The College English Writing Teaching Reform Based on SLA

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Abstract: Nowadays the College English course in China has played a significant role in improving college student's English abilities in reading, listening and speaking and translations, but their writing ability in English is not satisfactory. They are still likely to make a variety of mistakes, which is closely related to the status quo of current College English writing teaching and learning. After analyzing the SLA theory in which there are some hypotheses beneficial to the College English writing teaching, the author tries to put forward some effective ways to reform the College English writing teaching based on SLA theory.

Keywords: SLA; College English; writing teaching; reform

1. INTRODUCTION

College English as a compulsory course for the non-English majors in China has greatly assisted in enhancing the student's listening and reading abilities in English, but their English writing ability has been neglected for a long time. As an important and essential English skill, it is hard for the English learners. After learning English for many years since the primary school, most of the students still find it difficult to write an English article. It is hard to express themselves in English precisely because they can’t apply what they have learned into the English writing. This phenomenon has aroused the concerns from the college English teachers, teaching experts, etc. This paper tries to provide some effective ways to improve the College English writing teaching based on the SLA theory.

2. SLA THEORY

SLA (Second Language Acquisition) refers to the process during which a kind of language, except the mother tongue, is mastered intentionally or subconsciously through instructions or by nature. Researchers have been analyzing and studying the theories about SLA from different perspectives and dimensions since 1970s. The Monitor Theory put forward by Krashen, an American linguist, is the most influential one among all the theories. In the early 1980s, Krashen inspired by Language Acquisition Device Theory by Chomsky originates the Monitor Theory which consists of relatively comprehensive analysis of the language learning process, such as the language acquisition process, the language input and output process, etc. and the theory can be concluded as five hypothesis: The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis; The Natural Order Hypothesis; The Monitor Hypothesis; The Input Hypothesis; The Affective Filter Hypothesis. The first and the last two hypotheses play the most influential role in the College English writing teaching.

2.1. The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

Stephen D. Krashen believes that the language acquisition is a kind of subconscious learning. The language learners needn’t pay too much attention to the language formats. Instead they just need to focus on the senses or meanings of the language they want to express during the communication with others. While language learning is a process during which learners want to master and make use of the language through the studies and explorations consciously or intentionally in the formal learning
occasions or places. For example, students obtain the knowledge through reading the grammatical books or listening to the teacher’s instructions. In short, the main difference between language learning and language acquisition is that the former one means learning the explicit knowledge intentionally while the latter one refers to learning the implicit knowledge subconsciously. He also believes that acquisition is more likely to realize the automation of the language input and output during the language learning [1]. Language acquisition plays a more important role than language learning in the second language.

2.2. Language Input Hypothesis

Krashen believes that it is an essential way to acquire a language through the understanding of the language input and the comprehensible language input is indispensable during the language acquisition [2]. The language input provides the language learners with the language learning materials that are more difficult for them and slightly beyond their actual language capacities. He thinks the language teaching difficulty a little beyond the learner’s ability can have a positive effect on the learner’s language development. He defines the learner’s current language level as “i”, and language level in the next phase can be defined as “i+1”. The language input the learners receive should be slightly beyond the learner’s current language level but it shouldn’t be excessive.

2.3. The Affective Filter Hypothesis

It is believed that the language acquisition is closely associated with the student’s state of mind, emotional conditions, etc. in the second language acquisition theory. The Affective Filter Hypothesis attaches much importance to the teachers’ and students’ emotions during the language teaching. It includes some emotional factors appearing in the learning process and the learner’s own learning interests and motivations. The emotional factors are crucial to the language acquisition. When the teachers and students are both in the positive mood, the most efficient teaching can be achieved. Otherwise, the enthusiasm and interest in impairing and learning the knowledge for both teachers and students will be diminished.

3. The Main Errors in College Student’s English Writing

The English writing is the most difficult kind of English skill for the college students. The students not only need to have the necessary writing skills, but also should be skilled in the English use. So it is pretty common for the students to make various kinds of mistakes. As an English teacher, the author will list some common mistakes in the students’ writings through the daily teaching practice.

