

A Study on the Application of CBI in College English Writing Teaching

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Abstract. This paper offers a brief introduction of content-based instruction (CBI) and its related studies, and discusses the application of CBI in college English writing teaching. Based on CBI and its theme-based instruction, it constructs a new mode of college English teaching. In other words, according to students' interests and needs, teachers should concentrate on the contents and provide numerous authentic linguistic materials to improve students' English writing proficiency and develop their writing ability.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a heated debate on English for Specific Purpose (ESP) and it has become an essential research topic in college English teaching. Therefore, the objective of college English teaching is to cultivate talents who can combine English with their professional knowledge. Ken Hyland pointed out that ESP was the landmark of the development of people's understanding on language, and it was not a new linguistic discipline so that it was in consistent with both conventional and modern linguistic teaching methods [1]. In another word, while the contents in ESP courses differ from that of ordinary English learning, they can employ identical learning process and methods. Namely, the teaching methods used in ESP apply to college English teaching. CBI as one of the main teaching methods in ESP can be adopted in college English teaching. In the contemporary era, a growing number of colleges and universities take CBI as a teaching concept to instruct English teaching. The most prominent example is a reforming experiment represented by Professor Chang Junyue, which was based on a national philosophical and social scientific project and initiated in Dalian University of Foreign Languages in 2007. This reforming project was conducted by the English Department in Dalian University of Foreign Languages in 2008 and achieved remarkable research results. It has proved the effectiveness of CBI and illustrated its effects on students' abilities in reading comprehension, writing, listening, intonation, and affection and so on. In addition to the application in English major, CBI has been widely applied in the reform of other non-English majors to boost students' interests in learning English and improve their capacities of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

College English writing teaching is a difficult problem in college English teaching. With the deeper reform of college English writing teaching, how to enhance students' writing ability becomes a though-provoking question for all the college English teachers and educators. However, a host of English teachers put their emphasis on the linguistic knowledge, thus overlooking the training of expressive skills, which seriously restrains the improvement of students' language competence. Zhang Zaixin and Wu Xinyun et al indicated that the most

prominent problem in English writing was the insufficiency of contents which was presented as the lacking of main idea and details, and teachers should emphasize on how to explore details [2]. Furthermore, Wang Yi, Xuan An and Chen Yongjie made an empirical research showing that most college teachers employ product approach in teaching English writing, and they also concluded that product approach overemphasized writing results and this writing process was a process of slavish imitation, which would not stimulate students' creative thinking and promote teaching efficiency [3]. As college students are required to acquire professional knowledge as well as to improve all sorts of English skills to cultivate their thoughts, the traditional product approach obviously failed to satisfy these requirements. Nevertheless, writing teaching based on CBI is designed to help students obtain information so that they can substantiate writing contents, increase language competence and acquire professional knowledge during this process.

Aiming at the weaknesses of current college English writing teaching, this paper discusses the application of CBI in college English writing teaching and lay both a theoretical and practical foundation for transforming the traditional writing teaching to contribute to the reform of college English writing teaching.

CBI and Its Related Studies

In the 1960s, CBI initially appeared as “the immersion education” to practice second language teaching from kindergarten to junior school in Canada. In the 1980s, some Canadian linguists successfully introduced this experience to second and foreign language teaching in college and successively spread it into several European and American countries. CBI is a teaching method combining language with contents to raise teaching effects. “CBI teaches thematic contents and second language skills at the same time, and it regards target language as a tool of learning thematic contents rather than the direct learning items” [4].

The theoretical foundation of CBI mainly derives from Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, Swain's output hypothesis and Cummins' framework of language proficiency. Krashen claims that language acquisition relies on “meaningful and comprehensible input”, and it focuses on meaning rather than form [5]. When the learning environment in second language learning is similar to that in first language learning, second language acquisition will be most successfully achieved. Swain highlights the importance of output and he argues that active and interactive use of the languages raises the learners' consciousness of their linguistic problems and their temptation to seek the resolution [6]. Cummins identifies two kinds of language skills in learning a second language: Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) [7]. He argues that people obtain BICS faster than CALP because learning takes place in “context-based” communicative situations so that he puts the context and content in the first place in learning languages. As is mentioned above, all these three theoretical foundations attach great importance to contents in learning languages.

Leaver and Stryker conclude that CBI is characterized by subject-matter core, authentic language material and focusing on special needs of specific student groups [8]. As the first characteristic, the core of teaching is subject matter instead of forms and functions of languages and the input and understanding of contents should be paid attention. In the second characteristic, it indicates that learning materials should chose from natural languages and learning activities should convey and understand meaningful information. According to the

third characteristic, the learning contents and activities must meet learners' needs and stimulate their interests. Actually, these features can also be perceived as the teaching standards of CBI which should be observed in teaching activities based on CBI. In the light of different teaching objectives, there are three basic kinds of teaching modes in CBI—theme-based instruction, sheltered instruction, and adjunct instruction. Theme-based instruction takes the original target languages as the media to obtain information related to a theme or subject. In this process, learners will simultaneously acquire grammatical knowledge and catch information from contents to enhance overall English abilities. As language is a tool of learning professions, sheltered instruction gives priority to professional knowledge through comprehensible input in language acquisition. In other words, forms are learned at the time of processing the contents. In terms of adjunct instruction, it is required that professional courses and linguistic courses should be designed and linguistic courses are used to serve as the means of assisting the teaching of professional courses. Consequently, in accordance with the actual situation in college classes, it is mostly suitable to employ the theme-based instruction. English teachers should provide students with various relevant information to help them to obtain linguistic skills in the process of dealing with these materials.

