

Study on Strategies to Improve College Students' English Writing Competence from the Perspective of Memetics

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Abstract: On the basis of the current undesirable situation of college students' English writing competence in independent colleges, this paper discussed the strategies to improve college students' English writing competence from the perspective of memetics and different ways of memes' replication and transmission.

1. Introduction

English writing competence, especially college students' English writing competence is the everlasting research topic among English teachers as well as scholars. Both Guidance of College English teaching and Guidance of teaching for English majors in colleges have put forward specific requirements for college students' English writing competence.

Despite the given requirements set by the authorities of college English teaching, college students' English writing competence is far satisfactory because they can't write down their thoughts properly and precisely, which may result from the lack of language input before writing.^[1] Such an undesirable situation is also the results of over-emphasis of language output instead of language input in the pre-writing process^[2]. Therefore, effective prewriting language input is directly related to the quality of students' writing. So how to increase the prewriting language input is also a problem needed to further research. Fortunately, Chen Linxia etc.(2006) pointed out the enlightenment of memetics to English teaching^[3], which urged researchers and scholars to explore the effects of memetics on English writing, offering evidences that memetics can help increase students' prewriting language input.

Chen Linxia (2008) pointed out that the two replicating and transmitting ways of language memes could be applied to college English writing teaching^[4]. Tang Ting (2018) also put forward the advice that applying the writing template to English writing is an effective way to improve students' writing performance in CET-4^[5]. Deng Yunhua (2016) illustrated the methods with which writing memes reproduce and transmit themselves and the procedures they go through during their life circles^[6]. Zhang Weiping(2018) found that memetics helped promote students' writing performance in CET-4 and CET-6^[1]. Zhang Li established a writing teaching pattern, i.e. recitation-imitation-creation, from the perspective of memetics^[8]. Liu Hongjian (2018) discussed the efficiency of language memetics in improve English majors' writing competence on the basis of the two different transmission mechanisms of language memes^[2].

The literature mentioned above indicates the extensive application of memetics in English writing. However, most researchers focused on the writing competence of college students in governmental colleges and universities, ignoring that of students in independent colleges. In order to enrich the research results, the study on English writing competence of students in independent colleges is still needed. On the basis of the current undesirable situation of students' English writing competence in independent colleges, this paper discussed the strategies to improve college students' English writing competence from the perspective of memetics and its ways of replicating and transmitting.

2. Memetics and Language Memes

Memetics is a theory interpreting the laws of culture evolution, which was firstly put forward by Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* [8]. The core concept of memetics is meme, the elementary unit of cultural transmission, meaning “something imitated”. Francis Heyligen divided the process of meme’s replication and transmission into four stages, i.e. assimilation, retention, expression and transmission. According to the differences in replication and transmission, memes are classified into two types, genotype and phenotype. Memes of genotype transmit themselves by changing their forms but keeping the content the same, while replicating and transmitting the memes of phenotype is completed through changing the content while remained the forms the same.

Language is one of the carriers of memes, and it is also a kind of memes [8]. Language memes refer to the imitated lingual units. When the lingual units such as words, phrases and expression, sentences, paragraphs and passages are imitated and replicated for some pragmatic purposes, thus they become language memes[9]. In the process of replication and transmission, some language memes would combine with others in different contexts, forming new meme complex. The formation of new memes, to a certain degree, is a process of creative output of language, which is in accordance with the essence of English writing.

3. Strategies to Improve College Students’ English Writing Competence from the Perspective of Memetics

According to the four stages of meme’s replication and transmission and the two types of transmission, several strategies of improving college students’ English writing competence are proposed on the basis of the current situation of students’ English writing competence in independent colleges.

3.1. Setting up Language Meme Database of College English Writing

The characteristics of memes imitated easily indicate that not all language unities can become memes, and only those which can attract the host’s attention, easily understood and accepted by the hosts can become the language memes. When choosing the language materials for the meme database of English writing, students’ needs should be taken into first consideration. Owing to the drive force of English writing mainly lies in the needs of passing CET-4 / 6, the chosen language material should be related to those high-frequency vocabulary, sentences, and passages in CET-4/6 writing. Therefore, the language meme database of English writing should include different language units, including words and its synonyms, phrases and expressions, sentences (idioms, proverbs, saying and so on), writing templates, and model essays, which should be classified into different categories according to various topics. Editing of language memes in such a way can help students choose language memes related to some topic quickly and easily, thus shortening their writing time.

