The Theoretical Foundation for Construction of English Writing Community in the Digital Age

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Abstract. English writing is a complex social activity which is regarded as the weakest aspect of college students' English learning in China. This study briefly reviews writing theory in each development stage, and concludes by analyzing that the post-process method based on relevant theory is helpful for teaching adjustment and improvement, aiming at establishing a good writing environment for students in the digital era, so that it can improve the writing enthusiasm of those learners with fear of difficulty in English writing.

Keywords: post-process method, relevant theory, English writing community.

1. Introduction

Writing is an important skill required to be cultivated in the second language acquisition. Especially in the modern society, with the emergence of SMS, QQ, WeChat and other rapid information delivery methods, writing is naturally regarded as a basic skill for successful communication. However, learners in China are constrained by language resources and ways of thinking, so their writing ability is still the most challenging part of second language acquisition.

2. Theoretical Background

The early writing instruction focuses on the structure of the text, believing that writing text is a kind of "product" that assembles words, phrases and sentences according to a certain rule, which means that the development of writing ability is actually to imitate the writing structure provided by teachers. Therefore, writing is often referred to as controlled writing or guided writing. Teachers in class often strictly control writing procedures to avoid errors and deviations in language use of students. However, overemphasis on correction will only result in learners' unwillingness to truly express their intentions and to undertake risks of making mistakes, which seriously hinders meaningful communication and fails to better optimize writing.

Since the mid-1960s, there has been a growing awareness of the inadequacy of controlled or guided writing. In addition to the non-ideal teaching effect causing by controlled writing, the influence of functionalism theory is perpetually growing. In this period, the writing instruction mainly emphasizes the functional components at the discourse level and focuses on the logical construction and arrangement of different discourses, such as the composition of paragraphs and the method of paragraph development. However, this method deviates from the author's intention and personal experience, and fails to overcome the shortcomings of the early results method.

Because of the long-term frustration with the product approach, educators began to re-examine the writing method. Under the influence of cognitive theory, a new method is born: process approach. This approach presents an idea that the author should be placed in the center of writing. And writing is no longer a simple linear process: "plan-outline -writing", but a process of "non-linear, exploration and generation". Based on this understanding, a typical four-stage writing pattern is formed: preliminary writing, drafting, revision and editing. Therefore, English writing is regarded as a behavioral pattern of cultivating students' ability of expression, discovering topics they are interested in and developing creative self-discovery. The change of teaching focus from teacher to learner also means that writing is done by learners themselves and is not controlled by teachers. Accordingly, classroom teaching provides a favorable atmosphere that encourages students to participate and explore themselves.

3. The Post-process Method based on Relevant Theory

Since the 1980s, with the highlights of socio-cultural environment in second language acquisition, language domain has undergone the so-called "social transition", that is the core of foreign language learning and teaching shifts from cognitive problems to larger social problems. The popular theory of cognitive learning gradually declined and is replaced by the more socially-oriented constructive theory. In the late 1990s, under the influence of constructivism, writing theory entered into the era of "post-process". Tirmbur firstly proposes the "post-process approach". He believes that literacy is an ideology and writing is a social activity. The writer needs to establish and reconstruct the standpoint related to his or others' subjectivity, conversation, practice and system, so that the writing refers to the study of social ideology. "Post-process" writing advocates the reader-centered teaching model which holds that writing is a purposeful and meaningful construction and communication for readers through the use of written language, and a tool for self-expression and social communication. "Post-process" writing method provides us with a broad theoretical direction, which transcends the narrow cognitive scope before and after writing.

According to Kalan, writing is not just a set of cognitive skills acquired through personal learning and taught by instructors. Because writing is not a single codifying process; Teachers providing writing skills as well as rhetorical situations should be above the class. In the whole writing process, teacher is a guider, organizer and initiator, while students are at the center and actively participate in the topic selection and even the establishment of the reward mechanism. When students encounter difficulties, they should turn to the "collective scaffolding" provided by their peers within the group or the whole community, not just the traditional authority figure -- the teacher. When teacher takes a back seat, the social rights and status of students will be put on an equal footing. As the course progressed, power and status will be evolved. Those who perform well and offer further assistance will be more active in the writing interaction, which undoubtedly create a new kind of power relationship. As those competent students grow into expert-like students, they begin to take on the responsibility of evaluating or marking the work of their peers, while the teacher serves as the evaluation committee.

The post-process method underlines that from the perspective of writing subject namely student to explore the influence of social and cultural environment, individual cognition and other factors on learners' foreign language writing. Learners should consciously strengthen their self-discovery awareness and ability, and explore the writing content from a variety of social phenomena, the surrounding environment, self-practice and other aspects, in order to preferably express their feelings and the purpose of external communication, so that writing will become a valuable and meaningful cultural and emotional communication activity. However, English writing is a complicated social activity. When students cannot get enough support from their classmates and teachers, writing is still a personal behavior. When students make important decisions about their own texts, they can only rely on themselves. In this case, writing anxiety increases, and writing interests and performance decrease. Therefore, English writing should be based on social situation, not individual. To solve above mentioned problem, it needs to be done by creating a writing community in which students can write and have ample opportunities to share information, exchange ideas, offer advice and, if necessary, enlist the emotional support of peers.

In the digital age, advanced technology, especially the computer network technology permeating every aspect of our social life, has restructured the way we think, communicate, and live. There is no doublt that learning style has also been changed greatly. Previous learning theory (behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism) solely focus on the learning within learners' mind, but in the digital age, the learning process can implemented and supported through the technology (e.g., storage and retrieval). The previous learning theory, facing the new challenges, cannot fully explain more and more complicated learning in the digital age. Inspired by chaos theory, network theory, complexity theory and self-organization theory, a Canadian scholar George Siemens, proposes connective learning theory, which is hailed as "learning theory in the digital age". This theory adds a new dimension to the theoretical study of English writing.

In the digital age, learning, and even knowledge itself, is shifting from the perspective of personalized cognitive orientation to social orientation. Therefore, post-process writing based on relevant theory requires to build a broad social interaction community, in which mobile technology promotes new connections, the construction of collective knowledge and the development of individual cognition. With the decline of teachers' authority and the increase of students' autonomy, a new relationship has been formed between teachers and students in online communities. At the same time, based on students' individual contribution to the whole community in the learning process, a new relationship has been formed among students, including the centrality and marginalization. In addition to the growth of individual writing knowledge and skills, more important contribution of this community is about the formation of social groups. Individuals learn from each other through "collective scaffolding" in terms of thinking modes, logic construction, structure establiment, and language use.

4. Conclusion

The "post-process" writing method based on relevant theory further studies and discusses writing itself and writing teaching from the perspective of society and culture. Although at present it has not yet become a new paradigm, but for students and English writing teacher, it can avaliably improve the effect of classroom teaching by using a powerful network conditions for learners to build a "harmonious and win-win" writing community.

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