

A Study of Tactics of Cultivating Senior High Students' Critical Thinking Skills of English Writing Based on the Production-oriented Approach

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Abstract—As an embodiment of the comprehensive language competence, writing is also an effective way of promoting students' critical thinking ability, and the writing process involves not only language usage but critical analysis as well. In traditional English classes, however, the cultivation of critical thinking skills is sometimes overlooked and the teaching of English writing pays more attention to the usage of grammar or lexical knowledge, in other words. A lot of students just write for high scores by applying flowery language without logicity or internal essay structure, and writing teaching is always one of the difficulties in English classes. In this case, in order to enhance senior high school students' English writing ability, arouse their English writing interests and train their critical thinking skills in the meantime, in this paper, the author sets the production-oriented approach as the theoretical basis, applying it to English writing classes and discussing feasible teaching strategies from three aspects: preparation for English writing production, process of English writing production and assessment of English writing production, aiming at providing a guidance or some new ideas for English writing teaching in Chinese senior high schools.

Index Terms—English writing, senior high, production-oriented approach, critical thinking

I. INTRODUCTION

In current English classes, when teaching writing, a lot of teachers focus on explaining grammar and language points. Most of them prefer to use one of the typical English teaching methods named TBLT(Task-Based Language Teaching method) to teach writing, combing reading with writing and setting a writing task before reading. As time of the class is limited, students often finish writing after class. However, there is no motivating stage for students to know clearly about what their present English writing levels are or what they can do to improve their writing skills, let alone training critical thinking skills. And there is a time difference between input and output in these classes, so that the writing task and other teaching procedures are sometimes disjointed easily. Also, from some teachers' point of view, writing is only a stage for writing independently and they ignore the importance of discussions and thinking deeply during the process. Students feel it difficult to write in English and don't know how to construct writing structures correctly and logically or how to analyze the writing topics critically. Their real writing abilities can not meet the requirement of the curriculum standard. Wen Qiufang and her team proposed the production-oriented approach(POA) based on their research of the current situation of traditional English classes in China, which integrates learning and using together and aims at balance input and output when teaching English. One of the biggest differences among POA and other teaching methods is that according to POA, students are supposed to try to do the output task; and after they find difficulties in output, the teacher provides proper input for them to tackle those difficulties, and finally they are asked to finish another output task. Up to now, POA is broadly used in almost all levels of education in China, which mainly concentrates on language classes, such as Chinese class and English class. In this paper, the author applies production-oriented approach to finding out teaching tactics of senior high English writing, aiming at cultivating students' critical thinking skills through English writing classes on the strength of the main teaching process in POA: Motivating, Enabling and Assessing (Wen Qiufang, 2017).

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PRODUCTION-ORIENTED APPROACH

In 2013, Wen Qiufang et al. proposed the output-driven hypothesis, which developed into output-driven+input-enabled hypothesis (Wen Qiufang, 2014), which laid the groundwork of POA study. After a great deal of practice research, based on Swain's output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) and Lantolf's opinion of language acquisition from the sociocultural perspective (Lantolf, 2000), the framework of production-oriented approach was firstly built in 2015. POA is mostly used in higher education and has recently been applied in secondary education, which emphasizes that input is the primary driving force of foreign language studying and output is both the basic motivation and final objective of foreign language learning, and the process of input aims at facilitating students finishing output tasks instead of

obtaining knowledge only. According to Wen Qiufang, the framework of POA consists of three main parts: teaching principles, teaching hypothesis and teaching process.

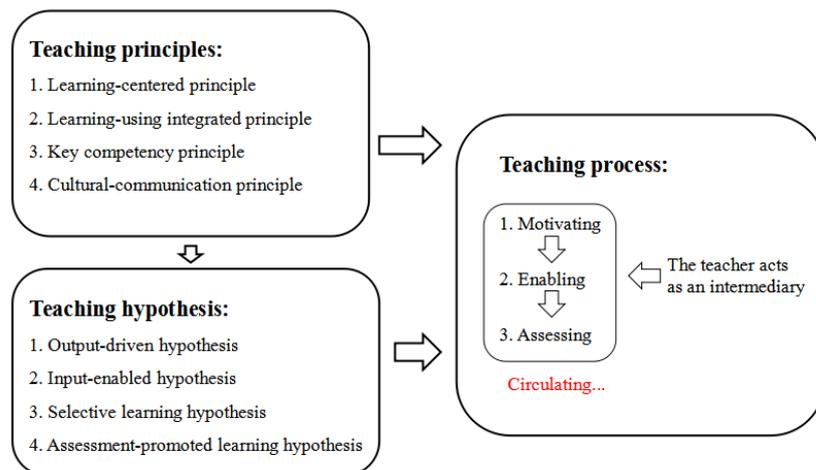


Figure 1 The theoretical framework of POA (Wen Qiufang, 2017)

A. Teaching Principles of POA

Learning-centered principle: Teaching in classroom should facilitate the occurrence of effective learning, aiming at achieving teaching objectives.