What should be mentioned is the crucial role of English teachers in establishing the language meme database because of English teachers’ absolute authority in choosing language materials and students’ consistent admiration for them. Students’ identification with their teacher’s choices in language memes make them more willingly to accept and comprehend these memes, inspiring their eagerness in retention and memorization.

3.2. Memorizing and internalizing the language memes

After the establishment of language meme database on English writing, students should devote themselves to memorizing and internalizing the language memes in the meme database. Due to the differences in characteristic of language units, different measures to memorize the memes should be taken.

For the memory of words, affixation is frequently used as long as students know the meanings of various affixes, mainly including prefixes and suffixes. With affixation, students can easily remember the spelling of long words with affixes by separating words with suffixes or prefixes.

They can also employ the word-formation laws to form new words by combining different affixes with word root. Meanwhile, conversion can be also applied to memorize words by extending the meanings of homonyms. As for remembering sentences, students should recite them on the basis of analysing sentence structures and understanding their meanings, thus resulting in the flexibility of using the sentences by replacing some words to alter its meaning. In order to enhance the memorization of sentences, teachers can also offer help by creating certain situations for students to practice. The more skilled students apply these sentences in a given situation, the quicker they choose them from the meme database.

When memorizing writing templates, students should figure out the genre of a specific template, such as narrative, argumentation and so on. Take argumentation for example, it is the writing genre frequently tested in CET-4/6, and is comprised of several subtypes, i.e. problem-solving, phenomenon-explaining, advantages and disadvantages-analysing, chart/picture-describing. Among the subtypes of argumentation, there are great differences in structure as well as content. What's more, there are many universal sentences with different functions in writing templates, such as transitional sentences connecting the sentences of advantages and disadvantages, concluding sentences, sentences inducing a phenomenon at the beginning of an essay and sentences introducing reasons. Memorizing these different writing templates can help students internalize these language memes, thus developing their ability of applying writing memes.

As for the memory of model essays, reciting is the most direct way. In order to improve the effectiveness of recitation, students should analyse the characteristics of structure, typical sentences, as well as words and phrases in the model essays with the help of their English teacher and then find out good sentences to imitate. Apart from direct recitation, students can also take part in some related activities such as English speech contests and recital contests to urge them to memorize the model essays in the language meme database.

3.3. Practicing writing using language memes

After students' memorizing and internalizing language memes, they should apply the memes to writing practices, which is known as language meme output as well as meme transmission. In this process, students can choose different ways to transmit language memes.

3.3.1. Applying memes directly

Applying memes directly means students directly use the memes chosen from meme database to write their essays, with no change in the form and meanings. The memes which can be used directly include idioms, sayings, proverbs and so on. The two sayings "Time is money." and "Time is life." are often used to emphasize the importance of time. "Where there is a will, there is a way" is a high-frequency proverb about determination and persistence. In a word, direct application of language memes in English writing is the simplest way for college students to transmit language memes.

3.3.2. Applying synonyms and synonymous expressions and sentences

Applying synonyms and synonymous expressions and sentences in English writing is an important method to transmit language memes, which can avoid the dullness of language. When writing, students should consciously select synonyms, synonymous phrases, expressions and sentences to enrich their writing languages. For example, when describing the popularity of some phenomenon, students can use the memes "more and more + adj" as well as "increasingly + adj." Therefore, "more and more / increasingly popular" can be employed to describe the popularity of some phenomenon. Furthermore, "be gaining popularity" is also the synonymous expression of the above two memes.

3.3.3. Applying homographic sentences and structures

Applying homographic sentences and structures means that in English writing students express different meanings with the same sentence structures, i.e. changing the content while keeping the sentence structures unchanged. The universal sentence patterns and the writing templates are typical homographic sentences and structures, with which students can produce canonical language output,

lessening the grammatical errors. Meanwhile, applying the writing templates help students have more time to develop their ideas better owing to the ready-made essay structure and some sentences with specific functions.

