A Study on the Application of CAT in English Writing from the Perspective of Social Constructivism

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Abstract. English writing is widely regarded as an integral part of English learning. Well developed, it can nurture communicative ability and raise learning awareness among students. High-level writing proficiency reflects students’ comprehensive competence to express their ideas on specific topics. It may also boost students’ confidence and enthusiasm. In traditional teaching method, teachers are the only readers and evaluator of students’ writing. Students can only get limited comments. Inadequate feedback deprives students of opportunities for correcting defects in their works. The English writing in the thesis mainly refers to college English writing teaching. This paper mainly discusses the important role and practical application of social constructivism and computer assisted technology in English writing. Hopefully, it can enrich the English writing teaching methods; improve the quality and efficiency of English writing teaching, so as to effectively improve students’ English writing ability.

Chapter 1 Status quo of Teaching English Writing

Importance of English Writing

Writing is a complex process of psychological cognition, thought creation and social interaction\[1\]. And the improvement of students’ writing ability cannot be achieved overnight. The process of writing is kind of social communication.

As one of the most important components in English teaching in schools, writing is an essential tool of expressing creative thoughts. In English teaching, emphasis should be laid on training of listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities for students to improve their comprehensive capacities. Therefore, writing, as an important symbol of high comprehensive English qualities for students, plays a critical role in schools \[2\]. Moreover, writing is an effective way to enlarge our vocabulary. Different compositions we write need different vocabularies. Therefore, the more compositions we write, the more vocabularies we grasp. At the same time, it is very beneficial for our reading.

Furthermore, writing makes great contribution to our logical thinking and analysis ability. For one thing, to write a good composition, we must collect and arrange writing materials systematically so that we can distinguish what is essential and what is not so important. By contrasting the similarities and differences between Chinese and English, students explore the two different cultures and enjoy the charm of two different cultures. Therefore, it is very important and necessary to cultivate English writing ability of students. Writing ability training cannot be completed within one day or two. In this process, it requires the teacher’s active cooperation, correct guidance, joint efforts and perseverance of teachers and students.

Problems in English Writing Classrooms

When it comes to English writing teaching, many teachers have been accustomed to the traditional teaching routines. In face of increasing demand for writing teaching, many of them do not know how to deal with it. Many teachers lack systematic and in-depth thinking on teaching content. Therefore, the unresolved problems hindered the improvement of writing teaching method.

In the meantime, inadequate attention is paid on teaching. Many teachers rely too much on teaching materials, and most of these writing exercises in the textbook only provide a "training of
acceptable ability”. In addition, in the actual teaching classroom, the vast majority of hours are devoted to language points, grammar and other aspects rather than actual writing guiding. There is little time left for writing in class, and compositions need to be finished after class as homework.

**Overview of Social Constructivism**

Different from the traditional English teaching concept, constructivism has developed new perspectives on the teaching methods. It puts more emphasis on learners’ autonomy and spontaneity, it encourages students to accumulate knowledge and experience, and then remodel knowledge by themselves[3]. Switzerland’s famous psychologist Piaget first proposed constructivism, he stressed the interaction between children and the surrounding environment and their close relationship during cognitive developments. When children interact with the outside world, their internal cognitive structure will absorb the interaction provided by the external environment. When the internal self-recognition cannot absorb the interaction provided by the external environment, the child’s own cognitive structure will make a new reorganization. So the “internal” and “external” form a delicate relationship between the balance and the imbalance. Through the interaction between internal and external factors and the cognitive development of children is promoted [4].

Constructivism argues that knowledge is not taught and instilled by mandatory, but acquired with the help of others, in a specific environment. According to social constructivism, in English writing classroom, teachers should follow the following principles:

Firstly, students are the dominant participants of learning. Writing is one of the important manifestations of language ability. Students are also equally important in the learning progress. However, in the English writing classroom, indoctrination in teaching method is still very common among teachers. Teachers should motivate students to be independent autonomous individuals rather than passive receivers of knowledge. Teachers also need to stimulate students’ passion for learning, encourage them to acquire new knowledge on the basis of their own experiences.

