

The Application of Constructivism Theory in College Efl Grammar Teaching

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Abstract: As the time advances, the innovation in higher education is promoted, and the College English class is in an urgent need of vibrant new life. The paper discusses the status quo of College EFL class and analyzes relevant causes, and under the instruction of constructivism theory, raises three new classroom activities including situational interaction, native language immersion and task collaboration for grammar teaching, in the hope of improving teaching efficiency in a more lively atmosphere.

1. Introduction

The booming development of modern technology not only motivates an efficient operation of all walks of life, but also realizes the leap of people's information interaction and mode of thinking. The progress of the times, along with the diversification of people's information and resource acquisition, has posed a great challenge for modern education; also, it has provided opportunities for the overwhelming reformation of this industry. As the most central section of talent cultivation, higher education needs to keep abreast with the times as soon as possible, and get rid of the shackle of traditional teaching mode; meanwhile, it should keep enhancing its own comprehensive quality to embrace new challenges.

2. Status Quo of Current College English Classroom Teaching and Cause Analysis

As a required course for non-English majors, College English faces a student group with relatively weak base, whose proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing hasn't reached balanced development. Though the classroom teaching model and the cramming method of teaching in the stage of compulsory education have improved to some extent, little improvement in the learning effect has been achieved, as students are still frightened to speak, often suffering from frustration in grammar learning. Such circumstance is mainly caused by the following factors:

2.1 Students' Insufficient Independent Learning Ability

Owing to the reality factor of a large population base and limited educational resource in China, Chinese students are exposed to large-scale class teaching since young. Because of the limited class space, flexible teaching activities are difficult to carry out; and over the years, a fixed pattern of teachers lecturing, students taking notes is formed. Imperceptibly, instead of thinking actively, students receive information passively and blindly pursue after the so-called standard answer. Upon entering the university, students may find it hard to adapt to the new teaching mode which requires a higher degree of learning autonomy. They fail to figure out their routine study schedule, the study plan for each subject and suitable learning methods; obviously, their competency in independent learning and critical thinking desperately needs to be elevated.

2.2 College teachers' Emphasis on Scientific Research over Teaching

Apart from a place cultivating advanced talents, the university is also a scientific research institution providing the country with technical support. Aside from everyday teaching task, teachers in universities and colleges also shoulder multiple tasks like administrative affairs and scientific researches. Since scientific research is considered a significant reference for teachers' professional title and performance assessment, there is a tendency that a certain number of teachers

emphasize more on doing scientific researches; not to mention that classroom activities require teachers to spare much time observing students' preferences and their short slab in study. Accordingly, they need to prepare activity props, think over appropriate interactions to match the teaching target, and motivate students to get involved in the activities; also, they are demanded to possess competence of emergency management. So this poses a tough challenge to teachers' comprehensive quality and teaching enthusiasm.

2.3 Training for Teachers in Universities and Colleges Stays on the Surface

Higher education teacher training is held every year, but its "theory over practice" characteristic restrains its function of practical teaching ability cultivation. Teacher training not only requires to deliver theories, but also should attach importance to the display of actual teaching cases and examples, and guide teachers to give play to their role as a walking stick in real-life activities--to build scaffold for students step by step whenever it is needed. In addition, language training is also an important part of college English teachers' ability cultivation. Considering that language keeps changing and updating, English teachers should be given more chances to polish their language proficiency, in an effort to teach students the most authentic expressions that native speakers actually use every day, rather than giving priority to the textbooks.

3. Theoretical Basis of College English Reform: Constructivism Teaching Theory

Constructivism is a conception of teaching that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which calls for a learner-centered and teacher-led teaching idea. To illustrate, the learners are the subject of information processing and the major constructor of the meaning of knowledge, rather than the object for passive input. [1] Students' acquisition of knowledge and skills is constructed on the basis of existing knowledge and experience, while the teachers' duty is to stimulate students' learning motivation, create a situation suitable for the teaching contents, remind them of the cues of connection between old and new knowledge, and organize students to carry out cooperative learning. Guided by the teacher, students construct new knowledge with existing experience, to take the initiative of becoming the constructor of their own knowledge system.

