

## The Essence of the Academy Teaching in Ancient China and Its Enlightenment to College English Teaching

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### Abstract

The academy is a unique form of educational institution in ancient China. With specialized pedagogical thought and theory and teaching methodology, the academy had played a great role in the academic development and talent cultivation of the late period of the feudal society in China. The essence of the academy teaching is still significant and enlightening for college English teaching in China nowadays. A brief analysis of the essence of the academy teaching and the pedagogical enlightenment to college English teaching is made in this paper, hoping to provide a new perspective on the reform of China's college English teaching.

**Key words:** The academy; The academy teaching; Teaching essence; College English teaching

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### INTRODUCTION

With the popularization and internationalization of higher education, it's both necessary and possible to promote the reform of education and teaching in China. The related research has always been passionate about the reference and application of foreign teaching theories, neglecting the value of Chinese theory generated locally. As a kind of unique cultural and educational institution which is different from the official school in ancient China,

the academy has such characteristic as subjectivity, innovativeness, practicalness, etc.. It has accumulated rich experience and skills in education and teaching, and injected new vitality for the education of that period. Although it cannot be mentioned in the same breath with modern university, owing to its unique nature, task, scale, etc., the academy teaching can provide reference for college teaching.

As one of the important part of higher education in China, college English teaching should comply with and serve its general objectives. The cultivation of students' self-learning and life-long learning competency is the core of education nowadays and in the future. The teaching essence of the academy teaching lies in its educational concepts. Based on these teaching essences, the academy trains all round qualified persons and teaches them to apply their learning to practical use, learn actively to perfect their personality. The academy teaching essence is related with college English teaching. Putting particular emphasis on people's quality cultivation is the key point of the academy teaching, which should be applied to college English teaching in a flexible and proper way so as to help cultivate talents needed by the society, who obtain not only modern scientific knowledge but also professional competence. The paper proposes that college English teaching can be improved by drawing lessons from the essence of the academy teaching.

### 1. THE TEACHING ESSENCE OF THE ACADEMY IN ANCIENT CHINA

#### 1.1 A General Review of History of the Academy

The term "academy" first came into general currency in the Kai Yuan period of Tang Dynasty. However, the academy of that period didn't have the nature of education organization and teaching institution. It was only the

place where the feudal government compiled books and the emperor entertained talents. Therefore, the academy of that period was not studied in the research. When did the academy which had the significance of education and teaching originate? It has not formed a final conclusion up to now. It is generally believed by some scholars that the academy independently focusing on teaching appears in early Song Dynasty, owing to years of war and depressing official schools (Li, 1998). In Song and Ming Dynasties, with the development of the Buddhism-colored Cheng Zhu Neo-Confucianism and the promotion of some great masters, the academy developed into its golden period, appearing Bailudong Academy, Yuelu Academy, Xiangshan Academy and Lize Academy, etc.. To the end of Qing Dynasty, the academy was gradually declining. It lasted more than one thousand years in the history of China, from start to end.

Dissatisfied with the official education and imperial examination system at that time, the ancient scholars and masters in China founded academy actively, hoping to reform and improve education. In the past thousands of years of continuous development and improvement, the academy has formed its own bright characteristic in education, which has outstanding significance in the history of education in China. Some of the education thought, education theory, education measures and teaching methods still have some enlightenment to China's college English teaching reform.

## **1.2 The Essence of the Academy Teaching**

As a unique cultural and educational institution, the academy has gradually formed a distinctive style and feature of its own over the development of a prolonged period, which is different from the official school in ancient China (Xie & Tang, 2004). The following three aspects worth learning and researching for the scholars, teachers and students in China.

### **1.2.1 Diversified Teaching Forms**

With complete organization and strict management system, the academy has formed diversified and distinctive teaching forms in the long history of development. The most popular teaching form which has been applied in ancient academy commonly is "the lecture" where different schools exchange and debate academically. It allows the school with different views and insights to give lectures, reflecting the spirit of "contention of a hundred schools of thought" to a certain extent. The scholars of the academy communicate with each other through this form of teaching, effectively expand the scope of educational activities, enrich the teaching contents and improve the teaching level of the academy. "The lecture" helps to expand the influence and improve the social status of the academy, widen students' horizon and improve their enthusiasm of learning at the same time. Besides "the lecture" teaching form, the academy also applies to other forms which combine

teaching and research, self-learning and teacher's facilitation together. No matter which one is applied, the academy advocates student-centered teaching, promoting students to acquire knowledge actively, think and solve problems independently.

