

An Exploration of English Writing Teaching Design in Senior High School Based on the Activity-based Learning Approach

Zhanghan Ma

School of Foreign Language, China West Normal University, Nanchong 637009, China

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Abstract

According to the New English Curriculum Standard for Senior High School, the teaching concept based on the English activity-based learning approach is advocated, which aims at improving students' English subject core competences. And writing teaching is an important way to cultivate students' core competences of English. However, due to the lack of deep understanding of the curriculum objectives and teaching concept of learning activity, there may be some problems in writing teaching such as the lack of students' autonomous and cooperative learning, the lack of hierarchy and logic in activity design, and the lack of practice and innovation activities. Based on the English activity-based learning approach, this study explores senior high school English writing teaching strategies based on the construction of perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing activities, transferring and creating activities, with a view to promote the improvement of students' comprehensive language ability, cultural awareness, quality of thinking and learning ability in writing teaching.

Keywords

Activity-based Learning Approach; Core Competences; High School English Writing Teaching

1. Introduction

English subject core competences are emphasized in the new General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards(2017 Edition) (for short: NECS) which are consisted of four terms: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability[1]. Writing, a productive activity, can effectively reflect students' mastery of English writing knowledge and comprehensive application ability. And to some extent, it can reflect the level of learners' core competences. In terms of writing, NECS clearly states that students should be able to write short essays with coherent meaning and complete structure, and be able to describe situations, express

views and attitudes in English in a more specific and vivid way, and requires all language learning activities to be carried out under the theme. In a word, writing plays an important role in language acquisition, and the degree of foreign language internalization can be measured by writing. So that writing teaching and learning is the important topic of English teaching research in senior high school.

In NECS, the concept of “the activity-based learning approach” was first put forward which integrates six elements of curriculum content, namely, thematic context, discourse type, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies. It provides an operable way to change students’ learning mode and improve the effect of English teaching and learning. The activity-based approach is a proposal and solution for language teaching to improve the English subject core competences (Wang, 2021)[2]. In senior high school English education, where writing skills are crucial for overall language proficiency, the activity-based approach offers a comprehensive framework for developing these skills within a broader context of communication and cultural understanding. However, some current practices in senior high school English teaching still focus on compartmentalized writing instruction, which limits students’ ability to apply their gained knowledge in a more integrated and practical manner. This traditional teaching method cannot fully reflect the principles of the activity-based approach, which advocates for a more cohesive and dynamic learning process.

To better cultivate students’ writing abilities and support their development of core competences, it is imperative to integrate the activity-based approach into writing instruction at the senior high school level. By doing so, teachers can create a more appropriate environment that encourages critical thinking, creativity, and effective communication through writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. English Subject Core Competence

The term “core competence” first comes from the West. Although other organizations or scholars define it as key competence, the essence is similar.

The OECD proposed the term “key competencies” and then gave more accurate and detailed definition competence which referred to the essential qualities that promote a successful life and a healthy society (2005)[3]. And the European educators suggested to take such concept into account the educational approach in Europe, which indicated that the core competencies was literacy, which not only required all individuals to achieve self-realization but also became active citizens who can actively participate in society and succeed in employment (Halász & Michel, 2011)[4]. However, there was a consensus about “core competence” around the world that refers to the quality for students to adapt to the future life and prepare for work.

China also began to join in when the research on core competencies abroad lasted for a long time. The Ministry of Education mentioned the term “Core Competence”

formally for the first time. After that, the Ministry of Education issued NECS which summarizes the term “English subject core competences” for the first time. NECS indicates that English subject core competences includes four aspects: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability. Language ability involves the integrated development of listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing skills. Cultural awareness refers to understanding and appreciating cultural diversity, and being aware of the customs, values, and social norms of different cultures. Thinking quality refers to the ability to think critically, creatively, and logically in the process of language learning and communication. And learning ability refers to the capacity for autonomous learning, continuous learning, as well as applying effective strategies for learning English.

