

# An Analysis of the Teaching Methods for English Writing in High School from the Perspective of Constructivism Learning Theory

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**Abstract**—Writing is an activity that integrates the use of target language. Compared with listening, speaking and reading, it usually improves slowly in practical teaching. Based on the practical problems encountered in teaching, this paper aims to explore and analyze the effective methods of English writing teaching in senior high schools through the meaning of constructivism learning theory and its guiding principles for the classroom. It builds effective scaffolding to help students complete their writing that defining writing tasks in advance, putting forward writing topics related to students, encouraging students to put forward their own views through group cooperation and paying attention to them. Finally, through the change of the evaluation method, this teaching method can guide the development of students' cognitive function and the teacher-student relationship. It is not only helpful for students to master the method of composing English compositions, improve their English writing ability, but also helpful for students to gradually build up their confidence in writing.

**Keywords**—constructivism; high school English; writing teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

English writing aims to train students to practice the use of language, especially to test their language communication ability and language utilization ability, which is a comprehensive reflection of students' English language ability.

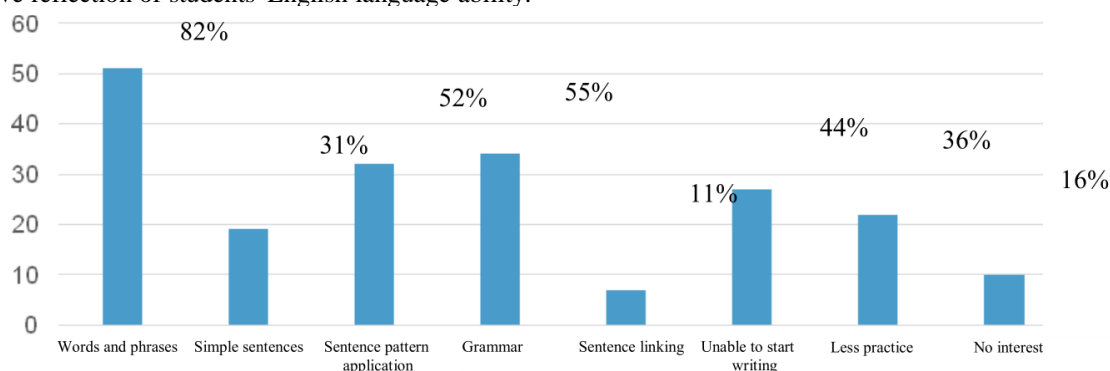


Fig. 1. Students encountered problems in writing.

Students can organize an excellent written expression only if they have a solid basic knowledge of language and flexible use of the communicative, logical and flexible language.

In recent years, with the continuous deepening and implementation of the new curriculum reform, the improvement of reading, listening, and grammar classes in high school English teaching is more significant, while the writing class teaching is still relatively lagging. How to use the theory of learning as a guide to explore an effective and operative teaching mode for high school English writing teaching is the original intention of this paper.

## II. THE DIFFICULTIES FACED IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH WRITING TEACHING

### A. The Dilemma of Students

“Writing is communication; Writing is self-expression” (Gere, 1985: 4-16) the problems that students present in the writing process are: digression from the subject, incomplete content and logical confusion. It is neither communicative nor meaningful self-expression. The following picture is the result of a questionnaire survey aimed at a 62-member general teaching class selected by Grade 2 in a provincial-level demonstration high school.

As can be seen from "Fig. 1", the first obstacle to students' English writing is the problem of words and phrases. There are two aspects to this problem. The first is the insufficient reserves of words and phrases. Then, when there are sufficient words and phrases, students tend to fail to know how to organize them into sentences. The second issue is the use of grammar knowledge. There are 8 grammar knowledge majors in high school, and the contents of these 8 parts have already been fundamentally studied in the junior high school stage. The high school stage only has a more comprehensive and in-depth study of knowledge based on junior high school learning. Grammatical errors mainly focus on the person, tense and subject-verb agreement, so the use of grammatical knowledge is mostly unskilled and lacks knowledge of the composition of the sentence itself. The third is that student thinks that the tricky problem is the use of sentences. This is actually a performance of the students' insufficient training on the use of sentence patterns. When the sentences are analyzed, there is an extraction barrier in this part of the knowledge. Fourth, they don't know how to write a text. 44% of the students said that they couldn't get the essay topic. Some of them said that they have words in their mind, but it is difficult to write. The main reason why it happens is that they don't know how to analyze the problem and express their thoughts and opinions accurately and clearly. The problem of the rest few people reflects that the students have a disposition to choose simple sentence structures, single structures, weak logical coherence between sentences and sentences, and less practice. In the end, they will gradually lose interest in writing practice without any improvement.