3.1. Linguistic Errors

Linguistic errors include the following aspects (1). The misuse of the infinitive. Some verbs should be followed by the infinitive while others can’t. For example, the words “appreciate” and “admit” can’t be followed by the infinitive. Sometimes the students are likely to regard the preposition “to” as the infinitive such as the phrase “key to”. For example, “The key to succeed is not easy to find.” In this sentence the word “succeed” should be replaced by “success”. (2) The misuse of the words. The students may have learned many English words. They know the spellings and the pronunciations, but sometimes they may not understand the exact meanings of these words. So they may misuse the words they have learned. For example, “The discovery of the computer brought about the information era”. Obviously here the word “discovery” should be replaced by “invention”. (3) Encumbrance and redundancy. Encumbrance refers to the repetition of the words which have the similar meanings while redundancy refers to the use of the words which are not needed in the sentence. For example, “The college students in the colleges should assume the responsibility”. In the sentence, the first “college” is redundant or we can delete the phrase “in the colleges”.

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3.2. Pragmatic Errors

Different English words have different pragmatic functions and they are different in connotations [3]. Some words are commendatory and some are derogatory and still others are neutral. The students should know how to use them in different situations in order to interact with others successfully. Otherwise they will make the pragmatic errors. For example, “She paid me a very charming flattery on my paintings”. Here the word “flattery” is derogatory. It means the insincere praise. And it is contradictory with the word “charming” which has the commendatory connotation. So it is the pragmatic error and should be replaced by the word “compliment” which is commendatory.

3.3. Strategic Failures

At the beginning and the revision phase of the English writing, the students usually adopt the improper strategies. To start with, they should focus on the content and the structure of the writing and mainly take the purpose of the writing into account. For example, what they want to write is a complaint letter about the service quality or an invitation letter to a party for friends. Different writing purposes imply the different layouts of the article and writing styles. Usually the complaint letters are very formal in format and serious in language style while the language style in the letter to friends is rather casual with some colloquial sentences accompanied by some descriptions and remarks.

4. The Status Quo of Current College English Writing Teaching and Learning

All the main errors mentioned above result from the poor English writing teaching and learning. Thus it is very necessary to have a clear picture of the status quo of current College English writing teaching and learning, which should be analyzed from two aspects: the teachers and the students. (1) English teachers. Firstly, some English teachers don’t attach much importance to the English writing teaching. They are more willing to teach the vocabulary, grammar and reading, etc, not realizing the fact that the English writing is a vital and indispenisible part. Secondly, some English teachers are still utilizing the traditional English writing teaching mode. Teachers just assign an English essay and make some explanations about the writing topic and outlines in the classroom just before the end of the class. Students hand in the essay next time and teachers make some corrections and grade the essays. Finally the essays are given back to students. After receiving the rectified essays, students just care about the scores, not focusing on the corrections made by teachers. This kind of teaching apparently can’t improve student’s English writing ability because it can only be realized under the teacher’s long and scientific guidance along with the student’s initiatives. (2) The students. Many students think that the English writing course is just set up for the exams. The purpose of writing an English essay is just to get a high score in the exam. They have the improper motivations. Some students believe that writing English articles cost too much of their time and the improvement is not so conspicuous. Others lack confidence in English writing and never take initiative to do the exercises about it. Instead they are resistant against the English writing. This attitude results in students’ avoiding English writing and prevents them from improving the English writing skill.

5. The Effective Ways to Improve English Writing Teaching Based on SLA Theory

How to improve student’s English writing skill given the status quo of current College English writing teaching and learning? Considering the relevant SLA theory mentioned above, we can take advantage of some of the following effective ways.