College English teaching reform is extremely urgent, which asks for joint efforts from students, teachers and the college, but first and foremost, the conception of thinking needs to be transformed. Teachers should walk down from the altar, and mingle with their students to get to know their living situations; they should try to make knowledge more alive and practical through ways that are acceptable by the students. In the following part, the author takes grammar teaching as an example, and under the guidance of constructivism theory, raises some ideas and attempts regarding College English classroom reform.

4. Reform in Grammar Teaching of College English under the Guidance of Constructivism Theory

Prior to grammar teaching, teachers should first explain the difference between prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar to the students. Prescriptive grammar believes grammar is fixed, so any rule-breaking behavior is considered incorrect; while descriptive grammar takes the modern language that people actually use as the criterion, believing that the continuous update of language has a speculative nature that there's no absolute right or wrong. In the two grammatical theories, the former is suitable for beginners who need a standard template, while the latter shows more respect for language's convention and changing of times, which is not only fit for upper and intermediate adult learners, but also accords with the innovative ideas of College English teaching. Therefore, students should be encouraged to step out of language dogmatism; rather, an open mind should be cultivated, and a sense of ownership of learning should be motivated. According to constructivism theory, and starting from the four elements of learning environment: "situation", "collaboration", "conversation" and "meaning construction" [2], the author figures out the following three new grammar teaching methods:

4.1 Situational Interaction

The criterion of truly mastering a language can be created by oneself. The major difference between native speakers and second language learners lies in that native speakers are able to use grammatically-correct sentences without learning grammar on purpose; they can use language flexibly, which benefits from the fact that the grammar has already inset in their thinking since childhood. For second language learners, even if they can clearly explain grammar, they might still make mistakes when using the language. That is why even though students recite the texts and words, and dictate grammar rules all day long, they still find it hard to make sentences with words so as to express their ideas. Hence, except for teaching grammar rules, teachers should also offer students comprehensible input and repeated practices, to encourage collaboration among them and simulate an immersion environment, starting from the use of language to form the memory of thinking.

In the beginning of learning grammar, learners can deepen their understanding and memory through repeated use. For instance, after explaining general question, the teacher can ask a volunteer to speak out the sentence: "I'm thinking of something/somebody.", and the others are required to ask him/her 24 questions using general question, such as "Is it a man? Is he a foreigner? Does he run very fast?", so the volunteer can only reply "Yes/No". If the students fail to figure out the answer when all the 24 questions are asked, the volunteer wins, and he/she will be awarded by increasing his/her GPA or a small gift.

The game can also be replaced by other exercises. If the teacher desires to practice the sentence pattern of "Are there any...", the teacher can ask a student to say: "I have a place in mind.", and writes the sentence on the blackboard and asks the others to guess based on the pattern. For example, "Are there any desks in this place? Are there any people/food in this place?" and so on. Besides, possessive pronoun can also be practiced (Is her hair curly? Are her shoes black?); also, it can be used to exercise various tenses by recalling some experiences or describing a certain incident. Upon understanding the mechanism of activities, it is suggested to combine with the teaching objectives for flexible application.

It appears to be a tiny quiz game, but actually, it is a sentence-making grammar exercise. The teacher aims at creating an appropriate situation for the students, allowing them to repeatedly output correct English through conversations and collaborations. Stimulated by the situation, students' memory for classroom activities will stay exceptionally alive and profound. What's more, by repeated practices, more in-depth understanding will generate to realize genuine meaning construction. Undoubtedly, it is more interesting and effective than simply asking students to make 20 sentences by themselves.

4.2 Native Language Immersion

In the context of this new age of Internet +, aside from the textbooks, teachers and students are allowed to gain first-hand high-quality resources through videos, news reports, and pictures on the Internet. By looking for authentic materials that comply with the teaching objective and conform to the young generation's taste, the teacher exposes students to the target language that native speakers are actually using to acquaint them with grammar's practical function in English, and develop their degree of sensitivity and sense of control showed for new knowledge.