### **1.2.2 Student-Centered Teaching Method**

The ancient academy attaches great importance to the cultivation of student's subjectivity. Focusing on using and learning content as a means to develop information-processing and problem-solving skills, the academy teaching approach is more student-centered, with the teacher as a facilitator of learning. The main teaching form of the academy is that a master teaches a group of students. After admission into the academy, the students should knuckle down to books and study assiduously, with the facilitation of the master. Questioning and debating is the popular teaching method for the academy, so as to teach and inspire students in accordance with their aptitudes. By stimulating students' interest in learning, the academy teaching always to take self-educated ability as its highest pursuit. Generally speaking, there are two forms of facilitation from the master in the academy. The first one is guiding students to read independently. Some famous masters set guiding students to read independently as an important teaching task. Generalizing their own reading and research experience into some concrete principles and methods, the masters guide the students to read independently in practical teaching, to help students improve their reading and learning effect. This kind of facilitation is not to explain word by word or sentence by sentence, but introduce briefly. The second form of facilitation is answering students' questions and eliminating their confusion. The academy teaching encourages students to be good at asking questions and debating. According to the degree of students' study, the masters answer their questions and give suggestion in the light of different people and matters. Sometimes they will answer directly, sometimes give some inspiration, and sometimes debate repeatedly. No matter which one, it should be based on the principle of students' self-reading and self-study.

### **1.2.3 The Harmonious Teacher-Student Relationship**

In the academy teaching, teachers and students stay and learn together, promoting harmonious relationship and deep affection. The masters in the academy set an excellent model with their knowledge and virtue, teaching and helping students wholeheartedly. Influenced by Buddhism-colored Cheng Zhu Neo-Confucianism, the students have always had the tradition of showing great respect to the teachers. The relationship between teachers and students focuses on the morality. They will learn and debate together as bosom friends, ultimately achieving progresses together. Different from the stereotype relationship in official schools at that time, the teacher-student relationship in the

academy is harmonious, which is beneficial for the carrying out of teaching and the improvement of teaching effect.

## 2. THE PROBLEMS OF COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

College English teaching has always been highly valued by the education circle in China. In the process of rapid development and deep reform of college English teaching, a lot of achievements have been made. Of course, there are still some problems to be solved in college English teaching in China.

### 2.1 The Contradiction Between Students' English Competence and College English Teaching

There is always a big contradiction between students' English competence and college English teaching (Cai, 2005). At present, the effect of college English learning in China is still not satisfactory, although the college students have been learning English for a long enough time. Moreover, the input of college English teaching from the colleges and the teachers are large enough. Unfortunately, achieving unsatisfactory practical effect. Students' productive skill, such as the ability in oral and written English, is relatively weak, which can not adapt to the actual needs of social development.

### 2.2 The Problem of Curriculum Design and Structure

The college English teaching system, the curriculum design and structure can not fully meet the actual requirements of learners. In some universities or colleges, there is a larger proportion of English course, but the necessity, rationality and practicability of some basic courses' contents really need further research. Too much input to basic courses reflects the low teaching efficiency, and the quantity and quality of application-oriented course can not well meet the actual needs of students and the society.

### 2.3 The Obsolete Teaching Method of College English Teaching

With the development of society and the advance of the new basic education curriculum reform, the original teaching methods and content system of Chinese Language Teaching Methodology cannot meet the needs of basic education teacher training (Wang, 2014). For a long time, the spoon-feed teaching method is the traditional method of college English teaching in China, which puts the students under the control of the teacher. The teachers still pay more attention to the teaching of language knowledge, not completely getting rid of the negative impact of the examination-oriented education. There is no freedom for the students

to create, making English learning become a boring and mechanical process. The teachers are tired of teaching, and the students are reluctant to learn, resulting in unsatisfactory teaching effect of college English teaching.

## 3. THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE ACADEMY TEACHING TO COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

As a special educational institution in the feudal society of China, the academy has distinct temporal spirit and class limitation. But as an important form of education, it has many concepts and ideas that are still of significant value for current education. In the times when people think highly of education and talents, we should focus more on applying the essence of the academy teaching to college English teaching.

### 3.1 Cultivating Students' Autonomous Learning Ability and Promoting Their Classroom Participation

The ancient academy teaching attaches great importance to the cultivation of student's autonomous learning ability which has great enlightenment for college English class teaching nowadays. Linguist Henri Holec (1981) defines autonomous learning as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". He argues that the goal of foreign language teaching should be two: one is to help students acquire language and communication skills and the other to help the students to learn how to learn independently. These theoretical basis laid a solid foundation for cultivating student's ability of autonomous learning. Owing to different language systems which lead to great differences in cultural tradition and language features, foreign language learning is much more difficult than the native language acquisition. Therefore, the learners must have a strong awareness of autonomous learning in order to learn a foreign language effectively.

