On the Facilitation of Students’ Metacognition by Applying the Length Writing Approach in Graduate English Teaching

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Abstract: English course plays a significant part in graduate education. It is advocated in this paper that applying the Approach of Length Writing to graduate English teaching is not only effective in improving the teaching efficiency but also helpful in developing students’ metacognition. By reviewing and summarizing the findings of recent studies and teaching experiments in ESL, some teaching strategies have been put forward in this paper about how to adopt Length Writing Approach in graduate English course to develop students’ metacognitive strategies, reducing their learning anxiety and increasing their comprehensive ability in English using simultaneously. It is claimed by the author in this paper that such a teaching approach will produce prolonged positive effects in graduate students’ English learning and therefore deserves more attention, discussion as well as application.

Introduction

English learning is not merely a required course for graduate students in China, but also a fundamental skill for their further academic development. Therefore how to maximize the teaching efficiency of English course within the limited academic semester and to facilitate their competence in autonomous learning which matters so much in the life-long learning society is of vital importance and therefore has become the target of teaching for graduate English teachers.

Conventional graduate English classes revolves around the study of the textbooks, which means the teacher mainly performs the duty of text explaining while the students mainly perform the task of reading and question answering. This kind of teaching format has its advantage as it provides a clear and systematic explanation of language knowledge and offers much comprehensible input for the students, which forms the foundation of language learning. Yet, the disadvantages of the conventional graduate English teaching format is equally remarkable, such as lack of output practice, weakness in cultivating competence of independent and autonomous learning. What’s more, the unnatural language learning environment also leads to students’ weaker motivation in active engagement in language training activities or self-arrangement of after-school learning.

It is under this circumstance that it is suggested by the author of this paper that metacognitive strategy training combined with Length Writing Approach might help with the solution of the previously mentioned problems.

Literature Review

Metacognition

The notion of metacognition has much to with the study of cognitive psychologists, among whom Flavell plays a critical role. Flavell (1979) points out that metacognition is the awareness that the cognitive subjects have of their own cognitive activity. Individuals with high metacognition have a clear awareness of their mental process in cognition and therefore show a high ability of monitoring, regulating and directing themselves to achieve the desired ends. Ever since the wide dissemination of the notion, the idea of metacognition has been widely used in psychology as well as education. There have also appeared a variety of studies on the training of metacognition in language learning. Chinese scholars, represented by Wen Qiufang (1996) have also greatly pushed forward the study on metacognition in the field of ESL learning. It is now widely approved that strategies of
metacognition training matters a lot for English teaching, as learners with high metacognition show much higher performance in English learning and using, and more importantly, they are more likely to do better in autonomous study even after they leave school. Therefore, whether the students’ metacognition can be enhanced has already been a significant criterion for our evaluation of the efficiency of an English teaching approach. And one of the reasons for the author to recommends the adoption of Length Writing Approach in Graduate English teaching is that it is believed that this approach has the potential of enhancing graduate students metacognitive awareness and competence.

**Length Writing Approach**

Length Writing Approach is an innovative English learning approach advocated by Chinese scholar Wang Chuming and his team members who firstly conducted a series of teaching experiments in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and achieved remarkable results at the beginning of the 21st century (Wang Chuming et al., 2000). Since then, the teaching idea and approach of Length Writing has been promoted by a great many college teachers in their English teaching.

As indicated by the term “Length Writing Approach”, this is an English teaching approach which requires the students to writing in English as long as possible. The reasons for the advocates to encourage long passage writing comprise:

Firstly, writing in English is the primary way for Chinese English learners, especially adult learners like the graduate students, to produce “comprehensive output”. “The Hypothesis of Comprehensible Output” has been widely approved and testified by linguistics and language teachers since it was put forward by Swain (1995). Based on the Comprehensible Output Theory, what facilitates the language learners most in their understanding language input is not a large amount of analysis of grammar or syntax. Instead, it is productive language use, including mainly reading and writing, that helps with the language learners’ verification of the syntax rules, usage of the vocabulary and hence the automatic use of the already learned language knowledge. That is because when language learners produce the target language in the form of writing or speaking, they have no choice but to resort to the knowledge which they have previously acquired about the language, including the knowledge about accuracy and appropriateness in word-choosing, phrase-collocating, sentence-structuring, etc. Through producing such comprehensible output, the learners will naturally internalize their language knowledge, improve their language using skills, and therefore eventually enhance their understanding and application of the target language. Comparatively speaking, writing is the most fundamental form of comprehensible output for non-English major graduate students in China as a result of diverse factors. Therefore, the Length Writing Approach advocates highly recommend adopting writing as the key form of enhancing comprehensible output in the process of English learning.