5.1. To Enlarge the Comprehensible English Writing Language Input

According to the Language Input Hypothesis, the learning process is the input process of English basic knowledge. And the input must be comprehensible. When the amount of the comprehensible information amounts to some degree, the students can output what they have learned in their mind [4].
As far as the English writing is concerned, first, input the vocabulary and phrases that are relevant to the writing topics every time. The English vocabulary is the foundation for the English writing. Students should know the changes about the single word, such as the change of its part of speech, its antonyms, its synonyms etc. During daily writing practice, the teacher should assist in establishing the database of the words and phrases that are often used in the English writing. Furthermore, input the comprehensible sentence patterns in English writing and set up the sentence pattern database. For example when we want to introduce a place, we can use the sentence pattern “it has a population of…,” or the phrases “be located in…” or “be famous for…” etc. Only after students receive a large amount of comprehensible input, can they output what they think in the English writing.

5.2. To Intervene the English Writing Process with Emotional Adjustments

According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, the student’s acceptance of the input information is also influenced by their emotions on the condition that a large amount of comprehensible input is provided. The main emotional factors are motivations, confidence and the anxiety during the process. The stronger their motivations are, the larger the effective input information will be. Much confidence also contributes to the information input. However, more anxiety will increase the resistance against the language acquisition, affecting the input of the information. So before the English writing, the teacher should adjust the students’ emotions. That’s to say, first, the teacher should increase their incentives for English writing, telling them that they can benefit a lot in our daily life from English writing, not just a high mark in the exam. Second, the teacher should make them have more confidence in English writing. The teacher should treat every student equally during English writing teaching. The teacher should encourage them to write a simple but complete article at the beginning based on the outlines and they don't need to use more complex sentences and more advanced vocabulary. When the students finish a simple but complete article, they may think English writing is not so difficult as they believe. Gradually their confidence will increase. Third, the teacher should relieve their anxiety. The teacher should make students be aware that a bad composition will lead to nothing and it will only make them make faster progress because the teacher knows their problems in English writing and will give them the appropriate instructions. Only in that case can the students lessen the anxiety about and the fear for the English Writing. Once they are willing to write the English articles under the teacher’s guidance, their improvement in English writing is just a matter of time. After the English writing, the teacher also should adjust the student’s emotions. The teacher can add some encouraging words to the article to inspire their enthusiasm about English writing, such as “well done!”, “a good job!”, “a perfect ending” etc. The teacher should learn to find out the highlights in the student’s article which can be presented in the form of PPT and give the compliments and encouragement accordingly to offer the sense of achievement to them. The students who have been praised will be inspired and other student can benefit a lot from it, either.

5.3. To Enhance the Authenticity and Interest of the Writing Materials

The paragraph above illustrates how to adjust the student’s emotion to lower their resistance against and inspire their enthusiasm about English writing from the perspective of teachers. Equally the writing materials and the writing topics also can affect the student’s emotions toward the English writing significantly [5]. The more authentic and interesting the writing materials and tasks are, the more interested the students are in it. The authenticity of the writing materials and tasks means that they should be relevant to the student’s concerns in actual life, especially those hot issues happening the Internet or social media, such as the microblogs, the Facebook, or the friend circle in the Wechat. In this age of information explosion, everything upgrades and transmits quickly, everything can become a center of attention if more and more people begin to focus on it. As the modern college
students, they have their unique opinions about the issues they see and hear. So if the English writing teaching can take full advantage of it, every student can voice their ideas through an English article. It must appeal to them. They are willing to participate in the writing activity to make their opinions heard. This is what the Affective Filter Hypothesis is about. What the teacher needs to do is to find out the hot issues the students are concerned about, design the reasonable and scientific writing tasks and give the proper guidance before and after they finish the writing tasks. So, the writing materials and tasks should cater to the student’s sentiment to arouse the student’s interest in English writing.

6. CONCLUSION

It is urgent to improve college student’s writing ability in English because it is an important kind of way to communicate with foreigners and to participate in the global issues concerning the whole world. So it’s not too late to reform the College English writing teaching which is a possible way for college students to improve their writing ability in English. As long as we make full use of the SLA theory and apply it to our daily English teaching practice reasonably and properly, the errors in the student’s English writing can be avoided and the status quo of current College English writing teaching and learning can be improved. Finally the College English writing teaching reform based on SLA will be successful.

REFERENCES


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