Teaching of English Writing for Ph.D. Graduates Based on Output-Driven Hypothesis

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Abstract

The theory of output-driven hypothesis is especially appropriate for second language teaching, because language needs practicing. The teachers of Ph.D. graduates' English writing should reform the former curriculum system, and through assigning interesting writing tasks, optimizing the content of writing instruction, discussing for writing input, providing writing feedbacks, and establishing a comprehensive evaluation system, their writing ability is sure to be enhanced.

Key words: Output-driven hypothesis; English writing; teaching; Ph.D. graduates.

INTRODUCTION

From the law of language acquisition, input is the beginning point, and it is the premise of output. (Wang, 2010) Where there is no enough input, there is no ground for output. However, if the learners do not do output, their input is only declarative knowledge, is only their memorized information, not procedural knowledge. They cannot use language as a tool to convey their information, and communication cannot be realized. Unfortunately, many English teachers have been emphasizing too much on input, making students unable to do output like speaking, writing, and translating. It is recommended that English teachers should pay more attention on output to make students more proficient in language expression.

1. "UNDERSTANDABLE INPUT" AND "OUTPUT HYPOTHESIS"

1.1 Crashen's "Comprehensible Input"

Crashen, American linguist, put forward the theory of "Language Input" in 1980s. In his theory, he coined the term "understandable input". Crashen thinks that second language learners can only acquire language by understanding and accepting linguistic symbols and information, which is called language input; however, only if the symbols and information are "comprehensible" to the learners can they acquire the language. If the symbols and information are not comprehensible, the process of language acquisition is in vain. Crashen's "comprehensible input" has now become a significant concept in second language acquisition. As for language output, Crashen thinks that it is the natural result of input, so output plays no direct role on language acquisition (Crashen, 1985).

1.2 Swain's "Output Hypothesis"

The famous linguist Swain, based on her study of Canadian Immersion Program in teaching, put forward the theory of "Output Hypothesis" in 1985 (Swain, 1985). In her theory, she thinks that "comprehensible input" is the key element or premise of language acquisition, but it is not the fundamental aim of language acquisition. If learners want to grasp a second language, input only is not enough; learners must do a great amount of pushed output (Wang, 2013). That is to say, only through language expression and practice can learners grasp the language indeed.

Swain also puts forward the term "comprehensible output", and thinks that comprehensible output plays a significant part in enhancing the learners' linguistic

abilities. She emphasizes the conscious monitoring and checking function that output plays during the learners' expression (Wang, 2010), because language output helps the learners to verify their vocabulary, grammar, and other linguistic appropriateness, thus to make learners use the language right automatically, and to promote the efficiency of second language acquisition.

1.3 Other Linguists' Related Studies

Linguist Izumi, from psychological point of view, analyses Swains' output functions, and thinks that if learners can do language output proficiently, they will be more interested in the language and it is of great help to their further progress. (Izumi, 2002) Izumi thinks that to enhance proficiency is only one function of output. While outputting, the learners can also be aware of the gap between what they want to output and what they actually output, which is the potential motivation to develop the learners' language capacities.

Anderson who puts forward the theory of information processing (Anderson, 1982) and Levelt who puts forward the output theory of oral language (Levelt, 1989) both think that output can accelerate the speed of converting declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge, i.e. output improves the learner's linguistic proficiency.

Scovel thinks communication an interactive process. Not only can language interaction happen among learners, but it can also happen inside the individual's brain. While expressing, one has two parallel systems working in the brain, one is called output system, and the other is called modifying and monitoring system. There is interaction between the two systems during language output. (Scovel, 1998) It is this interaction that enables the learners to realize the deficiencies of their language and to motivate them to learn more to overcome the deficiencies.

Hamer puts forward the theory of "parallel activity" in which three elements (i.e. input, absorption, output) are included into language teaching. He thinks that input itself cannot sufficiently train the learners' communicative ability. They must do various repeated linguistic activities to practice their input, so as to make the input digested, absorbed. Finally the input is stored in the learners' memory system and it becomes part of their own knowledge structure and language system.

Brown points out that language input and output are the two sides of a coin, they are inseparable. Sufficient comprehensible input is the basis of appropriate output, while output is the key for learners to absorb and consolidate their input and to cultivate their language application ability.

