

Teaching Strategy of CET-4 Writing Based on Second Language Acquisition Theory

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Abstract

Based on the Input Hypothesis and Effective Filter Hypothesis of Second Language Acquisition Theory by Krashen, the paper gives depth discussion on problems universally existing in writing teaching of CET-4 with some corresponding teaching strategies of strong operability.

Key words: Second language acquisition theory; Writing of CET-4; Teaching strategies

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INTRODUCTION

The “second language acquisition theory” was proposed by American linguist, S.D. Krashen in the 1980s. It was proposed based on the acquisition of second language as well as study on its rules. Research on second language acquisition theory has close and direct relations with language teaching with important guidance significance to college English teaching (Xu, 2011). During college English teaching, it will have important significance for reforming teaching methods as well as teaching quality of college English teaching by studying and exploring teaching process and rules of college English guided by second language acquisition theory. The College English Test-4 (hereinafter is referred to as CET-4) is the important part of college English teaching. The result of

CET-4 has almost become the only standard to measure college students’ English level of non-English majors, which is of vital importance to students. The school quality and level of colleges are closely related to the pass rate of CET-4. As for the writing of CET-4, it is score of 106, accounting for 15% of the total score of 710. It requires students to write an article no less than 120 words within 30 minutes. In general, writing in CET-4 has some stylized features, so maybe it can be a short-cut to increase the pass rate on the whole by improving students’ CET-4 results with assistance of their writing methods and modification methods. As for undergraduates of non-English majors, they usually attach more importance to the natural acquisition while less important to explicit guidance, which results in a low score with more efforts but less efficient. In the paper, based on the input hypothesis and effective filter hypothesis of Krashen’s second language acquisition theory, it deeply explores universally existing problems in each section of teaching in writing of CET-4 with the proposal of some corresponding measures which have strong operability.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

According to Krashen (1981), two conditions should be met for second language acquisition. The learners should be given with massive comprehensible language input with filtration of input by emotional factors. The learners should be offered with input language which is a little higher than their current language level as well as language environment with low effective filtration. Only if the two conditions above have been met, the learners’ language system can under non-resist state, and thus their input of language can be turned into intake.

1.1 Input Hypothesis

The input hypothesis, also known as the monitor model, is a group of five hypotheses of second-language acquisition developed by the linguist Stephen Krashen in the 1970s and 1980s. Krashen originally formulated the input hypothesis

as just one of the five hypotheses, but over time the term has come to refer to the five hypotheses as a group.

The hypotheses put primary importance on the comprehensible input (CI) that language learners are exposed to. Understanding spoken and written language input is seen as the only mechanism that results in the increase of underlying linguistic competence, and language output is not seen as having any effect on the learners' ability. Furthermore, Krashen claimed that linguistic competence is only advanced when language is subconsciously acquired, and that conscious learning cannot be used as a source of spontaneous language production. Finally, learning is seen to be heavily dependent on the mood of the learner, with learning being impaired if the learner is under stress or does not want to learn the language.

According to Krashen, the basic means for human's language acquisition is to understand language since comprehensible language input is the necessary condition for language acquisition. The comprehensible input means that the language materials offered to learners should be a little higher than their current language level. Krashen has defined current language level of the learner as "i" and defined the next stage of language development as "i+1". He pointed out that the language input should neither be far higher than the learner's current level, such as "i+2", nor close to their current level, such as "i+0"; while only if the input level is higher than their current level "i" slightly with "i+1", which is language knowledge materials in the next stage of current language level, then it can produce positive effect for learner's language development. The function of language input is to activate the acquisition mechanism in learner's brain while the activation condition is appropriate comprehensible language input. Only if the materials belong to comprehensible input, they can have positive significance for language acquisition; while the most important duty of a teacher is to offer as much comprehensive language input as possible to students. Meanwhile, Krashen also pointed out that second language acquisition includes study of systematic rules and accumulation of prefabricated language chunks. The process of second language acquisition has both automatic process and control process while the automatic process comes from repeated practice (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). Besides, frequency effect also plays an important role in second language acquisition. The acquisition and employment of second language need learner's attention and the attention is the necessary and sufficient condition for turning input into intake since study won't take place without attention.

1.2 Effective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen argues that comprehensible input is not enough to ensure language acquisition. Language learners also have to be receptive to that input. When learners are bored, angry, frustrated, nervous, unmotivated or stressed, they may not be receptive to language input and

so they "screen" the input. This screen is referred to as the affective filter. This suggests that when learners are bored, angry, frustrated, nervous, unmotivated or stressed, they may be unsuccessful at learning a second language.

