Theory

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Abstract

In language activities, English writing is a very important skill of language output; in college English learning, students' improvement in writing is important for English teaching. To apply schema to writing teaching, the teacher ought to first help students to activate the language, content, formal schemas stored in their mind, and then to elevate their writing skills by setting up new schemas.

Key words: Writing; Teaching; Schema theory

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INTRODUCTION

Schema, a very important term in cognitive linguistics, refers to an intuitive way of understanding and pondering the world. As a way of expressing and storing knowledge revolving around a subject, it is a general idea stored in memory, as well as a framework, and a script. The forming and changing of schema is the nature of the development of cognition (Ding, 2010, p.2). The concept of schema can date back to the 18th century, when Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, introduced schema into philosophy in 1781. He maintained that knowledge was

made out of those irrelative and disorderly materials by prior schema. “Only when they get in contact with the present knowledge will new ideas become meaningful.” (Carrel, 1988, p.85) In Kant's view, ideas themselves are meaningless.

In 1930s, Bartlett, a British psychiatrist, applied schema to psychology research. He considered schema as a kind of present-mastered knowledge by individuals, which can be used to assimilate new information as well as recalling the old information. Meanwhile, he noted that memory was not a process of memorizing mechanically or reproducing but a process of keeping essentials of events and then reconstructing details according to the overall impression. In Bartlett's point of view, schema is a medium of new and old knowledge, so it is a dynamic organization of the present knowledge and experience in people's mind (Bartlett, 1932, p.201).

In 1963, Ausubel, an American cognitive psychiatrist and educator, illustrated learning process with schema. He thought meaningful learning could connect new knowledge with the old knowledge stored in mind and thus expand the original one; if students lacked the original knowledge, teachers should provide necessary information to bridge the big gap between the old and new knowledge. In other words, our schema is our knowledge.

1. THE CLASSIFICATION OF SCHEMA THEORY

1.1 Language Schema

Language schema refers to learners' knowledge in language, namely, knowledge about vocabulary, grammar, syntax and semantic structure, etc.. In writing, it involves specific language forms such as collocation, grammatical change, sentence structure, coherence, spelling, and punctuation usage. Many students have been faced with such problems: In spite of volumes of vocabulary and

collocations, they still feel frustrated to find an appropriate word while writing; or they even misexpress what they want to say with the improper words. The reason for this phenomenon is that students ignore the use of words—they only memorize words, phrases and collocations. And that is far from enough. Thus in teaching, teachers should systematically analyze the differences between Chinese and English in rules, grammar, syntax so as to help students build a framework of language schema. Building a rich language schema is necessary for students to finish their writing assignment.

1.2 Content Schema

Content schema refers to the knowledge relative to an article's content. In writing, content schema is theme knowledge of man, objects, phenomena or minds as well as varieties of background knowledge such as society, culture, politics, economy, history, geography, technology, education, military and diplomacy, so on and so forth. Some students lack theme knowledge. They don't know what they are writing about in spite of volumes of beautiful words. Others lack background knowledge. They are so deeply influenced by Chinese language that they can not get rid of Chinese style in writing English, causing misunderstanding especially when they translate idioms and proverbs word for word.

To improve students' writing skill by content schema, teachers should enhance students' theme consciousness. When reading, they should be taught to take themes as their reading units. When writing, they should be taught to take themes as their focus. Furthermore, they should be concerned about their everyday college life, thinking and then writing about it, thus they can renew and expand their content schema.

1.3 Formal Schema

Formal schema refers to the knowledge relating to the article structure. In writing, it is the structural difference of different styles. Different styles embody different features. Ignoring these differences will lead to chaotic article structures. There are four common writing styles: Narration, description, exposition and argumentation. Generally speaking, formal schema of narration, taking time and space as its thread, contacts factors such as time, place, character, event and topic; formal schema of description, through senses, describes details such as someone, some place, something or some scene and thus impresses the reader; formal schema of exposition explains or explores all kinds of processes and relations, including the reason or effect of a natural or social phenomenon; formal schema of argumentation, taking an argument as its center, logically arranges facts, data, or authoritative views to prove and conclude (Li, 2014, p.128). The foundation and perfection of formal schema can help to make sure that the structure of an article is right. In one word, schema is a kind of memory

structure, including knowledge in language, culture, folk customs, etc..

2. SCHEMA THEORY AND ENGLISH WRITING TEACHING

2.1 The Significance of Writing in English Study

College English writing can reflect students' comprehensive quality, test their comprehensive English level and their ability to communicate in English including vocabulary, grammar, writing skills and the understanding of a text. It is a process closely related to students' whole study. This process involves not only language learning and expression but also the cultivation and exertion of varieties of comprehensive ability, such as logic thinking, analysis and judgment. Also, it includes students' mastery of knowledge, culture, folk customs, ideology and speaking habits of the English-speaking countries. As a practical activity of comprehensively exerting knowledge, writing is a subjective and practical subject. In language activities, English writing is a very important skill of language output. In many tests, whether home or abroad, writing plays a vital role in testing students' English skill (Zhang, 2007, p.230). Therefore, in college English learning, students' improvement in writing is important for English teaching.