In summary, in the process of English writing, students have problems from words, phrases and sentences, to the connection between sentences and sentences, and then, to the overall planning of chapters and the transition between paragraphs.

### *B. The Dilemma of Teachers*

In the English teaching of high school, teachers also face some real conflicts. The main conclusions are as follows: first, the high school class tasks are heavy. In order to catch up with the teaching progress, the special training of students' writing is neglected. Teachers use discourse to occupy the classroom and spread knowledge. They think that this is a weapon to counter the tight tasks of time. And students only need to be able to identify and repeat the knowledge. Second, rely on textbooks. Usually, the information that teachers deliver to students is exactly the same as the content provided in the textbooks. Under these circumstances, students are likely to lose interest in this unique way and content. Third, although cooperative learning has entered the classroom, teachers generally believe that writing is a personal activity and requires students to complete tasks individually after class. Fourth, even if the writing task is arranged, due to the lack of the writing evaluation link or not in place, the achievement of the practice goal cannot be guaranteed. Fifth, the lack of training and instruction in writing skills has made it difficult to improve the writing level of students.

### *C. Mobius Strip in High School English Writing Teaching*

The current teaching practice of students and teachers in high school English writing is caught in such a tortuous circle: the quality of students' writing is not high; the intensity of the work of teachers' essays is aggravated; teachers reduce the number of essay exercises--the students' writing level continues to be sluggish - the quality of the composition next time is still not high. In a word, teachers teach very hard, and students can't know about the law in study. So reciprocating, to make breakthrough, high school English writing teaching has to get out of this Mobius strip.

To end this vicious circle of Mobius, it is needed to find a breakthrough point, which demands to solve two problems: first, where is the key link to break this curse? Second, how to rebuild the teaching of high school English writing? Only by some breaking and some making can cure symptoms and root causes, avoiding the situation of 'find-it and fix-it mentality'. Going back to the previous strange circle, it can be seen that the joint point lies in the teacher's focus on the ability to write and then moves to the process of writing, while ignoring the classroom teaching. Since it is necessary to return to the classroom to solve the writing problem, and to constantly find a balance between teaching and learning in the process of writing such a highly subjective activity, it is necessary to reconstruct an effective teaching mode from the perspective of student learning.

## III. LEARNING THEORY

Learning theory is "a set of explanations about how learning is produced, learning processes and outcomes. Psychologists explain the generation, process, and influencing factors of learning from the perspectives of learning processes, cognitive development, and social context." [1] From the behavioral school to the cognitive school and humanistic school, over more than a century, psychologists have developed a variety of learning theories based on different philosophical foundations, theoretical interests, and research methods. In many learning theories, how to choose, obviously depends first on the understanding of learning. Illeris defines learning as "any process that leads to changes in persistence in life organisms, and that these processes occur not simply because of physiological maturity or aging mechanisms." [2] From this definition it can be seen that the core element of learning is "directing the ability to change persistence". Learning is a complex process, and students' perceptions include an understanding of how the world works internally. New information may change the student's existing ideas, perhaps not. This change cannot be measured by the scores obtained during the exam; otherwise it will limit the boundaries between knowledge and expression. Learning requires both teachers and students to work hard, but teachers can't replace students to complete this activity, and only through the continuous change of students themselves. In this process, teachers can play a role in changing the speed and direction. Then the new teaching model should focus on the cultivation of students' writing ability, rather than the infusion of writing knowledge. This dynamic nature of learning has made constructivist learning theory into the field of research.

### A. *The Meaning of Constructivism*

Constructivists believe that teaching means support, guidance, and assistance, but not be arranged, be replaced, or be instilled. The earliest proponent of constructivism, Piaget, discovered through observation that "there is a cognitive schema in each person's mind, which is constructed in the course of past experience and in the ongoing experience of individuals. In the process, the schema constantly adjusts and changes to adapt to the external environment and the stimulation of experience." [1] Children interact with their surroundings by thinking about their own contact with these things and with various ideas, as well as by interaction to construct understanding, and then gradually build up knowledge about the external world, so that the cognitive structure can be developed. Learners have subjective initiative in the construction of knowledge meaning, rather than passively subject to external stimuli. Its subjective initiative is reflected in the appearance of objects, thoughts, relationships and phenomena that are different from previous materials and opinions. Existing cognitive schemas have two types of effects: the one is assimilation, and new experiences are incorporated into existing ones. That is to explain things that are not understood, so that they conform to the existing rules in order to explain and organize our world; the other role is to adapt, that is, to find that existing patterns cannot explain new experiences and adjust their own schemas to be able to explain new experiences. Under this mechanism of action, a series of new rules have been formed. Regardless of the role, people's understanding and rules are constantly interacting and constructing.

