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Research Article

On Autonomous Learning of English Writing Based On Constructivism and Network

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Abstract: With the development of information networks, students can extensively employ diverse techniques as network resources, network platform and multimedia to practice and learn English writing. Coupled with the characteristics of writing in the network environment, this paper focuses on exploring the specific application of the network in the process of students' autonomous learning of English writing on the ground of the theory of constructivism. It analyzes the significant influence of the network on the autonomous learning of writing. It points out that the network can promote writing communication to a large extent, which is conducive to cultivating students' autonomous learning competence and improving students' writing skills. Obviously, it is feasible and practical to apply the network to autonomous learning of English writing. Therefore, the enlightenment of this paper on teaching mode in the future is that teachers should guide students to use the network to conduct learning and practice in the process of English writing, thereby improving students' autonomous learning competence.

Keywords: Constructivism, Network, Autonomous learning.

INTRODUCTION

"To learn English well, the importance of writing cannot be overestimated." (Wang Chuming, 2004) A number of researchers at home and abroad believe that writing is the most helpful tool for evaluating learning outcomes. Generally speaking, the traditional writing class basically follows the conventional teaching mode of "a piece of chalk, a blackboard and a mouth". In other words, the teacher teaches English writing methods and writing skills, while students are listening passively. Moreover, the teacher determines the topic, and the students write a composition as required. In this kind of teaching environment, students usually pay attention to the fixed writing patterns rather than the content, pursuing the correctness of expression while ignoring the ideological nature of content (Wang Haixiao, 2014). Even worse, students' personalized thinking and subjective initiative are severely restricted or hindered in this way. In addition, the amount of information provided by teachers' corrections is limited and feedback cannot be timely given to students. (Tang Jinlan *et al.,* 2012).

The development of the information network enables students to widely apply the various techniques of network resources, network platform and multimedia to practicing and learning English writing. This is a sort of learning method based on modern educational technology, providing students with abundant resources through the network. A number of studies have indicated that the application of network exerts a relatively positive effect on improving the English writing proficiency. (Yang Yonglin *et al.,* 2009; Guo Xiaoying, 2010). Numerous practices of domestic English teachers in network-assisted English teaching suffice to illustrate its feasibility and salient merits.

Guided by the theory of constructivism, this paper explores the application of the network in the autonomous learning of students' English writing, analyzes the advantages of autonomous learning in English writing with the help of network, and puts forward suggestions for future English writing teaching. On the one hand, this paper can introduce a suitable approach for students to learn independently, and directly facilitate students to participate in more writing practice, thus improving their English writing ability. On the other hand, from the perspective of teachers, this

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paper can also play a role in optimizing the structure of teaching English writing, thus accelerating the development of English teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW
This section reviews the literature of constructivism theory and autonomous learning.

Constructivism Theory
As a pioneer of constructivism, Glaserfeld considers that knowledge is automatically constructed by the cognitive subject rather than passively accepted; cognitive functions adapt to and serve the empirical world, rather than discovering the actual reality. (Glaserfeld, 1994) The basic premise of constructivism is that learners actively construct knowledge by building new knowledge on existing structure of knowledge. As a matter of fact, the occurrence of learning is not isolated. Learning veritably generates when learners interact with knowledge, learning environment, and other learners (Dershem, 1996). The learning process is not simply the information input, storage and extraction, nor is it simply taught by the teacher; however, it is actively constructed by the learner in the brain (Ning Yujie, Fan Wenjing, 2008). Constructivism theory should function as a theoretical guide for autonomous learning.

In addition, domestic researchers have demonstrated through experiments that using constructivism theory to guide teaching of English writing highlights the guiding role of teachers in teaching writing and the principal position of students. It is conducive to students' internalization of writing process and the construction of knowledge in the process of learning, and it is of great benefit to the cultivation and improvement of students' English writing ability (Chang Hongmei, 2007; Guo Xiaoying, 2009). In the process of writing, the role of students has undergone profound changes. Students are given rein to the autonomy of learning: proactively discovering problems and themes of writing, actively collecting and analyzing pertinent information and materials, and creating compositions with personal cognition and knowledge mastered. This is also the core of constructivism learning theory, so constructivism theory can provide theoretical guidance for English writing.

Autonomous Learning
The concept of autonomous learning stems from the discussion of cultivating the ability of lifelong learning and independent thinking in the 1960s. Henry Holec (1981) first introduced the concept of autonomy into the foreign language teaching, and reckoned "autonomous" as an ability to be responsible for students' own learning. Domestic scholar Shu Dingfang (2004) pointed out that foreign language autonomous learning consisted of three elements: attitude, ability and environment. In general, foreign language autonomous learning refers to the process of foreign language learners who actively and creatively determine their own learning content, learning plan, learning method, learning time and learning situation on the basis of their different needs, learning motivations and learning objectives.