With more attention paid to CBI, this concept is increasingly employed in various kinds of foreign language teaching reform. It combines the language with contents and transfers the focus from linguistic form to its function, thus developing students' linguistic skills effectively. Yuan Pinghua argues that students can gain linguistic skills as well as subject matter so as to achieve the goal of enriching their knowledge, developing language competence and training the ability of self-learning [9].

The Application of CBI in College English Writing Teaching

Currently, teachers attach importance to practicing writing skills and assess writing products from the aspects of linguistic forms, which misleads students to embrace an incorrect attitude that the training of writing is simply to memorize models and apply them to their own writings. As a result, numerous students imitate writing models and create stereotyped products. Perhaps they fail to recite an exemplary writing, which ends up with nothing to say in the writing. Therefore, students lose their interests in writing and just consider writing as an compulsory assignment. However, language points are involved in contents in CBI and the major objective of writing courses is to enlighten students to think critically and cultivate their interests in writing more than learning some writing skills. It should be clarified that writing is a process of creating not reciting and it requires accumulating, practicing and expressing. The application of CBI in college English writing includes three stages: pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing.

Preparing for Contents in Pre-Writing

Yu Fei and Zhang Huifen indicates that writing teaching based on CBI requires a comprehensive analysis on the materials gained via different means, such as reading, lecture and discussion and the function of teachers is to guide and promote students to get information [10]. First of all, teachers should choose some interesting writing topics in order to meet students' emotional needs and develop their writing interests. Then teachers need to direct students to learn and comprehend these topics to make them write after understanding the contents and main idea of topics. The means of input can be various. Teachers can utilize

multimedia to play videos or records to introduce audio resources. Furthermore, students can involve in searching for materials such as attending lectures and searching on the Internet or in the libraries. These multiple writing materials can easily attract students' attention and deepen their understanding of topics. The last part of the preparation can be the discussion on the materials. Teachers should encourage students express their opinions freely and then analyze these different opinions. Gao Lulu and Chang Junyue believe that only by learning meaningful, systematic and relevant natural languages can students achieve correctness in their expression and improve their writing potentials [11]. The input of multiple authentic materials can largely broaden the language environment for students and indulge them in a positive linguistic context. Besides, students can learn authentic expressions and new viewpoints to increase their writing proficiency. However, it should be noticed that the input must be of appropriate difficulty. Namely, learners should focus on the materials that are a little bit more difficult than their current levels and associate the original knowledge with the meaning of unfamiliar language structures.

Drafting in While-writing

The act of expressing one's ideas on the papers according to the writing guidance is actually a test of his or her abilities of understanding related topics and expressing himself or herself in terms of letters. On the basis of analyzing the writing materials, teachers also need to analyze the writing styles and structures of the chosen materials so that students can have a better understanding of the contents. Meanwhile, some writing techniques and attentions should be mentioned in this period. At the beginning of writing, students are required to write an outline, which can help them sort through their thoughts and make their writing more organized and logical. Then students can get down writing in line with their understanding of the contents and the outline. They are supposed to explore the detailed information they have learned and fulfill their writing with sufficient contents. Moreover, they should make the most of the related expressions in the input and the theme-based contents. After the first drafting, teachers should ask students to check over the spelling and grammatical mistakes and correct them to accomplish the final writing. In this stage, students can not only strengthen their abilities of processing information, but also examine how far they have truly acquired the previous knowledge. More precisely, students should attempt to both acquire knowledge in practicing and put what they have learned into practice.

Assessing in Post-Writing

The last stage of writing teaching is the assessing of writing products. There are several key points that should be observed during the assessment. Firstly, the subjects of assessment should not be restricted within the teachers and they can be the classmates and the students themselves. Students are exposed to a host of realistic language materials in writing teaching based on CBI so that the assessment should also be made in a more authentic and comprehensive environment. While evaluation among classmates can provide them with an opportunity to learn from each other, self-assessment can prompt them to realize their mistakes and fully understand their strengths and weaknesses in introspection. Secondly, the evaluation criteria contain three aspects: linguistic expression, content and structure. The main principle in the process of assessing should be content-oriented. To put it another way, the assessors should concern more about whether the content is relevant and substantial and the structure is appropriate, rather than

just the linguistic mistakes of a composition. In addition, the coherence and cohesion should also be examined. Finally, the assessment must be comprehensive and continuous. It is not an evaluation of a certain writing assignment but an assessment of the students' overall performance during the whole process. As a consequence, the single product-oriented assessment should be transformed into process assessment to inspect students' comprehensive ability. Students' performance in collecting and digesting information should also be taken into consideration in that the mastery and application of the materials can greatly influence the quality of their writing.

Summary

In the theme-based writing instruction conducted by CBI, college English teachers should introduce students to comprehensible authentic materials and enrich teaching resources as many as possible to construct a natural English learning environment and broaden students' writing thoughts. In conclusion, writing teaching based on CBI should consider contents as the core of learning and naturally combine contents with the language teaching so as to develop students' linguistic knowledge and skills in the process of understanding contents. Although this teaching idea has been established on solid theoretical foundations and its effectiveness has been tested in some teaching practices, new questions may arise in its further application so that it remains to be improved in the practical use. Hence, teachers need to adopt the strong points while overcoming the weak points to enhance the teaching effects.

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