2.2. The Activity-based Learning Approach to English Learning and Teaching

For learning activity, different scholars have different definitions of it. Some foreign educators point out that learning activities refer to the sum of various operations carried out by an individual learner and a community of learners to achieve a certain goal. Moreover, they believe that learning activities are the purposeful completion of previously formulated detailed learning outcomes, which are achieved through active and effective interactions between the learner and the environment. (Vygotsky, L.S., 1978)[5]. In China, some scholars believe that learning is a process in which individuals build new experiences from past experiences through learning activities. They believe that learning activities mainly refer to the practical activities that students participate in independently in the process of education (Yang, 1999)[6]. These activities are based on the student’s learning interests and internal needs and aim to achieve the well-rounded development of the student’s abilities. These activities are characterized by active exploration. Yang (2005) concluded that the activities are conducive to promoting students’ growth[7]. Participation and development can be called learning activities. Gao (2018) pointed out that English learning activities are the basic form of English classroom teaching and the main way to implement curriculum objectives[8]. Learning activities become a kind of learning way for students, and provide an operable path for English teaching quality. In NECS, the activity-based approach to English learning advocates that students learn English through a series of integrated, relevant, and practical theme-based activities, where they undergo learning processes such as perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and creating. Wang (2018) believes that English learning activities are not a simply activity-oriented education concept, but rather an attitude and understanding that runs through the design and organization of the whole class, rather than just the design and implementation of activities[9]. In addition, Zhu (2019) points out the need to introduce activity-based approach into teaching[10]. Under the premise of determining the subject context of

activities, learners can develop their ability to find and solve problems in the subject context through these three types of hierarchical activities under the guidance of the subject context.

Engaging in these activities allows students to leverage their prior knowledge, explore the significance of different text forms, and undertake tasks that require critical thinking and problem-solving. As a result, students advance in their grasp of language structures, refine their communicative competencies, broaden their cultural perspectives, develop a range of cognitive skills, cultivate positive attitudes, and employ strategic learning approaches. This experience serves as both an integrative path for mastering linguistic elements and practical communication skills and an ongoing process for enriching cultural sensitivity, improving thinking capacity, and boosting learning abilities.

2.3. English Writing Teaching

According to Wang and Wen (2002), the process of writing is the process of thinking in two languages[11]. They believe that there are five kinds of thinking activities between language input and output: problem solving, content conception, structure conception, text output and content control, and learners need to complete complex thinking activities from pre-writing to post-writing.

Activity-based approach to English learning integrates different levels of teaching activities into writing teaching, and constructs a teaching model of senior high school English writing that combines reading and writing (Ge and Yin, 2020)[12]. In such model, students will gradually master the use of vocabulary, the structure of sentence patterns and the mining of theme content. The following examples can explain why writing process and the activity-based approach to English learning can be well combined. In the stage of perceiving and understanding stage, the writer obtains the language knowledge, topic knowledge and style knowledge needed for writing on the premise of reading relevant texts. In the applying and practicing stage, the writer initially use language, topic and stylistic knowledge to conduct post-reading dialogue. And then in the transferring and creating stage, the writer can creatively apply the above knowledge to complete the writing output task in a new context. So that in the process of writing teaching, teachers should concentrate on inspiring students' intrinsic motivation for writing by bridging the gap between writing tasks and their real-life experiences. It is essential to first activate students' relevant background knowledge, whether linguistic, topical, or related to personal ideas and emotions. By engaging in English writing, students can articulate their emotional and rational reflections through written expression. This process not only enhances their linguistic abilities but also fosters logical, critical, and creative thinking, thereby emphasizing the practical application of English as a communicative tool.