Secondly, constructivist learning theory holds that teachers are the organizers of student learning behavior, the conductor of the learning process, the guide of the learning goal.

The constructivist learning theory emphasizes the collaboration between teachers and students. In English writing classroom, teachers should not only put emphasis on their guiding role, but also enrich their teaching methodology. Students need to be encouraged to learn material, share and research learning materials together, and finally get improved and make progress in their writing ability.

Thirdly, “circumstance” is the key to social constructivism. It also is the important precondition of “knowledge construct”. In English writing classrooms, teachers should develop students’ writing ability from such aspects as reality life, personality development and writing cognitive. These aspects are strongly associated with students’ writing aspiration. If student put writing as a way to share their daily life or to enrich themselves, they will put their heart and soul into writing so that they can express their feeling naturally. Only in this way can students improve their writing ability.

**Computer Assisted Technology**

**Rise of Computer Assisted Technology**

The origins of Computer Assisted Technology stem from the distinguished work of Suppers and Blitzer. They have clearly situated the use of technology with a broader educational agenda. In 1960s, when the high cost of technology was thought to prevent its uptake as an educational tool, Suppers foresaw the potential for wider applications of computers in education. He argued that: In the future it would be possible for all students to have access to the service of a personal tutor in the same way that ancient royals were once served by individual tutors, but that this time the tutors would be in the form of a computer.

**Advantages of Computer Assisted Technology**

The computer technology has been widely applied in the English teaching and has become a
strong support for the modern English teaching [5]. As for the English writing, multimedia based on the computer technology make the class atmosphere active, arouse the students’ interest and in the meanwhile improve the efficiency of English writing.

First and the foremost, computer gives students greater initiative and independence. Students themselves manage to master the progress and weigh the difficulty of learning. Learning time is bound by time and space as it was in traditional classrooms. This can give full play to the student’s initiative.

Secondly, teachers can better implement the teaching principles of individualized teaching. Intellectual learning can be in a relatively short period of time to master more knowledge content. Poor students with poor performance will be the computer “patient” with the help of repeated practice, without any discrimination.

Thirdly, computer aided teaching overcomes the shortcomings in traditional teaching, and it is the fundamental change of teaching form and method, which can make the teaching content more dynamic. Students will take the initiative to break the time and space constraints, accumulate knowledge as well as develop competence with the help of computer.

**Application of Social Constructivism and CAT in English Writing Classroom**

**Application of Social Constructivism in English Writing Classrooms**

Constructivism has profound implications for English writing teaching. Writing skill can reflect the students’ comprehensive ability of using language. Constructivism has brought new methods to the English writing teaching. There are four elements of the learning environment based on the theory of constructivism: collaboration, conversation, scene and meaning construction. The writing teaching based on the theory of constructivism consider the students as the center in writing, stress the writing skill constructed by them. Thus it can make the teaching effective and improve the students’ writing ability.

During the writing training process, students need to be personally involved. Its main purpose is to generate as many ideas as possible about the topic given by the teacher. This process is called free-writing stage. In this writing stage, the members of each group have to discuss and develop their outline in the conversation and ask one of them to record. Teachers should give further directions on the structure of the whole text, and explain to the students how to lay out when they meet various subjects. What’s more, students are encouraged to write the key sentence for each paragraph. Finally, the whole group members will expand each paragraph according to the key sentence. The students write the drafts actively. The next follows is that students are asked to check the logic and coherence of the whole passage. The students’ compositions will be checked by the group members, and then they must find the obvious mistakes even correct them. In this stage, students are trying to reconstruct their cognitive structure to realize the construction of new knowledge or assimilate the new knowledge through using the related knowledge and experience.

There are three stages of the application of constructivism in English writing:

In the pre-writing stage, teachers should give the requirement and accurate directions on the topic, it is better for teachers to create a situation, input all the possible relevant information, arouse the students’ interest, activate their learned knowledge, and stimulate their activity in a relaxing way. Then the students can act on the directions accordingly. At the same time this stage for the students is a thinking process, they are divided into several groups, they have to think divergently, design the writing, identify the composition’s genre, and gather information by discussion. This process directs the students to consider the purposes and goals for writing and to design for their writings.