The kernel of autonomous English writing under the guidance of constructivism is that students can actively explore, discover, practice, and construct writing knowledge. It focuses on reconstructing new knowledge and improving students' writing abilities through the application of what they have learned. Consequently, it enables students to effectively complete writing tasks and improving writing abilities. A comparative study by Bagheri and Aeen (2011) shows that among the intermediate English students in Iran, the English writing ability of the experimental group using the autonomous learning method is higher than that of the control group. From this, it can be concluded that autonomous learning has an important influence on improving English writing ability. Chen Meihua (2007) analyzed that on the condition of the continuous changes of external factors of autonomous learning, the internal factors of students' autonomous learning based on the computer network teaching mode are transformed in the direction of facilitating learning. Liu Wenyu and Cha Ji'an (2010) investigated non-English majors from the aspect of the learning motivation, learning strategies and their relevance about students' autonomous learning in the network environment. What they have discovered is that the network environment for English autonomous learning cannot be ignored.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WRITING IN THE NETWORK ENVIRONMENT
With the rapid development of network technology, more students have set about practicing writing through the Internet. The writing in the network environment is characterized by immediacy, interactivity and openness.

Immediacy: The network breaks the limitation of time and region. On the network communication platform, teachers and students can conduct online writing discussions at any time and place. Students can get feedback in time and then quickly correct their mistakes. As a result, they can make progress in writing. Besides, some online correction software or websites can modify the foreign language composition of students in real time, which reduces the teacher's burden of correction and considerably improves teaching efficiency.

Interactivity: The network environment offers a variety of communication possibilities. Teachers and students can communicate through various forms of communication tools such as QQ, MSN, BBS, BLOG and E-MAIL. As readers and supervisors, teachers communicate with students and give their comments.

By using the Internet, the teacher has fully realized the online communication with the students, so that the relationship between teachers and students is more harmonious, and the enthusiasm of students to learn writing can be fully mobilized. Under the network condition, the status and role of the teacher is no longer conditioned to the classroom. The teacher has begun to influence the students' life. The improvement and adjustment of this harmonious relationship encourages the students to be more enthusiastic about learning and promotes their initiative of learning.

Openness: The online environment creates a more relaxed, casual and eclectic atmosphere. All people can choose the theme according to their own wishes. A train of thoughts of students can be greatly expanded and the imagination can be exerted. The open nature of the network environment enables students to be discharged from the rigid requirements of the classroom in a free environment. They can think independently and effectively integrate into the writing environment. Accordingly, students' writing proficiency can be enhanced to a certain extent.

APPLICATION OF THE NETWORK IN THE AUTONOMOUS LEARNING OF ENGLISH WRITING

Under the guidance of constructivism theory, teachers should also focus on students and cultivate students' autonomous learning consciousness, so that they can fully exert their enthusiasm and initiative in the process of writing through the construction of existing knowledge. The dominant role of students is established in the writing process. Guiding students to use the Internet effectively can eliminate many barriers in students' writing, which students can participate actively and confidently, so that it helps them to achieve autonomous learning in English writing. Specifically, the application of the network in the autonomous learning of English writing is as follows:

Employing Multimedia Courseware

Multimedia courseware is a tool for teachers and plays a supporting role for students to participate in class. Provided that the English writing class is tediously taught by teachers, students will have no interest in it. Multimedia courseware can integrate words, graphics, video and audio into the content, which greatly appeals to students. On the Internet, there are a large number of courseware, pictures and materials for teachers to make reference to. Teachers can glean resources from the Internet, applying them to their courseware and enriching the teaching content. This lively and interesting presentation deepens students' understanding of the learning content and stimulates their enthusiasm for learning English writing in the process of enjoying the pictures and audiovisuals. After all, only when they are interested in learning, will they have the motivation to learn. Therefore, in daily practice of teaching, the use of the multimedia courseware can arouse students' writing interest and stimulate students' enthusiasm for autonomous learning.

Studying ESL Writing Theory and Method

Due to the arrangement of the curriculum and limited credit hours in China, teachers do not have the opportunity to systematically and comprehensively explain all the theories and methods of writing in the classroom. The utilization of network resources makes up for the shortcomings of insufficient input of ESL (English as a Second Language) writing theory and method in the classroom. Hence, teachers can recommend that students learn English writing genre, writing skills of different genre, even the use of punctuation, grammatical structure and others by the means of English writing website and English writing tutorials to introduce English writing methods. There are many websites that introduce ESL writing, which can be found at any time by using search engines. For example, the online writing lab founded by Purdue University in the United States is a comprehensive website about writing, which contains detailed explanations on all aspects of writing knowledge. Teachers should make good use of the network to increase the input of students' writing knowledge, so that students have the correct theory to guide English writing.