Learning-using integrated principle: Learning (input) means listening and reading, and using(output) means speaking, writing and translating. Input and output study should be combined together and all the language teaching activities should be closely related to each other, so that students can learn how to use English properly and correctly in their daily life.

Key competency principle: Key competency refers to learning ability, cooperative ability and transfer ability. Learning ability means the ability of acquiring new knowledge and new skills independently. Cooperative ability means the ability of cooperating with each other and seeking common ground while reserving differences. And transfer ability means the ability of knowing how to solve problems by applying the known knowledge.

Cultural-communication principle: The teacher needs to know how to handle the relationship between the culture of the target language and the culture of learners' native language correctly, and leads students to understand different cultures better and cultivate their cross-cultural awareness.

B. Teaching Hypothesis of POA

Output-driven hypothesis: Output-driven hypothesis highlights that output is the main driven force and objective of language learning, and there should be an output-input-output process in language teaching classes. In the first output stage, students will face some troubles and be aware of their shortcomings; in the input stage, teachers can give them input tasks in time, so as to arouse students' learning interests and increase teaching efficiency.

Input-enabled hypothesis: Input-enabled hypothesis deems that better teaching result will be obtained if the teacher provides appropriate input after output-driven stage, and input should serve the output objectives.

Selective learning hypothesis: selective learning means selecting targeted input materials and patterns to meet students' needs of output. The teacher should choose useful teaching materials based on students' output demands to instruct them to process new knowledge elaborately, in order to promote students' all-round development.

Assessment-promoted learning hypothesis: Assessment-promoted hypothesis emphasizes that in language teaching classes, assessments can be helpful to students' learning. Here, assessments include immediate assessment and delayed assessment, and these assessments will reflect teaching and studying problems so that teachers can make improvements timely.

C. Teaching Process of POA

And on the basis of teaching hypothesis, the teaching process of POA can be divided into 3 steps: Motivating, Enabling, Assessing. Together with each other, these three steps form a loop, and the teacher acts as an intermediary.

Motivating: Different from traditional warming-up activities which aim at arousing students' studying interests, in this stage, targeted activities are arranged for students to be conscious of the gap between what they have known and what they don't know and their deficiencies, so that they will be eager to learn new things to cover their shortages.

Enabling: In this stage, the teacher will provide appropriate learning materials for students and lead them to study selectively. Output tasks will be finished by students under the guidance of the teacher.

Assessing: This stage consists of immediate assessment and delayed assessment. Immediate assessment means that the teacher needs to make output assessments timely during the teaching process. Delayed assessment means that the

teacher should make assessments after students finish after-school output tasks and homework.

III. ENGLISH WRITING TEACHING AND THE CULTIVATION OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

A. *A Brief Introduction of Critical Thinking Skills*

According to the High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 Edition), the key competency in English refers to language ability, thinking quality, cultural character and learning ability (MOE, 2018). And thinking quality is initially put forward as one of the main English teaching aims in the curriculum standard, which means the ability of logical, critical and creative thinking and critical thinking is the most important part in English learning. As language is the external embodiment of our mind, we need to exert our mind when learning new language, and the application of language can also promote the development of our thinking skills. Sun Youzhong (2019) claims that language should be applied to develop students' higher thinking ability, hence, language teaching classes should not only aim at cultivating students' communicative capability in English, but also aim at cultivating their competence in acquiring knowledge, analyzing problems and solving them. He highlights the necessity of training students' critical thinking skills in English classes and the interrelationship of language ability and critical thinking ability, advancing the TERRIFIC teaching principle(TERRIFIC refers to target, evaluate, routinize, reflect, inquire, fulfill, integrate, content) to lead English teachers to make critical teaching designs. As a kind of thinking competency, critical thinking can stem from Socrates' art of midwifery, which means that leading students find out correct answers individually after incessant discussions and debates, and was initially proposed by Dewey as reflectively thinking, who believed that it was an embodiment of reflective thinking skills (Dewey, 1933). In 1987, Ennis Halpern who concerned much on skills training named it as rational reflective thinking, focusing on its rational characteristic (Ennis, 1987). As a breakthrough in 1990, Facione divided critical thinking into two aspects: cognitive skills and affective dispositions. And in the Delphi report in the same year, critical thinking skill was defined as a kind of purposeful and self-regulating judgment, which can promote the explanation, interpretation, evaluation, analysis and inference of evidence and conception(the Delphi Report, 1990).