When using homographic universal sentences and writing templates, the primary work for students is analysing the requirements of the writing task and figure out its genre, such as narrative, argumentation or practical writing. Then students should find the matched writing template and universal sentence structure from the writing meme database. On the basis of the chosen memes, students can choose other memes related to the given topic and combine them with the chosen writing template and universal sentences with specific functions. Thus, an essay is completed after the combination of these memes.

Take the topic “online shopping” with the writing requirements of analysing the advantages and disadvantages as an example. Before writing, students should analyse the specific requirement for the writing task, and then choose the writing template of analysing advantages and disadvantages of a specific phenomenon and some universal sentences related to advantages and disadvantages from the meme database. After that, students can choose words, phrases and sentences related to online shopping, such as shopping, online / Internet, goods, buy / purchase, pay for, refund, time-saving, convenient / convenience, poor quality, long waiting time and so forth. The sentence “the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.” and phrases “all in all / in a word / in conclusion” are also memes frequently used in this type of essay writing. With these already-chosen memes, students can combine them in a proper way, thus finishing the essay writing.

What should be mentioned is that the replicating and transmitting ways of memes shouldn’t be confined to a certain type. For example, when expressing the popularity of online shopping, students can write “With the development of Internet, shopping online is more and more popular.” and they could also rewrite the sentence into “As the Internet develops, shopping online is increasingly popular.” And “increasingly popular” could be also changed into “is gaining popularity”. Meanwhile, homographic sentences and structures can be applied. So the saying “Where there is a will, there is a way.” can be rewritten into “Where there is Internet, there is online shopping.”.

3.4. Applying multi-assessment methods to revise essays

After finishing the essays written on the basis of the English writing memes, multi-assessment methods should be applied to assess them from different perspectives according to the sequence “self-assessment---peer assessment---teacher assessment”. Before assessment, teachers should give assessment criteria and explain it to students in detail, ensuring students apply it properly.

3.4.1. Self-assessment

Students’ self-assessment of their own essays according to the assessment criteria means they check their essay by themselves from the perspective of punctuation, spelling, paragraphing, namely those so-called silly mistakes. Owing to the limitation of students’ English language ability, revising some inconspicuous mistakes is beyond most students’ ability in independent colleges. Meanwhile, teachers urge and supervise students to finish this revision carefully.

3.4.2. Peer-assessment within group

After self-assessment, students’ revised essays should be assessed by their peers. In order to assess the essays more effectively, teachers should divide the students into several groups, within each of which there are 5 to 6 students responsible for the assessment for the students in another group. Within each group, the students are assigned to different assessing tasks according to their respective writing abilities. Students poor at writing are responsible for checking some mistakes of punctuation, spelling, who are easy to find. Those with average writing ability not only check the silly mistakes, but they should also find out good sentences and those sentences with grammatical mistakes, and then put forward to revision suggestions. Basing on the prior assessment, students good at writing check the essays for the third time, and then give their comments to both the essays as well as the prior assessment within their group according to the assessment criteria.

3.4.3. Teacher's assessment

On the basis of students' self-assessment and group peer-assessment, teachers should check students' second revised essays comprehensively. Meanwhile, teachers should also evaluate the results of peer-assessment and point out some ignored mistakes or unreasonable revision caused by students' own limited writing ability, which are much poorer for the students in independent colleges.

In the process of assessment, teachers should highlight the advantages of students' essays by praise and encouragement. For example, teachers should praise the students for their proper application of synonymous expression of memes and the flexible use of homonymous structures in time. After the thorough revision, teachers should circulate the model essays in class to stimulate the students' sense of achievements in writing, maintaining their enthusiasm for writing and strive to improve their writing ability.

4. Conclusion

The establishment of writing language meme database can help students input language quickly, the internalization of writing memes is the key to language input, writing training is the necessary means to realize meme output, and the evaluation of exercises is the evaluation of meme output effect. These four measures are interrelated and indispensable to each other. Students who want to improve their English writing ability should take the four measures simultaneously. Meanwhile, the improvement in English writing ability can not be achieved overnight, for it is a gradual process; the language input and accumulation before writing is also a long-term process. Therefore, in order to improve their English writing competence, students should persist in making efforts in writing.

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