From Piaget's interpretation of cognition, the following characteristics of students' learning characteristics can be understood: firstly, the existing schemas formed by each person through past experience are different. When faced with the same new experience, the role of schema assimilation or adaptation varies from person to person. Secondly, in the face of new experience, when the learning subject actively constructs and actively participates in the integration of personal experience and schema, knowledge can be acquired by learners. Again, the end of a learning process is a temporary balance of cognitive structure. That is to say, after the learner completes the assimilation or compliance, the new experience either successfully enters the existing schema, or the existing schema changes to achieve a temporary equilibrium state. Finally, learners can build more complex understandings and experiences at different stages of development. Every new experience comes from the increasingly complex thinking of learners, but each time of thinking depends on its cognitive ability and experience reserves at the time to adapt to the differences in materials and perspectives. The inspiration for designing new high school English teaching activities is that teachers should have an understanding of the students' existing schemas and individual differences in order to arrange teaching activities and content suitable for students. In English writing teaching, students' familiarity with the structure of different articles, the background knowledge related to the theme and the degree of students' use of the target language are some aspects of the students' existing patterns in writing. It is difficult for a student to write a good essay if he or she lacks the relevant schema or fails to activate the existing schema. At

the same time, teachers should create specific situations for students, help students to form learning motivation and acquire knowledge in the context; and provide a place for the connection of new and old knowledge through the designed situation to help students generate the meaning of the knowledge they have learned.

### B. *The Guiding Principles of Constructivist Learning Theory for the Classroom*

The above mentioned the enlightenment of constructivism to teaching activities, but how to use constructivist learning theory to guide teachers to practice teaching and to embody abstract revelation as guidance to the classroom is more important and practical. American scholars Jacqueline Grennon Brooks and Martin G. Brooks proposed five guiding principles: raising questions related to students; organizing learning activities around basic concepts; seeking and attaching students' views; and setting the curriculum to suit students' assumptions; evaluating students' learning against a teaching context. Here the author will discuss separately.

1) *Raising questions about students:* The learner's interest in learning is an important condition for identifying whether this activity can be run. Both Dewey and Bruner have pointed out that education should consider the interests of students. But there is no way for every student who walks into the classroom to be interested in word spelling, phrase collocation, sentence structure, etc. What teachers can do is to help most students know the importance and relevance of these topics. The teachers ask students questions about the basic teaching objectives selected in advance, and gradually understand their interest and cognitive ability in a series of teaching contents in order to achieve the teaching objectives, and then coordinate the classroom environment according to these situations." When a teacher asks a question to a student, the key is to avoid isolating the variables, avoid providing information that exceeds the student's needs, and avoid simplifying the complexity of the problem prematurely, because complexity often produces relevance and thus triggers students' interest. In fact, too simple is often confusing for students." [3]

2) *Organizing learning activities around basic concepts: exploring the nature of problems:* Starting from the basic concept is an important method of constructivist teaching. That is to say, when designing a class, teachers should organize information around the conceptual group of questions. The questions and concepts are only presented when they are all presented rather than being presented in isolation. And only in this situation, students can study in the most concentrated way. [3] In the current English teaching, a theme is divided into several modules, and the focus is on the teaching objectives to be achieved in each individual module. When each unit goes to the last module, writing, it is not possible for most students to establish the relationship between concepts and skills from part to whole. From the modules of warming-up, pre-reading, reading, comprehending, speaking & listening to writing, the teacher has presented all the parts to the students. Just as giving the student a bunch of parts and the student knows what

each part is, but he doesn't know what to do with it. The neglect of the whole will lead the students to give up trying to explore the whole. For example, one person has to install a bicycle in life. Although there are detailed installation guides, he still needs to constantly refer to the overall picture of the bicycle. The students will be attracted by the concept introduced by the teacher, but these concepts are constructed by the learner from the whole to the part, not part to the whole. Using a linear approach to form a concept will only inhibit the learning process.

