

Academic Writing-based British and American Literature Teaching from the Perspective of Activity Theory

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Abstract: This research attempts to implement the teaching of academic writing-based British and American literature for postgraduates majoring in English literature. Drawing on activity theory, the curriculum integrates reports on reading materials, group learning, teaching assistants, and other forms of activities, give full play to the mediating tools, rules, communities and division of labor, and other factors. The analysis of students' course paper writing shows that students' academic English writing and research abilities have been improved, and the courses have achieved good initial results in teaching.

1. Introduction

Under the background of the internationalization of higher education, English has become the international academic lingua franca, and more and more domestic scholars have recognized English for Academic Purposes (EAP) [1] as an attribute of college English [2]. In this context, academic writing has become an important indicator of comprehensive international talents. In recent years, academic English writing has become one of the domestic college English curriculum reform focal points. Domestic colleges and universities have opened various academic English courses. The teaching of academic English writing involves multiple disciplines, helping students master the genre structure of academic papers, writing norms, and enhancing students' ability to use English for academic communication and improving students' academic performance. However, there are few attempts to teach British and American literature based on academic writing. For a long time, British and American literature teaching has been a closed system confined to the classroom. As a humanities subject, traditional British and American literature courses focus on language skills training, reading, and appreciation and rarely talk about writing. Thus, it appears that traditional literature teaching no longer meets the actual requirements for the real needs of society. Furthermore, academic literary texts are distinctively different from the typical academic papers in schematic structure. For these reasons, it is necessary to carry out academic-oriented literature courses to train students' critical literature reading and academic writing skills. Given this, this article presents the teaching practice of academic writing-based courses on British and American literature from activity theory.

2. Academic Writing-based British and American Literature Teaching Based on Activity Theory

The following part deals with the overview of Activity Theory and the curriculum design of for academic writing-based British and American Literature Teaching based on Activity Theory.

2.1. Overview of Activity Theory

2.1.1. Definition and Development of Activity Theory

Activity theory is developed as one of the conceptual landmarks of Sociocultural theory, emphasizing the significance of social contextual resources and goal-oriented social activities to the

subject's cognition and behavior development. The “triangular model” activity system is representative of activity theory. The system takes subject, object, and community as its core elements and uses mediating tools, rules, and roles as regulatory elements [3].

Activity theory recognizes the important role of participation in social activities in individual learning and development. The basic characteristics of the activity include artefact-mediated and object-oriented. In addition, mediation is a key mechanism for activity and cognitive development [3]. Thus, mediation tools are important means for individuals to participate in social activities and regulate mental development.

The development of activity theory has undergone three broad stages. In its earlier development, Vygotsky's cultural regulation theory proposed a triangular model of the relationship between subject, object, and mediating tools [4]. The link between the subject and the object is created by mediating tools. It means the individual agents can use and produce cultural artifacts to achieve the goal of object conceptualization. Later, Leont'ev puts forward three levels of activity in activity regulation theory: activity, action, and operation, corresponding to the motivation of the activity, the process of obtaining the goal, and the means of action [5]. Finally, Engeström extends the dimension of collective activity to form a collective activity system model [3,6].

2.1.2. Basic model of Activity Theory

The basic model of activity theory includes six elements (See Figure 1). These include subject, object, mediating tools, rules, community, and the division of labor, which together act on the evolution and development of human activities [3]. Individual and collective cognitive development occurs in the activity system composed of these elements. The same is true for the graduate writing-based English literature teaching and learning activity system.

- **The subject** involves the individual or group such as language learners and teachers participating in activities.

- **Object** refers to the goal of the activity (such as learning content, tasks, or problems). It is the target that the subject operates, and the subject can transform it into a specific cognitive result.

- **Tools/Mediating artefacts** include all material and psychological tools used to transform objects into results.

- **A community** is composed of several individuals and groups that share objects.

- **Rules** relate to provisions, standards, or contracts such as syllabus and task requirements to regulate activities.

- **The division of labor** is defined as assigning tasks and functions of community members (such as group cooperative learning role assignment, teacher-student role assignment).

The concept of mediation and activity theories clarify the nature of social activities of human cognitive development and learning, clearly establish the epistemological connection between SCT and second language learning activities, and promote researchers to examine and understand the nature and process of second language learning from a new perspective.

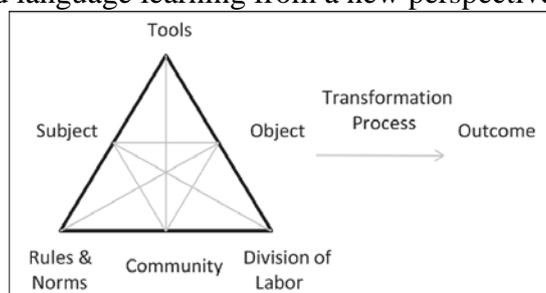


Figure 1 Collective activity system. [3]

2.1.3. Studies of Activity Theory

In recent years, activity theory has gradually attracted attention from domestic scholars and has been used in the design and research of English teaching activities. The application of activity theory in foreign language teaching is mainly reflected in three aspects: peer feedback and teacher

feedback in second language writing [7,8], the construction of second language teaching mode [9] [10,11], and teacher development [12,13]. Previous studies framed under activity theory emphasize second language acquisition and academic writing feedback. However, only a few studies have applied activity theory to academic writing teaching activities. For example, Xiong constructed an English academic paper writing process model based on activity theory in a classroom, highlighting the importance of academic language, discourse, and scientific thinking as mediating tools [14]. In a similar vein, Zhang and Sun provide a successful curriculum transformation case for EFL writing courses by carrying out writing activities using mediating such as books and reading packages [15].