Searching for Abundant Relevant Materials

As is well-known, the amount of information on the Internet is large and virtually everything can be included. After having been assigned a designated or self-written task, students can analyze the topic or find out several keywords at first, and then search for all materials related to the keyword through search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Lycos. There are also too many sources of materials on the Internet such as hyperlinks to articles, a variety of websites, textbooks, reference books, journals on English writing, etc. A wealth of information covering a relatively wide range is supplied by the network, and various topics or materials encountered in English writing can be found on the Internet, which solves the problem that students write compositions devoid of substance. By reading and screening of the searched materials, not only can students expand their range of knowledge, but also can accumulate materials connected with the topic, and deepen their familiarity and understanding of the topic. After that, in the process of English writing, students will write compositions rich in substances, and the topic is more profound.

Reading and Learning from Plentiful Model Essays

The writing topic is extensive, and the limited input of the model essays in the teacher's class cannot guarantee that the student has a good grasp and understanding of a certain genre. The exclusive feature of vast amount of information on the Internet is beneficial for students to read more model essays in

autonomous learning. There is chance that students can be familiar with the framework of various articles or "universal model", and can search a large number of model essays of the same genre. Sufficient language input can significantly ensure that students are familiar with various genres and targeted writing methods and techniques after screening, reading and imitating. Only in this way, can students be confident and competent in English writing.

Using Online Dictionary

In the process of English writing, it is inevitable that students will come across a string of new words or problems of grammar, syntax, words, etc. The teacher cannot answer all the questions of all students at any time, so teaching students to use the online dictionary can help the teacher resolve this problem. Many online dictionaries provide different expressions of the same word or phrase. If a student does not know how to use a word or phrase, he or she can appropriately check the online dictionary to expand his vocabulary. This kind of accumulation can lay a good foundation for later English writing. For instance, the interpretation of the same word in the modern English-Chinese dictionary and the Concise English-Chinese dictionary can be found in the English-Chinese dictionary of "iciba.com". In addition, "your dictionary" (yourdictionary.com) is also a popular website that provides 2,500 dictionaries and grammars in more than 300 languages. In the network environment, students should make full use of the online dictionary. Only in this way can some problems or obstacles of wording, syntax and grammar encountered in the writing process be eliminated, so that English writing can proceed smoothly.

Communicating Online

In order to create a favorable language learning environment, teachers can recommend that students conduct online real-time communication. First of all, students can express their opinions in English on various online forums and speak freely. The topics of communication are wide-ranging, and the content can be all-encompassing, such as current news, geography, culture, customs, food, entertainment, language learning and other topics of personal interest. Furthermore, students can use e-mail to quickly send and receive letters worldwide, and to make key pals in different cultures. Compared with traditional pen pal exchanges, email is faster, easier, and cheaper, in spite of the fact that both can create a real communication context. In the next place, students can also make friends at home and abroad through QQ, IRC, OICQ, MSN, etc., which can realize online real-time communication in English. They can also join various English learning online chat groups or centers especially for foreign language learners such as ESL Chat Central. Actually, communicating online with others in real time through texts can achieve writing purposes.

In addition, teachers can use network communication software to increase their interaction with students. The communication between the students and teachers can be ameliorated and the students' writing ability and communication ability can also be boosted. Afterwards, students can talk to the teacher more easily when facing the teacher, and they will come out from a self-enclosed and self-restricted state and integrate into the environment that they can discuss together. The online writing environment provides this condition.

Applying Composition Intelligent Evaluation System

Owing to the fact that teachers do not have enough time and energy to review a large number of essays, students cannot get timely and effective feedback. With the continuous development of information technology, a batch of automatic intelligent evaluation systems for essays has flooded in recent years, working out the problems of belated feedback. Some systems rely mainly on the linguistic features of different levels of composition obtained by manual scoring, and then the computer system compares the linguistic features of the student composition with the linguistic features summarized by the system to achieve automatic evaluation, such as the system developed by McLaughlin: Writing Roadmap (https://www.writingroadmap.com/). Some systems not only apply the above methods, but also compare the students' English with the English of the native speaker in light of the characteristics of Standard English derived from enormous English corpora, such as the pigai website (http://www.pigai.org/). The corpus of the pigai website has implemented real-time dynamic updates, which can reflect the latest changes in the English language in time. These intelligent automatic evaluation systems realize the personalization of evaluation. It means that they can evaluate compositions from multiple dimensions such as vocabulary, grammar, text and content, and then provide various kinds of feedback for students' writing, which not only reduces the teacher's burden of correction, but also gives students' immediate feedback, which can effectively improve the efficiency of teaching English writing and promote students' English writing ability. (Tang Jinlan *et al.,* 2012; Wang Ying *et al.,* 2012)

CONCLUSION

Under the guidance of constructivism theory, this paper analyzes the advantages and explores applications of network in autonomous learning of English writing. It can be found that writing in the network environment breaks the time and space boundaries of students' learning, which is conducive to cultivating students' autonomous learning ability, stimulating students' writing interest, enhancing students' self-confidence and improving their writing skills. Therefore, it is operable and practical to apply the network to autonomous learning of English writing.

In the future, with the continuous maturity and development of Internet technology, it is the trend of the development of future English teaching to guide students' autonomous learning and communication of writing in the network environment and apply it to teaching English writing.

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