Secondly, compared with listening and speaking, writing causes less anxiety among the English learners and is therefore more likely to be accepted by the students and to enhance their willingness and confidence to finish the assignments. Graduate students as adult learners and knowledgeable people in their own professional filed are intended to have more resistance to speaking in English in public as it may make them feel less competent and more anxious. Comparatively speaking, the task of writing, especially after class, leaves them more time and choice and hence more ease. It is generally admitted that affective factors play a non-negligible role in ESL learning. Too much anxiety will “filter out” the language input and therefore diminish the teaching efficiency. A tactful teacher is supposed to build up a good interactive interaction with the students by designing the teaching process to be less stressful and anxious for the students, which will have a positive effect on building up the students’ learning attitude, learning motivation and self-efficacy. It is especially important for Chinese adult learners of English, who, under the influence of “face culture” are most reserved in expressing themselves in public. Since writing, especially writing after class, offers them much more freedom in fulfilling the task, they feel they are better empowered and less compelled to produce output in English, it is more likely for them to drop the affective burden and to express themselves in the target with more freedom and willingness.
Thirdly, Length Writing has the function to explore the students’ potential, strengthen their competence and confidence in English using. The Approach of Length Writing is characterized by its requirement for the length of the writing. By meeting the requirement, the students have to resort to their already acquired language knowledge and to collect more material and information by using the dictionary and other materials. Over the course of performing the writing tasks, the students have to mobilize their knowledge and skills in English, which greatly helps with the internalization of such knowledge and skills as well as the automatic use of the target language. Consequently, the students’ competence and confidence will be enhanced naturally.

The Application of Length Writing Approach in Graduate English Teaching

The Status Quo of Graduate English Teaching

In most universities in China, Graduate English is a compulsory course for non-English major graduate students who are supposed to study the course for one to two academic semesters. The learners of Graduate English course are graduate students who are supposed to use English a lot for academic purposes. Firstly, in order to get informed with the latest development in academic research in their own field, they need to do a lot of literature reading in English; secondly, due to the increasing internationalization of higher education in China, graduate students nowadays quite a few chances of communicating with English speakers in campus life or at conferences; thirdly, many of the students have the wish to publish their academic studies in international journals in English. As a result, English learning for them is not simply a compulsory course that they have to take for their credits, but also an essential skill that they will need for their further development even after they leave school. That’s why most the graduate students attach great significance to the study of English.

Yet, for a long time, the teaching efficiency of Graduate English course does not satisfy the demands of the graduate students well. Of course, there are complicated factors behind the phenomenon, and one of them is that conventionally the course of Graduate English is focused on intensive reading, the design of which leaves quite limited time and space for output practice such as writing and speaking skills training. What’s more, the traditional teacher-centered teaching style does quite little good in developing students’ metacognitive strategies as it is mainly the teacher who dominates the learning activities. With most decisions made by the teacher, the students are used to waiting for instructions and therefore becoming less active in planning and monitoring their own learning, which will lead to their weak confidence and poor metacognition in long-term study of English. What’s more, it is widely believed that building students’ self-esteem and a positive attitude towards learning are important prerequisites for adult learners, yet the conventional teaching approach does not seem to perform well in this point.

Therefore, it is essential to adopt an innovative English teaching approach which can help with the students’ comprehensive ability of using the English language and providing them with necessary training of metacognitive strategies so as to pave the way for their autonomous study throughout their whole life.