However, we always find in examinations that despite students' improvement in English scores, their writing is still far from satisfactory. It frequently occurs that a college student, who has studied English for a few years in college and mastered grammatical knowledge and compulsory vocabulary, still can not write an English article to a particular point. Many a student feels it hard to precisely express what they want to say in an English composition. The problem of "I don't know how to start" is very common in English writing and many students say it's difficult to improve their writing. Writing has become an obstacle in training college students' English language skills (Wang, 2007, p.214). It is a problem to be solved in college English teaching.

A British writer Paul Davis holds that "writing is likely to be the least used skill in one's native language. Even in the most advanced society, many people have difficulty in writing". Good writing skills generally come from extensive reading, some special training and quantities of writing practice. The aim of English writing is to effectively communicate in writing English, so, in English writing teaching, teachers should teach knowledge not only in words, phrases, sentences or grammar, but also in the arrangement, paragraphs, ideas, content of articles so as to help students set up an article schema in line with native English thinking habits. Schema theory plays an important instructive role in college English writing teaching. Therefore, teachers are supposed to activate

students' language schema, then combine content schema with proper formal schema. In this way, they can enrich and develop students' writing ability and level.

2.2 Schemas in Writing

As a cognitive theory, schema theory is widely used in reading and listening teaching. In fact, it is applicable not only in reading and listening teaching, but also in writing teaching. Properly using schema theory is an effective way to improve students' writing ability.

According to schema theory, when a learner faces a new composition title, he will subconsciously collect the relative content schema and formal schema from his existing information to help himself set up a composition framework. With considerably rich background knowledge and experience in society, culture and technology, college students have already had corresponding schemas in their mind. The key is how to activate them. Activating schema means that learners, through some acquired information, judge what it might involve and meanwhile collect the relative background information from the stored schemas to write a composition (Zhang, 2007, p.230).

The knowledge stored in English learners' mind plays a key role in their way of absorbing and applying new knowledge. Thus, in the teaching process, teachers are supposed to activate the specific knowledge schema in students' mind so as to make new information more easily understood, absorbed and mixed into the content of the schema in mind. Writing is a complicated process of collecting, composing and processing all kinds of information and then expressing it in words. The first step of writing is to collect information and views related to the topic. This step, commonly called the pre-writing stage, aims to activate the long-term memory in the author's mind, including reading, taking notes and discussions. The second step of writing is to process the collected information and views in some logic order. The last step is the settled composition which has been devised for several times.

In writing process, there are three schemas involved: one is content schema—some background knowledge such as success and failure, Christmas, Internet, friendship, etc.; another is formal schema—stylistic knowledge; the last is language schema—the grammatical knowledge. So, the process of writing an article is a process of successfully activating and cultivating the relative schemas on the basis of making full use of the existing schemas in mind.

2.3 Teaching Methods of Writing Under the Guidance of Schema Theory

According to schema theory, when a learner faces a new composition title, he will subconsciously collect the relative content schema and formal schema from his existing information to help himself set up a composition framework. Then, with the help of his language schema, he finishes the composition. Therefore, the writing

process is a learner's thinking process of the interaction and matching between the stored schemas and the input language. If the author's formal schema is clear, correct, and colorful, it can increase his writing speed and the quality of his composition structure. If the author's formal schema is incomplete, the logical structure may go out of order. In fact, a vital way of improving college students' writing ability is to activate their existing language, content and formal schemas, especially the formal schema (Cui, 2010, p.161). Only in this way, can they write English composition with rich content and complete structure.

2.3.1 Activate the Existing Schemas

Writing teaching is a schema of first inputting information, and then the writer seeking new information from the information stored in his own mind. So teachers should act as organizers, instructors, encouragers. In teaching process, teachers must activate the students' existing schemas in mind (Wang, 2007, p.215). On this basis, students are supposed to set up new schema knowledge through volumes of writing, discussions, keeping diaries and store it into their long-term memory.

2.3.2 Set Up New Schemas

The volume of schema knowledge has an impact on students' writing. Thus, in English writing teaching, apart from activating students' existing schemas in mind, teachers ought to consciously help students set up new schemas.

In a word, in writing, proper forms should be combined with rich content, both of which require quantities of reading. That is, reading is necessary for writing. In everyday teaching, teachers should guide the students to read and accumulate and then to classify what they have read. Good writing skills come from extensive reading, some specific training and quantities of practice. That is why we apply schema theory to college English writing teaching—to activate the existing schemas and help students set up new schemas.

2.4 Matters Needing Attention for Writing Teachers

2.4.1 Learn Step by Step

People's cognition generally develops from simple to complex. So is the set-up of English formal schema. An article is made up of paragraphs in some logical order and a paragraph is made up of sentences in a specific order. From the perspective of cognitive development, the writing teacher should start from the relatively easy syntax, and then paragraphs, and last the article.

2.4.2 Consolidate Students' Schema Knowledge

In learning process, it is an important way to consolidate the accumulated schema knowledge. On the one hand, consolidation gets people related to the schema knowledge stored in mind; on the other hand, it helps to perfect the existing information.

CONCLUSION

Writing is a complicated process of cognition and creation. The improvement of writing requires a long time of reading and practice as well as the input and output of schema knowledge. The key to successful English articles is volumes of language, content and formal schemas being suitably activated. Therefore, applying schema theory to writing teaching is an effective way to improve students' writing ability. In teaching, teachers are supposed to activate students' existing English writing schemas, help students set up as many as possible new schemas, and thus promote the teaching efficiency of English writing.

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