He pointed out that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition but is not sufficient since massive language input is not equal to intake; while learner's psychological factors and emotional variables such as motivation, confidence as well as anxiety and so on should be taken into consideration if the learner wants to learn the language well. Emotion has filtration on language input, which controls learner's language quantity of input and intake just as a filter. Language input can be absorbed and digested by this filter to reach language acquisition mechanism. The comprehensible input can only be effective under low emotional filtration, so emotional factors during study can impede or accelerate language acquisition. That is to say, when the emotional filtration is strong, language intake will be weak, and then the language learner will have language intake obstacle psychologically so as to impede the learner to intake comprehensible materials and impede the learner to apply comprehensible materials to practical language communications. On the contrary, language intake will be more under weak emotional filtration, and thus learner will apply comprehensible materials to actual language communications by absorbing language information actively and submitting themselves to guidance.

2. THE ENLIGHTENMENT TO CET-4 WRITING BY SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The second language acquisition has guidance significance to each section of writing teaching in CET-4, so in order to have a better discussion, the writing teaching will be divided into three stages, which are pre-writing, while-writing and evaluation, combined with second language acquisition theory with great importance to enlightenment of this theory as well as corresponding teaching strategies needing to be adopted for CET-4 writing.

2.1 Pre-Writing

As for many students, they usually have many thoughts before writing the composition, but they can't put their thoughts into words well, which may result from unsound English skills or insufficient language materials accumulation. According to the output hypothesis theory of second language acquisition, sufficient comprehensible materials are the preconditions for the second language learner. In recent years, research on writing chunks of home and abroad indicates that input and output with high frequency chunks are the important channels to raise the written English fluency of second language (Williams, 2005). Therefore, to make good preparations for CET-4

writing, the input of writing chunks for students should be strengthened, mainly including the following strategies.

(a) Input of reading. Since both reading and writing use written language, including mastery of knowledge and capability about spelling, written grammatical structure, passage organization and social cultural norms and so on. Therefore, reading is regarded as the main language input method for writing because massive language output can create conditions for writing.

(b) Leading students to accumulate specific vocabulary and sentence patterns of different genres with more attention. For example, CET-4 writing involves in many argumentative articles or half narrative and half argumentative writing, so teachers should guide student to search and accumulate vocabulary and phrases which are frequently used in argumentative articles, such as in favor of, on behalf of, argue, claim, figure out, for the sake of, go without saying, in accordance with, in somebody's place, get into the habit of and so on. Besides, as for the practical writing for campaign speech or guide words, students should be guided to collect expressions under special context so as to increase their passage characteristics. For example, I feel greatly honored to speak here. / Thanks for coming to this election campaign today. / If I were to be elected to ..., I believe that the key task would be to attempt to .../ Please allow me on behalf of ..., to bid you all a hearty welcome. / If you need any help here, I will be at your service and so on.

(c) Guide students to pay attention to and accumulate associated words so as to express the logical relations of leading, connecting, transition and summary. As for any CET-4 writing of any genres, a certain number of associated words need to be used to make the article logical and well arranged, such as It is well known that.... It is self-evident that.../moreover, furthermore, in addition/ however, instead, whereas, in contrast/ therefore, hence, as a consequence and so on.

(d) Guide the students to accumulate hot words input in campus and the society with more attention, such as drunk driving, violate the traffic regulations, job hunting, certificate craze, cyber-love experiences and so on.

(e) Guide students to pay attention to and familiarize with input of common writing template of CET-4, especially for writing templates with high testing frequency and stylized features, such as writing with positive and negative contrasting views and figure writing and so on. Guide students to familiarize the framework and structure of "syllogism" writing and understand the aesthetic standards of attractive beginning, rich contents, and strong ending. Students should be led to studying and recite a certain number of model essays of CET-4 writings in the past tests and on the basis, students should be asked to imitate writing similar compositions of different genres of same genre.

In my opinion, through intentional and regular materials accumulation, deep comprehension and constant input of the five strategies, students will have rich

materials storage for CET-4 writing, and their confidence and strength will be surely enhanced together with repeated practice with high frequency.

2.2 While-Writing

During the practical writing of CET-4, students may have the following problems, such as inappropriate passage structure, non or no obvious topic sentence, confused the logical thought, insufficient discussions, simple thought and plain word expression and so on. We can know from the second language acquisition theory that besides accumulation of prefabricated language chunks, it also contains systematic and regular study, and this acquisition process contains automatic process and control process, within which the control process comes from the learner's self control and guider's external control, while automatic process comes from repeated practice. The following teaching strategies can be adopted for problems occurred in students' writing.

(a) Guide students to familiarize the "syllogism" writing framework of CET-4 writing passage structure, which is the aesthetic standard of "attractive beginning, rich content, and strong ending" with one topic sentence leading the whole paragraph.