B. *The Relationship between English Writing Teaching and the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Skills*

In Sun Youzhong's point of view, critical thinking LSRW activities (LSRW refers to listening, speaking, reading and writing) should be set to integrate language studying with critical thinking training (Sun Youzhong, 2019). English writing a cognitive process of reasoning, proofing, judging and arguing, and English writing training is inseparable from the cultivation of critical thinking skills. In other words, the latter can promote forming students' logicity of English writing, while the former can examine whether their critical thinking skills are improved or not. Character is the carrier of language, which is the carrier of thoughts. English writing is one of the high-intensive thinking activities. Our brains are working the whole time from we plan to write what and how to write to finish writing, so that we shouldn't overlook the necessity of critical thinking when we write.

In a lot of English writing classes in China, however, many English teachers only pay much attention to students' application of words, phrases and grammar, but ignore the importance of critical thinking. In this case, a lot of Chinese students just recite model essays and apply them mechanically, which loses the initial idea of English writing teaching in the curriculum standard. According to the High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 Edition), senior high stated English writing types in China consist of narration, exposition, argumentation etc.. The topics of these writing types vary from one to another, which are closely related to hot topics or current news in the domestic and overseas. But it is reported that so many students don't understand the writing materials very well and they haven't accumulated enough knowledge or sources. As a result, they don't know how to express their opinions or which evidence can underpin their viewpoints, and finally deviate from the core theme. Another main problem is that affected by the traditional exam-oriented education in China, lots of students fall into the habit of estimating their English proficiency by scores only. Recitation and imitation become the popular ways for them when facing English writing courses or tests. And yet there is no extra time for them to think independently or critically about the deep implication of the writing materials or the internal structure of essays they have wrote. Moreover, some still apply their Chinese thinking habits to expressing opinions and just translate them into English, which is totally false and will do harm to their development of English thinking habits.

IV. THE APPLICATION OF PRODUCTION-ORIENTED APPROACH IN ENGLISH WRITING CLASSES

A. *Preparation for English Writing Production*

Before the English writing class, the teacher needs to make full preparation so as to control the output-input-output process. Firstly, teaching materials and writing topics that can motivate students, arousing their interests and meeting their mental needs should be chosen, and the teacher must make sure that what he/ she chooses should be of speculation and extensibility. Next, after choosing teaching materials and writing topics, the teacher should carefully make the teaching design and organize output and input English writing tasks. In terms of the actual teaching content and in consideration of the differentiation of students' language ability and thinking quality, targeted tasks should be arranged which can help improve their grasp and understanding of new knowledge points. As for teaching aims, the teacher must combine cultivating language competence and training critical thinking skills together, setting macro teaching

objectives as a guidance of the whole class and dividing them into several micro hierarchical teaching objectives which will be penetrated into each teaching step and achieved one by one. And Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives can be applied to make micro hierarchical teaching objectives of an English writing class, which has been widely used in critical reading and listening classes and has brought notable results. In Bloom's opinion, the process of cognition is composed of two main parts: primary cognition and advanced cognition (Bloom, 1956). And each part consists of three procedures: primary cognition- Remembering, Understanding and Applying; advanced cognition: Analyzing, evaluating and creating (Bloom, 1956). And learners' critical thinking skills will be improved accompanied by Bloom's Taxonomy from primary cognition to advanced cognition, from Remembering to Creating. Furthermore, in order to cultivate critical thinking skills in English writing classes, the specific assessing criteria of writing should be based on the critical thinking competency standard, which refers to truth-seeking, open-mindedness, analyticity, systematicity, self-confidence, inquisitiveness and maturity (The Delphi Report, 1990), as mostly students' problems in English writing can be attributed to their weak capability of interpreting, analyzing, inferring, evaluating, explaining and self-regulating. Whether the arguments in what we write clear or not will generally depend on the breadth and depth of our minds, and only internal logicity of our thoughts will ensure the consistency of our arguments.