3. Problems in Senior High School English Writing Teaching

3.1. Teacher-led learning limits students' autonomous and cooperative learning

In English writing instruction, some classes are teacher-centered, with students being afforded minimal opportunities for self-directed and collaborative learning. This instructional approach often resulted in a lack of autonomy for the students, as they were not granted the necessary time and space to engage in independent thought and exploration. The dominance of the teacher in the learning process meant that students' creative and critical thinking skills were not adequately nurtured. The classroom environment, structured around the teacher's guidance and direction, left little room for students to develop their own voices and perspectives in writing. As a result, the potential for students to cultivate a personal style and a deep understanding of the writing process was significantly limited.

3.2. The design of activities lacks hierarchy and logical coherence

The activities of the English writing teaching suffer from a lack of hierarchical and logical progression. The sequence of tasks and exercises did not build coherently upon each other, leading to a disjointed learning experience for the students. Without a clear structure that progressed from basic to advanced skills, students found it challenging to grasp the correlation of writing concepts and techniques. The lack of a well-designed activity hierarchy also meant that students cannot be systematically guided through the stages of writing development, which hindered their ability to master the craft and apply it effectively in various contexts.

3.3. Practice and innovation activities are insufficient

In terms of classroom instruction, the focus is mainly on understanding and perceiving activities. These activities, while essential for the acquisition of basic knowledge, ignore the importance of applying practice and innovative activities. There is a lack of writing opportunities in the classroom that allow students to apply what they have learned to the real world. In addition, the lack of activities designed to promote innovation and knowledge transfer means that students have few opportunities to experiment with their writing, think critically or create original content. This imbalance in activity types limits students' ability to fully develop writing skills.

4. English Writing Teaching Strategies Guided by the Activity-based Learning Approach

4.1. Principles of designing English writing teaching activities in senior high school

4.1.1. Carry out the learner-centered concept

Learner-centered learning places the students at the heart of the educational experience.

rience, empowering them to take an active role in their own learning process. This approach fosters autonomy, responsibility, and a deeper engagement with the material. In the context of writing instruction, it means that activities are designed to encourage students to explore, inquire, and construct knowledge rather than passively receive information. According to Mei and Wang (2018), high school English writing teaching activities designed based on the concept of English learning activities should make it clear that students are the real subjects of activities and teachers should guide learners to actively participate in English writing teaching activities[13]. In the process of English learning, only when the principal position of students is guaranteed and maintained, can students' independent learning and subjective initiative be realized.

However, in the actual writing teaching activities, each student has different participation in the activities, so each gains differently. The learning of English writing mainly depends on students' independent learning, so the teaching activities of English writing designed from the perspective of activity-based approach should adhere to the principle of students as the main body. This means that identifying themes, setting goals and designing and implementing activities are based on the practical needs of the students.

4.1.2. Design the whole writing teaching based on thematic meaning

Unit can be seen as a learning and practice platform that carries the meaning of the theme and provides the course contents related to the theme. Writing is generally in the last part of a unit, requiring students to integrate the vocabulary, grammar, culture and other knowledge learned or ability acquired in each part of the whole unit, and to express personal views or solve specific problems in combination with specific situations and task requirements, so as to promote the development of students' thinking and form an overall understanding and comprehensive application of the meaning of the theme.

Under the overall framework of the unit, teachers should take the development of students' English core competences as the purpose, design the overall teaching objectives of the unit based on the thematic context, integrate the teaching contents of the unit, organize and analyze the knowledge, skills and strategies related to the theme, coordinate teaching according to students' actual level and learning needs, and expand the meaning of the theme in teaching activities. Also, contextual relevance need to be guaranteed because if the writing tasks are connected to real-life experiences, current events, or cultural contexts, there will be a connection between writing and reality which makes the learning more meaningful and relatable, thereby increasing student' interest and engagement. Relevant contexts help students see the practical applications of what they are learning. In the writing teaching based on the whole unit teaching, the necessary language input in writing teaching is distributed in listening and speaking, reading, vocabulary and grammar classes. Students

can internalize knowledge through practical activities on the basis of in-depth perceiving and understanding of language and culture connotation (Nuraeni and Ratnawati, 2024)[14]. And then through the targeted transferring and creating writing activities, the formation and development of students' core competences such as expressive skills, logical thinking ability and cultural awareness can be promoted.