(b) During the paragraph writing, students should be trained with logical reasoning. As for many students, their writing are just like talking without any deep thoughts with very short causal chain, which has only two nodes, that is, because..., therefore....

Addressing this problem, a topic sentence should be given by the teacher, and then students are encouraged to list kinds of sub-arguments with deletion and combination so as to result in the most persuasive sub-arguments or reasons. In addition, the teacher should also guide students to master the presentation method of logical thought, such as from small to large, from near to far, from past to nowadays, and from macro to micro and so on. The writing space of CET-4 writing is not very large since usually students are required to write 130 to 150 words. Therefore, to write a composition with rational opinions as well as substantial contents is not simple. While writing, students should use diversified sentence patterns with deep and condensed thoughts, especially when referring to writing templates, special attention should be paid to grammar, logic, sentence patterns as well as wording so as to avoid unmatched phenomenon between the template and the added contents.

(c) During the preparation and training of CET-4 writing for students of non-English majors, students are unnecessary to be forced use English thinking for logical reasoning, instead, native thinking is Okay with them.

2.3 Evaluation

Evaluation is the most troublesome section during writing teaching of CET-4. On one hand, there are many students in a large class, so English teacher will cost much time on reviewing with only limited quantity; on the other hand,

sometimes students can't understand the connotation of teacher's evaluation without realizing their mistakes and inefficiencies, so they can't make modifications comprehensively and timely, leading certain mistakes to be stereotyped. This may be resulted from students' limited cognitive level and emotional anxiety (they have made lots of efforts during writing so they are reluctant to modify again; besides, they think asking help from the teacher or students may be embarrassed). According to second language acquisition theory, consideration should be given to language learner's psychological factors and emotional variables such as motivation, confidence and anxiety if the learner wants to learn the language better, which needs to be solved with more attention during the evaluation stage (Sun, 2011). The following teaching strategies can be tried.

(a) Training for evaluation. All students should be trained in the evaluation and modification training including structure, content and language expression and so on so that students can understand the basic requirements of a qualified composition. To make the composition evaluation simple and operable, teacher can list the evaluation table for students.

Table 1
The Evaluation Table for Students

Item	Score	Main problems
Structure (passage, topic sentence) 1 score		
Content (logic, thought) 2 scores		
Language (spell, grammar, sentences structure) 2 scores		

(b) Self-evaluation by students. After checking and modifying the whole composition, students can mark their compositions and find out main problems with the evaluation table. If possible, students can write on the computer so that they can eliminate stupid mistakes such as spelling mistake, grammar as well as format with the automatic error correction of Word.

(c) Mutual evaluation by students themselves. Students can be divided into several cooperative study groups with the implementation of cooperative study idea. First, students can be classified into three kinds according to their English levels, which are good students, medium students and poor students, ensuring the proportion of three kinds of students is 1:2:1 in each group so as to reach a state of different levels within each group but the same level among groups. Through this adjustment, the students with medium level can be improved with the effect of excellent students, and also poor students can meet the normal standards with the assistance of others, which is also an exercise for good students' capability. The compositions written by group members can be modified and marked mutually according to the evaluation table with listing of main problems for group discussions so as to propose modification suggestions. By mutual evaluation,

students can find their mistakes and deficiencies regarding writing structure, passage and contents so as to eliminate emotional anxiety among poor students, which is help for forming an atmosphere of mutual help with improvement of each member so as to reach the learning result of "i+1" that advocated by Krashen.

(d) Evaluated by the teacher. Based on the mutual evaluation among groups, teacher can select some representative draft, self-evaluated composition as well as composition modified by many people, assuring their performance and pointing out their deficiencies with modification and comment on inaccurate language, ideal fluency and so on made by students during the mutual evaluation stage. After evaluation, teacher should share his/her comment with students so that students can better understand feedback by teacher and basis for the feedback.

The purpose of multi-level evaluations is to evaluate students' potentials and writing performance comprehensively and truly so as to improve students' writing capability on the whole with the feedback information offered for improving teaching, which embodies the diversification of evaluation subject, evaluation form, evaluation content and evaluation standard in accordance with educational principle. It has certain positive significance for stimulating students' independent study awareness, adjusting self-study strategies and enhancing meta-cognition, which is worthwhile to be promoted in CET-4 writing teaching.

CONCLUSION

The input hypothesis and effective filter hypothesis of second language acquisition theory by Krashen has provided the theoretical basis and application enlightenment for CET-4 writing teaching. It still has large development space by understanding and comprehending its connotation deeply with constant conclusion and innovation of corresponding teaching strategies in teaching practice, which needs to be further perfected in teaching practice.

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