2. WEN QIUFANG'S THEORY OF "OUTPUT-DRIVEN HYPOTHESIS"

Based on Swain's theory of output hypothesis, Wen Qiufang, who is a famous linguistic professor in Beijing Foreign Language University, put forward her theory of "output-driven hypothesis" in 2008. (Wen, 2008) Her theory aims to improve the efficiency of China's second-language teaching. Wen thinks that the second language should serve as a tool for students' future employment, so the theory is devised to be applied on middle and high level students of second language acquisition. The theory reverses the sequence of language acquisition. (Lou, 2015) Normally, language acquisition begins with input, but Wen's theory begins with output, and regards output as the starting point and finishing points of language teaching.

Wen advocates her output-driven hypothesis from three aspects. (Wen, 2008) The first is, from psychological aspect, that output has more driving power than input. If there is no output for language learning, the efficiency of acquisition is by no means high, although there may be high-quality input. The second is, from employment aspect, that the students need output more in future work than input. That is to say students need speaking, writing, translating more in their jobs than listening and reading. So the teachers should focus more on output in the instruction. The third is, from the angle of foreign language teaching, that the comprehensive means guided by output-driven hypothesis is more efficient than single-ability-driven teaching means, and students welcome more about more applicable and efficient means of teaching.

Wen's theory is most appropriate for English writing instruction, because writing is a typical output ability based on input like reading and listening. Language input equips the students with knowledge of vocabulary, sentence pattern, grammar, discourse, culture .etc. Driven by output, the students purposefully select information from the brain, and then compose the writing. Writing output is to check the students' all-around linguistic abilities and also to elevate their comprehensive abilities of thinking and reasoning.

3. NECESSITY OF APPLYING OUTPUT-DRIVEN HYPOTHESIS IN ENGLISH WRITING TEACHING FOR PH.D. GRADUATES

Many China's college is now still using input-oriented teaching method for English acquisition, which means students mainly receive knowledge from the teachers, but their expressive skills are seldom trained. (Liu, 2009) Those colleges should discard this teaching notion and resort to output teaching methods to enhance students' interest of English learning. High level learners, like graduates, want to use English as a tool to facilitate their work and life. If their wish is not met, their passion in English learning is sure to decline.

Ph.D. graduates, as the highest level of English learners, should be equipped with the ability to write

their findings fluently and accurately in English. (Shi & Ouyang, 2017). As a matter of fact, most Ph.D. graduates are only good at reading and listening (i.e. input), but not good at output, especially at writing. Their vocabulary is very big, but their essays have various mistakes. For example: there are many grammatical mistakes; their sentence pattern is not varied; the essays lack linking devices or the linking devices are used inappropriately; the essays are not rich in content; the essays' structure is not logical; the argument is weak and unconvincing. (Chen, 2010) The reason is that they seldom do language output, and the teacher accordingly seldom corrects their mistakes in writing.

Ph.D. graduates have been studying English for about seventeen years; in those years, especially before college, they learn English mainly by input. Their input accumulation is way sufficient for language output. English teachers for Ph.D. graduates can never employ input-driven teaching methods any longer.

4. TEACHING OF ENGLISH WRITING FOR PH.D. GRADUATES GUIDED BY OUTPUT-DRIVEN HYPOTHESIS

Writing is a typical output skill, which needs high linguistic skills. According to output-driven hypothesis, output boosts input. (Wang & Chen, 2016) In writing, if students find their mistakes or weaknesses in language knowledge and writing skills, they may work hard to input more related materials to make their writing output more perfect, and then a benign circle is formed. This is why the theory is called output-driven hypothesis.

4.1 Reform the English Curriculum System of Ph.D. Graduates

According to the traditional English curriculum system, English teaching center on texts and reading. The teacher tries to elevate students' reading and comprehensive abilities through new words, phrases, sentence patterns. (Zhang, 2012) The reason of such teaching mode is mostly because China's English teaching is exam-oriented. As is stated formerly, language input and output are closely related. The English teacher need regard output (not exam) as the final purpose of language acquisition. To reform the traditional English curriculum system does not mean to discard input. Input is still the beginning point of English acquisition, but after the input, the teacher should let the students write by outputting what they have just input, and then through peer correction or the teacher's correction, the students can find their weaknesses in expression, which drives them to work hard to get more related information to overcome those weaknesses. With more information added, the teacher asks the students to write again, to see whether the students have made progress. According to the second version, the teacher

or peers should also give the students feedbacks. If the students have done a good job, the teacher should give them praise to encourage them to work on; if the second writing is not satisfactory, the teacher should repeat the procedure until they have made the output right.