3) *Seeking and valuing the views of students:* Constructivist education places great emphasis on understanding students' perspectives. By mastering the students' perspectives, the teacher can know the perspective and reasoning process of their problems. In this way, the teacher can put forward higher requirements along the student's thinking, so that the student's learning experience is coherent and more meaningful. Otherwise, the knowledge that the teacher taught to the students during class is boring and irrelevant, because those things are the knowledge in the teacher's eyes, not the students'. In addition to understanding the student's view, the point is to pay enough attention to the student's point of view. Attaching importance to the student's point of view means not only letting the student present what he or she thinks, but also giving a clear discussion. What teachers can do is to listen, coordinate, and stimulate thinking rather than teaching.

4) *The curriculum should be suitable for students to make assumptions:* "If students can understand the curriculum cognitive requirements, social requirements and emotional requirements, the learning effect will be greatly improved. Therefore, there is a certain inevitable connection between the curriculum requirements and the assumptions each student makes in the learning tasks.... Regardless how fascinating the teacher is, and how attractive the teaching content is, if he can't clearly express his own assumptions, most students will feel that the course is meaningless." [3] In the past, everyone always said that the cognitive requirements of the curriculum and the cognitive ability of students should be adapt to each other, simply thinking that if one wants to complete the task b, he must complete the tasks a, c, d first. Otherwise, the one is not allowed to start b. This simple way to establish a one-to-one correspondence between teaching tasks and students' cognitive ability is a kind of shackles and restrictions, because at any time, people are using more than one cognitive structure. Usually, students can apply a cognitive structure in one area, but they cannot immediately transform this cognitive structure into another field. It is hard to know what the students are thinking, only by taking specific measures to find out, so the curriculum shall be designed to help students express their own assumptions.

5) *Evaluating student learning in the context of teaching:* Effective evaluation requires a meaningful context as well as learning, and the more relevant it is to the real problems students face, the role of evaluation will last long time. If the

teachers only be encouraged to pay attention to the ability to cultivate individual knowledge construction in the teaching process, but use traditional scoring methods to evaluate, it is apparently contradictory. Whether it is a percentage system or a rating system, it is actually making judgments on right and wrong. And correctness or fault is more related to the filtration system." Adults use a filtering system to classify students' responses to problem understanding. For teachers, inaccurate answers are wrong. For students, inaccurate answers often reflect their state of thinking about the problem at the time." [3] What is lost with such evaluation methods is the opportunity to penetrate the students' minds, which is the loss of students' creativity and adventurous spirit. These precious things are not electric lights. A light cord will light up and can be switched on and off. They need to be cultivated, encouraged and supported. Often the creativity is not just an ability to project into a specific and tangible course content, yet, it still cannot be separated from the course. If the learning environment encourages students to construct personal knowledge, what emerges in their minds is not a discipline. People's understanding of the world is comprehensive, and solving problems in the world is not single.

#### IV. EXPLORATION TO THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH WRITING TEACHING METHOD

Based on the above, the teaching of high school English writing can focus on the constructivist learning theory and make the following changes.

First, the preparation for unit writing training moves forward, and the writing task is clearly defined in advance. In the preparation of high school English textbooks, around different teaching objectives, each unit will give a topic, which is the theme of this unit to organize teaching content. The content selection under each module is closely related to this theme. The writing module is arranged at the end of each unit, so the selection, classification and integration of knowledge is required only when the teaching of the unit is about to come to an end. But this process takes a lot of time, not a writing class. And this is the reason why it is not an easy thing for teachers to take a good writing class, and students also can not feel relax to the most extent. Therefore, it is advisable to agree on the writing theme of each unit after the warming-up session. Why is this? This is mainly due to the following considerations: first, students need to have an intuitive feel of the core concepts of the new unit. The teaching of this link is mainly to create a connection and environment for the later learning. In this way, the teaching methods are diverse; the activities are rich; and the students are easy to divergent thinking in such a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. Second, the teacher captures the student's point of view by interacting with the student on the topic of the unit. Most of the writing topics identified in this way are of interest to students, and in the next two weeks of unit teaching, students have plenty of time to start collecting data and preparing for knowledge.

Second, writing topics are related to students in an authentic and open manner. The writing topic designed by the teacher should be authentic, that is to say, it can be related to



the real life of the student. The students can give new meaning to the real world by thinking about such a problem. If the problem is real, then the method in the problem-solving strategy is diverse, because life is not black or white simply. Students can have different ways of understanding and expression. Teachers only need to make the necessary guidance on the values. In the face of such writing topics, specific to the classroom, it's wise for teachers to carry out various forms of activities, which can be debates or material evaluations and can be essays or quiet writing. The genre of writing can also be rich and diverse. Argumentative thesis, novels, poems, scripts, posters, etc. are permitted to be chosen according to the students' expressions, or they can be specialized for a certain style.