For example, when the topic is pollution, first the teachers can show some pictures and videos about the existing polluted problems and even give them some stories and events. Then the teacher encourages students to move to brain-storming stage by showing some words and phrases about pollution, such as water pollution, air pollution, chopsticks, noise pollution, plastic bags, trees, junk food, animals, disease. During this process, students can construct their knowledge of writing.
through the discussing, cooperating and persuading with the group members. Pre-writing stage in the English writing teaching is necessary, as it leads the writers to work in the following stages.

During the teaching process, teacher should pay much attention to the following principles: the teacher should create situations or contexts for students to development their imaginations of writing; the teacher should encourage students to discuss with their group members, and learn how to cooperate with others; the teacher should cultivate the students’ learning ability and treat students as the center of writing.

During the peer evaluation process, all the group members showed their ideas and suggestions which helped to make the composition well-organized, logical, clear and accessible to the readers. The students got responses or gained knowledge from others to develop their ability of organizing. Peer evaluation can help to broaden the horizon of the students. They become more actively involved in writing activities and changed their writing attitude, and both the teacher and students can get involved in the writing.

After the peer evaluation from the group members, the teacher will collect the compositions and give every student comments and marks on their own writings. It is one of the most important processes of writing. It is called the teacher’s feedback process. As a facilitator in the process of writing, the teachers’ feedback can help students to identify specific aspects of their writing performance. Proper feedback can inspire the learners’ intrinsic motivation.

**Application of CAT in English Writing Classrooms**

The application of computer assisted technology in English writing classroom is kind of new emerging teaching mode. It has brought far-reaching influence on English writing. On the whole side, the application of CAT has provided high efficient teaching media, which also enriched teaching methods, enlarged teaching scale, promoted the development of modernization. From the perspective of teaching system, it causes a series of changes in teaching content, teaching methods and forms of teaching organization. Furthermore, it gives rise to fundamental change in teaching thought, teaching concept, even in teaching system.

In traditional English writing organization, teachers have always been the center of the classroom. After computer assisted technology being applied into the progress of English writing teaching, students are transformed from “passive listener” into “active learner”.

On the basis of computer assisted technology, the cooperation between teachers and students could be realized. By this medium, students could get information exchange and emotion communication. Computer assisted technology can imitate reality, which demonstrate the environment vividly and provides a real studying environment. Hence it helps students improve their ability of language using.

Computer assisted English writing teaching is developing under the basic of active participation. Teachers construct many approaches and ways to build an opening and freedom teaching environment.

To sum up, computer assisted technology helps to improve students’ English writing ability and has broad prospects for development. It can achieve some teaching effect which the traditional teaching cannot achieve. It can provide a wide range of interactive functions; so that students can keep interact with teachers, students, teaching content and a variety of teaching resources. It greatly stimulates student’s enthusiasm for writing and makes the entire teaching activities into a positive circle.

**Conclusion**

Writing is complex process. For students, it needs some comprehensive English knowledge to complete a composition. In order to meet the requirements of the new curriculum and put it into the actual teaching, teachers must change the teaching notions and search for the most suitable teaching method for students.

With social constructivism applied, the classroom teaching is not teacher-centered, but student-centered. And at the same time, it arouses students’ interest. In this learning atmosphere
students can exchange their opinions and construct their system of knowledge naturally. The more interaction occurs in the class, the more benefit for students to promote the cooperative learning. The communication and discussion can make students act more actively and positively. In this comfortable atmosphere, students’ learning enthusiasm is motivated and they are willing to engage in the activities. They not only learn what the teacher teaches but explore issues independently and autonomously. They have the courage to express their own ideas, and enjoy the learning process.

The applications of computer assisted technology in English writing classroom can not only provide advanced teaching methods but also provide the opportunities for students to learn English spontaneously.

In short, the English writing is a written embodiment of the comprehensive ability of students. Therefore, the importance to cultivate students’ writing ability cannot be ignored.

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References