4.2 Do Writing Output Based on Various Tasks

As is said, writing can make students output what they have learned, instead of receiving knowledge passively. Writing can also make students finds their weaknesses and enable them to study actively. (Wang, 2015) The teacher should take the advantage of writing to make Ph.D. graduates do language output frequently. According the texts, the teacher can assign the students a writing task related to the text, such as writing a summary, rewriting, or imitative writing, to make them familiar with the topic and what they have learned about the topic. The teacher can also divide the class into groups, and let members of the group cooperate to finish a writing task, and it is the teacher's role to declare each one's task in the group. (Lou, 2015) This is to check the students' ability of teamwork. Through pair work and contrast, the students can find their weaknesses and try to perfect themselves through conscious efforts. Besides, there are many kinds of individual writing tasks for teachers to assign the students. For example, writing diaries, notes, letters, emails, movie reports, book reports, etc. As Ph.D. graduates are high level learners, the teacher can mainly assign them to write book reports, and if it is permitted, the teacher can let them write their research findings in English. Additionally, the teacher should teach the students writing skills for them to follow.

4.3 Optimize the Content of Writing Instruction

As for teaching Ph.D. graduates writing, because they are the advanced learners, the teacher should select the content of writing instruction. On the one hand, the teacher should select appropriate level of materials to teach, never making it too easy, or they may think they are looked down upon. They may even think the teacher has no quality to teach them. On the other hand, the teacher should select appropriate materials for them to write, to let then do output actively and happily. If their English interest is not aroused, the teaching efficiency is sure to be unsatisfactory. In addition, the content of writing instruction should be related to their major and research. Anyway, English is not their major; they study English mainly to help them to do research more conveniently and broadly. If they think the English material is useless and needless, the teaching instruction may be in vain.

4.4 Discuss for Further Writing

As Ph.D. graduates have already formed their own thoughts and they have their own insights into everything. The teacher first assigns a proper topic for them to discuss in English, and let them express their ideas towards the topic respectively. Through discussion, the graduates can

broaden their view, build up their writing information, and practice their communicative skills. After discussion, with the former input, they are ready to make the first writing output.

4.5 Provide Writing Feedbacks

When graduates have handed in the first version of writing, the teacher should provide feedbacks for them. There are many means to give students feedbacks. The main means is through the teacher's correction, because the English teacher is the most professional guider for students. Another way to get feedbacks is through peer correction. To make peer correction more successful, the teacher should try to make the writing anonymous. Peer correction can make them see others' strengths and, at the same time, their own weaknesses. It is a good way to motivate them to enhance their own writing abilities. The last means to provide feedbacks is through network. With technology improving, writing-correction networks can provide plenty of preferable advice for writers. For example, there is a network called "pigai.org" which is now ever used by 445,076,932 users.

4.6 Establish a Comprehensive Evaluation System

The teacher needs to establish an evaluation system based on output-driven hypothesis. As for evaluating Ph.D. graduates' writing ability, the teacher should evaluate them by academic writing, because Ph.D. graduates' main concern is to do academic research. Moreover, the teacher should evaluate them both by process evaluation and summative evaluation. (Shi & Ouyang, 2017) Besides, the assessors of evaluation should include not only teachers but also graduates. To regard graduates as assessors can make them actively take part in the teaching process and arouse from them more interest in English study.

CONCLUSION

Swain's output hypothesis enables second language learners to switch their linguistic study from language input to output, and Wen Qiufang's output-driven hypothesis asks the second language teachers change their teaching focus from input-oriented methods to output-oriented methods. According to the English teaching for Ph.D. graduates, the teacher should reform the traditional English curriculum system and make writing, not reading, as the initial part of teaching. The teacher should also devise appropriate topics for them to write and discuss. After the graduates have submitted their writing, the teacher and their peers ought to provide feedbacks for them to rewrite a better version. And the evaluation system for English writing instruction of Ph.D. graduates should be comprehensive and include both teachers and peers as the assessors. Writing is a rather difficult task, even for the natives. The second language teachers need

to stick to output-driven hypothesis and learners need to practice more to make their writing perfect.

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