B. Process of English Writing Production

Writing is one of the most important outputs in English studying and the process of English writing production involves two main aspects: Motivating and Enabling. During this process, the teacher only acts as a guide, an intermediary or scaffolding, and he/ she should consider each student's present level of English and their cognitive development, while students are the center of the class to find out and ponder the questions deeply. In the Motivating stage, the teacher should provide a communicative scene for students and introduce the topic to them, some discourses related to the topic are presented to the whole class and students are asked to read them quickly. Subsequently, critical questions of each discourse are set and students are led to think about their answers independently. On the basis of this, classroom discussions or debates can be arranged for motivating, and each student should be given the chance to express their own ideas and others can make comments on his/ her oral presentation. After this stage, students will find their drawbacks in some respects, for instance, his/ her vocabulary is limited, or the answer is illogical or deviates from the core theme etc.. And in this circumstance they will arouse learning interests and be aware of learning from others' strong points to offset their weakness. And after that, the learning objectives (macro objectives) and what tasks they need to finish in this class will be presented to them so that they can know more clearly about what they are going to learn and what aims they will achieve after the class. For example, firstly, they should make judgement independently before writing; then, they need to conclude their ideas based on the truth; next, self-inspection is arranged for making sure whether the process of inference between facts and opinions is correct or not; lastly, they should make accurate decisions on the strength of the inference and begin to write. Following the four steps can students know how to organize their thoughts and write an essay logically. In the Enabling stage, the teacher introduces the output writing task in detail and has students understand what they should do in each writing step of the task. They need to gather evidence, express ideas and explain their arguments from different perspectives. Meanwhile, the teacher guides them to integrate and distinguish useful materials they have found and learn selectively, so as to make them think independently about the writing topic and offer them more chances to discover and analyze those problems. It is worth noting that no matter what materials they choose or whether suitable or not their choices are, the teacher must provide examinations in time, making sure that students' writing process is monitored stealthily. Then students are supposed to write based on what they have found and their own thoughts about the topic, in this way can students apply their learning outcomes to the output writing task.

C. Assessment of English Writing Production

In traditional English writing classes, quantitative assessment is widely applied, which however is so rigid that students can hardly obtain a sense of achievement after writing. Appropriate and timely assessments and feedback are valid for motivating students to relearn and rethink about what they have acquired. According to production-oriented approach, various assessments are used in different stages of writing. Initially, from the microscopic angle, immediate assessment and delayed assessment can merge together. As for immediate assessment, during the writing class, the teacher should provide feedback in time for students, finding out their syntactic or grammatical problems in language usage and asking them to make modifications, so as to lead them to accomplish the output writing task of high-quality. Also, after students finish the writing task, some representatives are supposed to show their essays to all the class, and other students should assess his/ her presentations on the basis of the English writing assessment standard (origins from the critical thinking standard) which the teacher has prepared before the class. Meanwhile, during the process of peer response, the teacher can offer help and support to them to some extent. According to delayed assessment, as the time of the class is limited, students should revise their drafts after class based on suggestions given by their teacher and classmates and hand the final edition to the teacher. Then the teacher makes delayed assessments and collects those common problems in writing from his/ her students' essays for further teaching in the next class. And from the macroscopic angle, formative assessment and summative assessment should be mixed together so that the teacher can make accurate evaluations and analysis about students' overall competency of knowledge application. During the formative assessment, the teacher should inspect every student's whole process of Motivating and Enabling, and

provide timely guidance and correction for students' writing shortcomings and their attitudes towards writing English essays. And at the end of the term, summative assessment can be used to examine whether students can skillfully use what they have learned in English writing classes or not. And if permitting, some scales such as CCTST (California Critical Thinking Skills Test) and CCTDI (Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory) should also be applied to assess students' changes in critical thinking scientifically.

V. CONCLUSION

POA has its obvious advantages in English writing classes, because in POA class, guided by the output-input-output process, students will obtain much driven force and realize their drawbacks in writing, so that they can learn what and how to write more purposefully. During the process, the teacher usually plays a role of an intermediary and provides corresponding "scaffolding" for them, in this way can they study selectively and enhance their learning efficiency, and remain independent and critical thinking to some extent at the same time. In the Motivating stage, different from the traditional Warming-up stage, the teacher firstly presents the communicative scene, the writing topic and the first writing task to students who will try their best to finish the task before learning, so as to provoke their thinking of the topic. After being aware of their writing defects, students will be more interested in what they are going to study and it is time for the teacher to explain the teaching aims they will achieve and the second output task they will finish at the end of the class. In the Enabling stage, students are the center of the class and are supposed to study selectively surrounding the writing topic, while the teacher offers proper "scaffolding" to them and points out problems that they need to make corrections. Discussions or debates should be set to trigger collision of thoughts. And in the Assessing stage, various assessments will be used in different writing steps. In general, the application of POA in English writing classes aiming at cultivating critical thinking skills still has a long way to go, which remains to promote further.

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