Cultivation of Academic Literacy in Academic English Writing: From the Perspective of Collaborative Teaching Methodology

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Abstract. This paper, through the introduction of the concept of academic literacy, examines specific operation modes and defects of academic writing intervention from the perspective of curriculum setup. The paper holds that “academic literacy” paradigm, which advocates the combination of language skills with subject contents and focuses on writing practices, is of great enlightening significance to the teaching of academic English writing in Chinese universities and colleges.

Keywords: English for academic purposes, academic literacy, collaborative teaching methodology.

Introduction

English for Academic purposes (EAP) involves the training of linguistic skills oriented to college and university students for the employment of English for professional study or academic research. More than 50 years’ research has been made on EAP both in China and abroad, and dual changes of paradigm and perspective have taken place. The learners’ English cultural literacy and language skill teaching are no longer a major concern while EAP teaching process and learners’ demand for subjects have become the new highlights in the research. Under such circumstances, the academic literacy paradigm, together with the “language + subject” as the framework, has taken its shape in applied linguistics. However, the phenomena that language skills outweigh humanistic attribute and that China’s English writing teaching is divorced from subjects are long-standing. Therefore, it has become a top priority for Chinese universities and colleges to carry out academic literacy education based on the framework of “language + subject”.

I. Academic Literacy and Major Teaching Models

i. Academic Literacy. Academic literacy is normally employed only for writing teaching, but the extension of its concept goes far beyond the ability to do academic writing. Academic literacy refers to all abilities to communicate fluently in the academic discourse community, including the ability to read and
evaluate information and explore, and the ability to create knowledge through conversation and writing presentation.

To begin with, academic literacy must be acquired by all students exposed to new academic environment, including native and non-native English speakers. Secondly, it cannot be acquired outside the discourse community, indicating that specialists in the discourse community need to provide guidance and support to all students.

**ii. Current Major Teaching Model and Defects.** At present, the cultivation of academic literacy provided by many Chinese universities is usually limited to the pure imitation of foreign teaching model: it may first involve the EAP curriculum, generally dedicated to L2 students as a make-up for the low score in an English entrance test; on the other hand, it may offer development curriculum for all students. The model has its defects: firstly, EAP, which is open to students in all subjects, focuses on linguistic features, such as grammar, structure and style. Though the method following conventional grammar teaching can help beginners enhance their understanding of “universal grammatical and lexical core” in academic discourse, students are not able to communicate in their own subject field. Secondly, the function and power related to the academic literacy education is not properly distributed. In the present system, teachers, acting as the specialists in community discourse and communication, are not obligated to participate in the cultivation of students’ academic literacy.

**II. Learners’ Literacy Demands and Subject Support**

Writing is indeed the ultimate product of the complex literacy process. The complete writing process includes the identification of relevant source information, the evaluation of the source information, the synthesis of the information as the parameters, and the presentation of them in a logical and coherent way. However, the first three steps, namely “reading-to-write” (Dobson & Feak, 2001), are usually neglected in the present college writing teaching while the last step, text presentation, becomes the only focus. When the teaching is oriented towards all students, teachers are not able to truly implement the complex “reading-to-write” steps. Strictly speaking, the processes of identifying and evaluating source information can only be learned from the knowledge of a specific discipline and the social context of a specific task solely supported by subject professionals.

What learners need is the complete teaching processes of academic literacy discussed above. However, due to institutional reasons, subject specialists often fail to provide such supports. Thus, students’ need for academic literacy is only be met by two ways: the writing guidelines for subject paper and teachers’ feedback on their assignments. Although helpful, the former has a dull model that cannot cultivate critical thinking in learners. On the other hand, although seemingly a teaching methodology that can teach students according to their aptitude, the latter, as shown in the studies, has limited value if students fail to make full use of teachers’ feedback or such a feedback is difficult for learners to understand.
III. Disciplinarily Collaborative Teaching Methodology

How can the serious shortage of supply and demand in present academic literacy teaching be solved? The first step is to launch teacher training, which helps teachers understand the complexity of academic literacy and their roles in student learning. Such training can change teachers’ inherent thought and offer the enlightenment that the academic literacy teaching means the integration of teach methodology into their regular teaching and evaluation activities rather than as a mass of extra work. Secondly, the cooperation between EAP teachers and subject specialists can greatly enhance students’ academic literacy.

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Table 1. Classification of Academic English Writing Paradigm.

IV. Academic Writing Intervention

i. Collaboration with subject specialists. First of all, college teachers should identify the subject type fit to meet the teaching and students’ needs, and provide the subject specialists with written texts that have been assessed and accompanied by feedbacks. Then, teachers provide the subject specialists with a set of model texts of high and low scores respectively as well as their marks and feedbacks. The task of EAP course specialists is to analyze these model texts, identify discourse features and patterns that can make a difference on text quality, followed by a detailed analysis on rhetoric and linguistic features in the process.

ii. Curriculum implementation and evaluation. According to relevant theories of sociolinguistics, the teaching intervention mode of academic writing should aim itself at establishing and reconstructing a learning community with learners’ identities as the core. At the seminars, learners need to experience the following sections together with teachers and subject specialists: (1) reading section, offered with certain high-scored text paradigms accompanied by appraisals; (2) practice section, provided with one high-scored text paradigm, the appraisal of which should be completed by students, (3) observation section, provided with students being requested to list the characteristics of successful paradigms they have observed, (4) “re-reading” section, with certain low-scored text paradigms accompanied by appraisal, and (5) reflection
section: by cultivating learner’s critically thinking skills through the comparison of high and low scored paradigms, the “deconstruction” and “co-construction” phases upheld by teachers is shifted to the “self-construction” phase. In the deconstruction phase, the student group analyzes and discusses the text paradigms while teachers and subject specialists can provide consulting support and should be frequently involved in the discussion. Students are also required to submit their draft assignments to the seminars. In the co-construction phase, they apply the knowledge they have learned during the deconstruction phase to the draft edited by the peers. Finally, when students complete their assignments, the self-construction is fulfilled accordingly.

V. Conclusion

The current modernization process of higher education in China poses higher challenges to the teaching of academic English writing. The innovation of the collaborative teaching model for academic English and the cultivation of students’ academic literacy in writing practice are important issues waiting to be resolved. It is believed that the collaborative teaching model of academic English featuring “language + subject” can be used for reference. Meanwhile, in combination with actual practice of China’s higher education, efforts should be made to explore a proper approach for the cultivation of academic literacy.

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Literature References