For example, Super Bowl, known as the annual final of U.S. National Football League (NFL), always ranks NO.1 in the national television ratings. Every year, it attracts branding businesses to deliver advertisements at any price. It has become one of the highlights of the game with its all-star cast, which is rather innovative and tightly connected with the American culture. To let students sense the charm of imperative sentences, the teacher can download the original edition of Super Bowl's annual advertising collection, and decide the times of play according to students' English proficiency. The teacher can ask them to pick imperative sentences from the advertising language, and in the meantime, introduce competitions or incentives, so that the individual or the group who captures the most imperative sentences is considered the winner. This activity can not only practice students' listening proficiency, but also place them in the authentic language environment to learn

how native speakers use imperative sentences properly. Furthermore, the teacher can provide students with different types of products and encourage them to make creative advertisements with imperative sentences.

Apart from videos, the teacher can search for some original English “XX Notice” that closely relates to life and triggers students’ motivation, such as immigration inspection, hiking safety instruction, foreign cultural taboos, oral expression errors, etc. On the basis of independent reading, students are asked to fill in the blanks with fixed sentence patterns like “It’s important/It’s a good idea (not) to_____; Remember (not) to_____” and so on, to facilitate the connection between existing and new knowledge. It aims to enhance students’ reading proficiency, and meanwhile, to acquire related culture and make Yes or No sentences using their own words.

4.3 Task Collaboration

The contemporary renowned instructional design theorist M. David Merrill believes that “Only when the learner is involved in solving practical problems, activating existing knowledge to use as the basis of new knowledge, and integrating new knowledge with the living world could one facilitate effective learning.” [2] Language is the tool for communication, so the teacher can create a certain situation, divide students into groups and set a task; in such lively and tense atmosphere, students are guided to use the language.

For instance, in the process of practicing adverbs of frequency, the teacher is advised to divide students into groups of 6-8 members, and each team takes charge of questionnaires of different themes, like habits for binge-watching, the frequency of using mobile phone APPs for English learning, the frequency of surprising the intimate one, etc. The activity encourages the whole class to refer to teacher’s example sentence written on the blackboard when explaining the knowledge point, (e.g. How often do you watch dating show? A. Often B. Sometimes C. Seldom D. Frequently). Students in one group can pose the question to students in other groups and put down their answers. They can also have a brief communication on the relevant topic, and return to their own group’s data processing and conclusion drawing, (e.g. 40% of our classmates never watch Korean soap opera and Tom should never go to the cinema! It would be a good idea to invite him next time.)

Besides, by drawing lots, the teacher is suggested to guide students to work on party preparation or room decoration of various styles. Through visiting authentic shopping websites, such as eBay, Walmart or IKEA, students can go through the procedures of picking goods, adding to a shopping cart and placing an order, and accordingly, work out a simple rendering and present to the entire class. In the process of the task, vocabularies of goods, quantifier collocation, and the usage of prepositions that express directions can be consolidated. Moreover, by the direct exposure to source language, students get to know a series of authentic expressions of product description, shopping process and so on. During the activity, the teacher should walk about the classroom, and offer assistance when necessary.

5. Conclusion

It is said in *The Elements of Teaching* that “unlike a technology, in which correct application produces predictable and uniform results, teaching yields infinite surprises-infinite delights-from one moment to the next.”[3] Education is both a technique and a piece of art, which demands the teacher group to step outside the comfort zone, and join the students to explore into the unknown. Enlightened by the constructivism teaching theory, the aforementioned three categories of reform in grammar lessons integrate the four elements of “situation”, “collaboration”, “conversation” and “meaning construction”; it is led by teacher guidance, and followed by learners’ active output, which facilitates students to use their brain, hands and mind simultaneously, in order to eventually become the knowledge constructor and the dream-seeker.

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