Third, it is feasible to make full use of teamwork to encourage students to come up with their own ideas. According to the problems encountered in writing, nearly half of the students can't start writing. Then in the classroom, teachers should give full play to the role of group cooperation. Teamwork not only helps to alleviate the cognitive load of learners in the process of exploring complex problems, but also in Vygotsky's theory of recent development zones – for the advancement of children in the process of recent development zone, the mutual assistance of members of society is very effective. For a concept to be learned, what teachers instill for several times may not be as effective as classmates' communication. Cooperative learning and group learning provide this kind of social support system among students and between students and teachers, which promotes the cognitive development of students. When the students have conducted full discussion in the group, they should be encouraged to come up with their own opinions. This is the expression that the schema makes after debugging. That is to say, inquiry is the process of students constructing their personal views. The assumptions before the students' inquiry are corrected in the group interaction, or they are further confirmed by others' opinions. When the point of views of their own is clear, it is natural for students to write again without any words and feelings.

Fourth, after the students express their opinions, the teachers should pay attention. It is necessary for the teacher to extract the keywords and present them on the blackboard followed by that the students express their opinions on the topic. On the one hand, students who express themselves can feel the attention and listening of others. On the other hand, some creative expressions of students may be difficult to capture. However, when these expressions are listed on the blackboard in time, it is helpful for students to clear their writing ideas, and to make a knowledge reserve for the next teaching work. Of course, not only teachers can write, but also in the form of a group, students also can be asked to write the core words of their views on the blackboard.

Fifth, the construction of scaffolding is feasible. It is mainly to help students to retrieve and prepare for existing knowledge, to lay foundation for the words and sentences, so that they are able to express their own opinions through writing, and integrate a variety of linguistic knowledge. Teachers can design a scaffold in the form of a task or a game. Initially, students will think of words and phrases that are

simpler. At this time, students will be encouraged to think differently, and prepare as many words and phrases as possible. Next, students will be incited to organize the main points of the article with the structure of the simple sentence followed by upgrading the target-oriented clear sentence pattern, such as clauses, flip-flops, exclamatory sentences, parallel sentences, composite structures and other complex sentence patterns. In the beginning, the teacher can give hints on how to combine several simple sentences into complex sentences. After a period of time, capable students can be encouraged to complete the sentence transformation themselves. Through the preparation of words and phrases, students are guided to use some conjunctions to form a coherent and smooth connection between sentences and sentences.

Sixth, it is available to replace the traditional essay evaluation method by face to face correction. In the past, for the evaluation of the composition, the teacher's correction tend to take a long time, hoping that through careful comments, the students can make progress, but contrary to expectations, the students pay more attention to the scores and comments than the teachers in the written details, and few students would rethink their own problems. The reason is that the lack of a meaningful evaluation background. The insistence on doing the homework that has been substantially revised is equal to a waste of time. Therefore, how to create this evaluation background is very important. First of all, teachers and students must appear in this context at the same time. The absence of either party will lead to misunderstandings caused by untimely communication, and so on. Secondly, the evaluation results should not be used as a sign of individual knowledge, but should be a clear link between teachers and students to identify what and how much help the students need. Through such an evaluation, teachers can simultaneously guide students' cognitive function and the development of teacher-student relationship, instead of simply pointing out right and wrong. It is exactly that face-to-face correction means that students and teachers are present at the same time, and each other's questions can be communicated and answered in time.

## V. CONCLUSION

After using this teaching method to implement the one-semester writing training in the general teaching class in Grade 2 mentioned above, the students generally reflected that after training, "there are many clear ideas, and the writing has a clue. What's more, I can analyze and grasp the structure of the article." "I don't have confusion and don't know how to organize it like before. Now, I will make an outline and think in stages." "It will be natural to use some better sentences for me. And I do not feel overwhelmed any longer because of failure to write (some) words. "The vocabulary volume has grown a lot, and the article seems to be organized." There will be more clauses to be used smoothly, and the thinking has been developed a lot. In addition, the use of vocabulary is more flexible. Therefore, there is a great interest in English writing. It can be seen that this teaching method has a positive effect on the training of high school students' English writing.

The re-building up of high school English writing teaching under the constructivism learning theory proves to help students improve their English writing through teaching

practice. In response to the continuous debugging of students, it is advisable to flexibly adjust the method, constantly break the cognitive balance formed by students temporarily, and guide students to solve more complex and structural problems.

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