In the traditional English classroom teaching, the teachers pay more attention to the imparting of knowledge, neglecting the cultivation of students' autonomous learning ability, which influences English classroom teaching efficiency. Therefore, English teaching mode is supposed to be transformed from the traditional teacher-centered, simple language teaching into the new mode which takes the student at the center (Huang & Fan, 2014). It should also put emphasis on cultivating students' autonomous learning ability and the ability of using language. In the process of cultivating students' autonomous learning ability, the teachers should change the traditional teaching concept completely. Teachers' duty is not to implant knowledge but to help students find the way to explore knowledge. Teachers

should organize student-centered classroom teaching, by applying diversified teaching methods, such as elicitation, discussion and case-teaching method, in order to mobilize students' enthusiasm and improve their initiative. In the classroom teaching, teachers should also consciously cultivate students' ability of using learning strategies and awareness of autonomous learning, to promote their classroom participation efficiency.

### **3.2 Changing Teaching Strategies and Improving Teaching Efficiency**

By teaching strategy, it means the arrangements of teaching activities and the true communication between teacher and student. To be more exact, it refers to a series of effective teaching actions to achieve the expected result (Xiong, 1997). Although a clear teaching strategy is very useful, it is a simplification and an idealization. Reality is more complex, any strategy needs adapting to specific teaching situations. Therefore, in the process of teaching, teachers should choose appropriate teaching strategies according to the specific situation. As far as teaching strategies are concerned, different researchers have put forward different definitions and classifications. No matter which one, their essence is the same, that is, all effective principles and teaching behaviors to achieve effective teaching purposes. Drawing lessons from the academy teaching, teachers should make full use of the following teaching strategies in college English teaching.

An organizational strategy is an excellent means of ensuring that classroom teaching has a clear direction and goals to achieve. It is necessary for teachers to master certain methods and techniques to arrange classroom activities scientifically and ensure the smooth progress of classroom teaching. Under the premise of following certain principles of classroom organization, teachers should apply different organizational strategies, such as "planned participation" at the beginning of class, "think break" during the class, "one-minute paper" before the end of class, and "assigned participation" which can promote the discussion in big-size class, etc..

Motivation strategy is an effective way that teachers might be able to use to accomplish the goals in English course and enhance student learning. Motivation is a theoretical construct used to represent the reasons for people's actions, desires and needs. It is a prerequisite for students' success, including the choice of learning intention, the active participation of learners, the maintenance of interest and the persistence of the effort. Basing on the principles of autonomy, self-realization, self-esteem, and happiness, the teachers should try their best to stimulate and maintain students' learning motivation. "Silent solutions" used in problem solving activities requires students to perform their own answers instead of using language to describe, in order to reduce students' sense of classroom anxiety.

"Anticipation guide" is always used at the beginning of text teaching. With the problem given by the teacher in advance, the students present their own ideas about the topic, learn the text and then discuss together.

### **3.3 Adjusting Teachers' Role and Harmonizing Teacher-Student Relationship**

The academy teaching emphasizes harmonious relationship and deep affection between the teachers and students, which provide some significant enlightenment to college teachers and students. The equal and harmonious relationship between teachers and students is the premise and guarantee to improve the teaching efficiency. It is an important condition for the harmonious development of students' personality, and one of the factors promoting teaching success. In order to establish equal and harmonious relationship between teachers and students, the teachers should adjust their roles firstly. Modern teaching theory maintains that the teachers should mainly play the following six kinds of multiple roles: the organizer, the controller, the assessor, the prompter, the participant and the source of information, which are completely different from the traditional teachers' role in classroom teaching. An effective teacher understands that teaching involves wearing multiple hats to ensure that classroom teaching runs smoothly and all students receive a quality education.

The relationship between teachers and students is the condition of all college activities, which determine various aspects of college education. The harmonious relationship between teachers and students refers to the mutual democracy and equality, the mutual equity and justness, the mutual sincerity and amicability, and the mutual respect between teachers and students. In order to construct such kind of harmonious relationship, the teachers should adjust their roles and learn more from the masters in ancient academy, devoting to the teaching and students sincerely, respecting and trusting students. Only in this way can students grow up healthily, and can make the relationship between teachers and students more harmonious, and ultimately can improve college English teaching efficiency.

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## **SUMMARY**

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As a unique form of educational institution in ancient China, the academy plays a predominant role in the development of education at home and abroad. Now the academy has become a distant history, with its unavoidable historical limitations. However, the diversified teaching forms, student-centered teaching method, and harmonious teacher-student relationship are the essence of the academy teaching, as well as a beneficial enlightenment to college English teaching in China. Nowadays, introducing the essence of the academy teaching into college

English teaching is of great importance, for it is helpful to strengthen teachers' and students' sense of identity and pride towards our motherland's excellent culture, and further pay more attention to the reasonable core of Chinese traditional education, ultimately improve college English teaching efficiency.

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