Strategies of Applying the Approach of Length Writing

The application of Length Writing in Graduate English teaching with the aim of promoting students’ metacognition is to focus on the training of metacognitive strategies over the course of enforcing the teaching approach. That is to say, the key point is to combine the training of metacognitive strategies with the fulfillment of the length writing tasks, so as to cultivate a more positive attitude and awareness towards English learning among the students, to help them with their internalized use of English, to improve their ability of planning and arranging their own study, to monitor their learning process and make timely adjustment when necessary and to make a self-evaluation of own their English study. In order to achieve such purposes, the following strategies are suggested for the teaching design and enforcement.
Firstly, to ask the students to reflect on their usual learning habits and to guide them to correct the improper ones by having them answering the questionnaires on metacognitive awareness. The questionnaires are designed to help the students realize the importance of metacognitive awareness in language learning and to offer them the tactics about how to improve metacognitive knowledge. Only with a certain amount of metacognitive knowledge can it become possible for them to make proper learning objectives and to make feasible plans to achieve the objectives.

Secondly, to equip the students with the basic notion and practice of Length Writing Approach. Length Writing Approach differs from conventional approach of English learning and therefore is likely to come across with graduate students’ confusion and even rejection as they have long been accustomed to the average requirement of English writing. As a result, an explanation of this innovative teaching approach is required to ensure the acceptance and cooperation of the graduate students.

Thirdly, to combine writing tasks with the topic of intensive reading so as to integrate text reading, teacher explaining, student listening and student writing into a comprehensive learning activity. According to the philosophy of Whole Language (Goodman et al. 1987; Rigg, 1991), language skills should not be studied respectively, instead they work in an integrated way to ensure the acquisition of language. Therefore, it is highly recommended that reading, speaking, listening and writing should go hand in hand with Length Writing teaching, even though the focus is laid on writing. It is believed that well-designed class which encompass different skills in a series of learning activities with the same theme will definitely strengthen the learners’ comprehension of the language input and therefore consolidate their knowledge of language rules and improve their application of the rules into communication, whatever it is in the form of speaking or writing.

Fourthly, to ask the students to make plans for their Length Writing practice. One of the features of Length Writing is that it does not have a rigid limit in title-choosing, length of the writing or time used in accomplishing the tasks. That is to say, the students have much more freedom in making the decisions. And it is also likely that those who are not good at decision-making may feel at lost initially. So it is the duty of the teacher to help them make plans, to monitor their own writing process and to evaluate their own performance.

Lastly, to elaborate on the standards of evaluation, including self-evaluation, group peer evaluation and teacher evaluation. A critical difference between Length Writing and traditional which lays much emphasis on the writing product instead of the writing process is that diverse forms of evaluation are adopted in Length Writing with the focus on both the process and the product. And the evaluation in Length Writing is aimed not to find out the mistakes in students’ writing or correct them but to identify the well-written parts and share with the other students so as to have peer writing become meaningful input for students. What’s more, the tactic of having students actively involved in the evaluation section is meaningful as it can help with the students’ metacognition. By evaluating one’s own and peers’ writing, a student has to resort to his or her knowledge storage in wording, sentence forming and passage structuring so as to make a reasonable and reliable judgement of the writing quality. At the same time, this process also draws the students attention to the gap between one’s own writing and the good ones which might set inspiring examples for further writing practice.

Conclusions

Since its introduction to ESL in 2000, Length Writing has developed into an important ESL teaching approach with its own profound theoretical foundation and rich empirical experiences. The core of the approach is for the teachers to assign well-designed writing tasks to students and ask them to write as much as possible based on their authentic life experience and sincere affections. It has been proved by theoretical discussions and practical teaching experiments that Length Writing Approach enables students to improve their utilization of previously acquired language knowledge and skills by producing comprehensible output in the form of writing. More importantly, its feature of emphasizing learning process and self-evaluation as well as peer evaluation also makes it meaningful in cultivating students’ metacognitive awareness and strategies, which will positively prepare the students for autonomous learning in the life-long learning society.
Length Writing can promote students’ desire to express themselves in the target language and therefore creates a comparatively natural communicative climate for language learning and therefore stir up learners’ curiosity for language learning and using. As for teachers who adopt the Length Writing Approach, it is the students, instead of teachers, who take responsibility for the learning process and results. This, will on the one hand enhance the students’ willingness to actively engaged in learning, and on the other hand, reduce the teachers’ burden in “forcing” the students to accomplish the learning tasks, which will leave the teachers more time to allocate for designing and carrying out activities aimed at metacognitive strategy training.

In spite of all the previously mentioned advantages that Length Writing Approach has, it cannot be forgotte...