In summary, these studies have investigated the teaching mode of English academic writing guided by activity theory and helped us grasp the current research situation. However, to date, few studies have explored the teaching of British and American literature writing from activity theory. Therefore, this study aims to provide a curriculum design of academic writing-based English and American literature under the guidance of activity theory.

2.2. The Curriculum Design for Academic Writing-based British and American Literature Teaching Based on Activity Theory

2.2.1. Basic Idea of the Curriculum Design

The academic writing-based English and American literature is a compulsory course offered for graduate students majoring in English and American literature. The course counts for two credits, a total of 32 class hours. This course is an extension of the English and American literature reading course. In teaching, these two sections are connected temporally and logically by an input-output sequence. By reading classic works of British and American novels, the aim is to enable students to accumulate the necessary basic knowledge of British and American novels, improve their reading, understanding, and appreciation abilities of British and American novels, so that they can develop a good habit of self-study of British and American literature. On this basis, the goal of the writing-based English and American literature course is to cultivate students' ability to criticize classic literary works and improve their writing ability of academic papers in English and American literature to lay a foundation for improving the overall quality of the graduate students of this major, comprehensive professional ability and innovative scientific research ability.

In order to help students understand the generic features of academic texts regarding English and American literature and improve their awareness of academic norms, 30 representative academic papers on British and American novels are selected as reading materials in class. These texts are selected from prestigious journals of British and American literature research (e.g., AMERICAN LITERARY REALISM, AMERICAN LITERATURE, NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY). These are recognized as high-quality journals in the field of English literature research. Furthermore, according to the specific requirements of the syllabus and examination syllabus of the course, these 30 academic papers on English and American literature will be compiled into the self-edited textbook "English and American Literature" based on related topics and content.

2.2.2. Implementation of Academic Writing-based British and American Literature Teaching

The course teaching is mainly divided into the following three stages:

Before the class, students are assigned to read and comprehend the selected reading materials with some supplementary textbooks. Then, according to the topics involved in reading materials, students voluntarily form into several groups (such as realism, romantic, and naturalism groups). Each group is responsible for the reading and display of certain content.

In class, students are required to give presentations on what they read. Generally, a group is selected to report every week. Students also participate in group discussions to share what they observed from the patterns of academic literary writing. For example, they can discuss how the abstract of the article is schematically organized, how the introduction section is written, what prominent linguistic features are employed in the text, and what style is chosen. Students learn and apply knowledge in participating in group discussions to achieve the unity of theory and practice.

After the self-report and group discussions, the teacher will explain some critical contents based

on case analysis. These include the generic features characterizing literary research genres, the schematic structure of each part of the academic paper, and citation use in academic writing.

After completing the course learning, students are allowed to write a course paper based on topics they are interested in. Student papers will be reviewed by the course teacher with suggestive feedback. Course reflection should also be added for the improvement of future teaching practice.

Students continue to master the academic writing skills of English and American literature throughout the teaching process through self-study, personal presentations, group discussions, academic writing, and teacher feedback to improve their academic writing skills.

2.2.3. The Implication of Academic Writing-based British and American Literature Teaching Based on Activity Theory

In academic writing-based teaching of English and American literature, the configuration of various elements in activity theory is crucially important. Informed by activity theory, the main body is the graduate students engaging in the course. The object is the academic text (e.g., literary course paper) produced by the student. Students' learning is regulated by various tools, including materialized products and language signs. The mediating tools that students can use for learning writing include textbooks, course outlines, target language academic papers, prior literature, research methods and data collection methods, theoretical and analytical frameworks, professional guidance and peer guidance, etc. The student body uses these tools to devote themselves to the object to achieve results. Learning also needs to use mediating tools and resources such as cultural artifacts to construct new knowledge.

Students' academic writing activities are also rooted in a specific social, cultural and historical environment, influenced by rules, communities, and division of labor. Specifically, the act of learning how to write academic papers in literature takes place in an academic community, such as a classroom. In classroom teaching, teachers and students assume different tasks and roles for different tasks. Similarly, the subject needs to follow certain academic writing norms in this academic community, such as academic English citation norms, writing paradigms of different genres, etc.

Thus, as far as writing-based British and American literature is concerned, in order to achieve learning goals, students as the subject need to use specific tools as a medium to act on the object (target) and invest in reforms in a social and cultural environment composed of elements such as community, rules, and roles, and ultimately lead to specific results. The course involves a variety of activities, including project progress reports, group work, and instruction from teaching assistants, which give full play to the roles of mediating artifacts, rules, community, and division of labor. The teaching of academic writing-based English and American literature from an activity theory perspective reflects social and cultural writing, which views writing as a social behavior [16].

3. Conclusion

This research implements academic writing-based British and American literature teaching based on activity theory and provides a feasible teaching reference for future literature teaching practice. The study sees academic writing teaching as a collective practice. The writing-based teaching practice is adjusted by certain mediating tools, clear rules, a wide range of learning communities, and a reasonable division of labor so that students' academic genre awareness and academic English writing have been improved. In general, the expected teaching goals are achieved well. Activity theory from a sociocultural perspective provides a more dynamic and ecological model for systematically explaining the practice of foreign language writing teaching. Of course, it is difficult to avoid some problems in this teaching attempt. For example, each group's classroom reports and group discussions account for most of the classroom practice, resulting in some content that is not reflected in the teacher's summary and explanation section. In addition, reading materials are generally difficult for students to understand, and the paper structure paradigm is quite different from the accepted academic genre structure paradigm, which challenges students in writing semester papers. Therefore, selecting reading materials of appropriate difficulty and making full use

of the limited classroom time to help every student learn something is worthy of in-depth investigation.

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