4.2. Process design of English writing teaching activities in senior high school

4.2.1. Pay attention to reading for writing and the guidance of writing process

The writing teaching under the guidance of the activity-based approach pays much attention to the cognitive process of students' writing, emphasizing that students actively recognize, analyze and solve problems in writing, and creatively express their own opinions, attitudes and values. In such process, reading and writing and their combination play a key role. In the writing guidance, teachers should carry out meaningful reading and writing activities based on the characteristics of students to help them better understand and use the topic knowledge, genre characteristics, writing techniques and so on. According to the concept of activity-based approach, the activity pattern of perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing and transferring and creating can be designed to promote reading and writing in the following three levels, that is, text-based activities, activities that go deep into the text and activities that go beyond the text.

When designing and implementing text-based activities, by reading for main idea and reading for specific information, teachers guide students to acquire and sort out the main content and details of the reading text, understand its connotation and extract the theme of the article. Activities go deep into the text encourage students to analyze and think about the content of the text at a deeper level, and develop critical thinking and logical reasoning skills. For example, problem-oriented activities help students to think about the author's purpose of writing, the reason for choosing the topic, the consistency between the selection of materials and the theme, so as to deepen the understanding of the connotation of the text. Next, the teacher guides the students to sort out the structure of the article and then draw a mind map if necessary. Through core vocabulary and phrases, combined with the text of the mind map, students describe the relevant content in oral form, to practice and use language knowledge, exercise language skills, and pave the way for learning writing. Students may also have group discussions or debates around related topics or controversial points in the text, prompting students to express personal views and provide evidence for their arguments. Or students can compare different texts on similar topics to analyze their similarities and differences in point of view expression, stylistic style, etc., to deepen the understanding of the text. The activities beyond text are de-

signed to stimulate students' creativity, enabling them to flexibly apply their knowledge, create independently in new situations, and embody personalized expression. Specifically, this can include the following types of activities. Students are encouraged to create new stories, poems, plays or other forms of work based on what they have learned, combined with their own experience or imagination. Or the teacher can put forward a realistic problem related to the text, and ask students to propose a solution through writing, showing their observation and thinking.

Teachers play an active role as facilitators and supporters at every stage of writing, from pre-writing to post-writing, ensuring that students not only master writing skills, but also experience the joy of growing and learning gradually. First, in the preparation and planning stages, teachers lay a solid foundation for writing by activating students' background knowledge, setting clear goals, and providing appropriate resources. Then, in the conceptualization and organization process, teachers teach students to organize their ideas, and encourage problem-oriented thinking to help them build clear essay structures. When the first draft is written, teachers provide continuous feedback, promote peer evaluation, and provide individual tutoring to struggling students to ensure fluency without being constrained by grammatical errors. In the revision and editing stage, teachers teach revision skills, guide students to self-check the logical coherence and linguistic accuracy of the article, and deepen the content to make the article more rich and full. Finally, in the final submission process, teachers create opportunities to show students, guide students to reflect on the entire writing process, and give fair and reasonable assessment and recognition, so as to enhance students' sense of accomplishment and self-confidence.

4.2.2. Pay attention to the hierarchy and logic of activity design

Anderson (2001) classified cognitive goals, including the following six levels, namely, remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating[15]. Under the background of the integration of reading and writing, the hierarchy and logic of the design of writing teaching activities are reflected in that the goal of the activities should be directed to the above categories. Activity design should follow the cognitive law of students, that is, from easy to difficult, from shallow to deep order, students gradually stimulate old knowledge to experience new knowledge, understand and use new knowledge, comprehensive analysis and evaluation of old and new knowledge, generation and creation of new knowledge. Therefore, the classroom activity design based on the English activity view includes the following three stages: perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and creating.

Perceiving and understanding activities are designed to create situations related to the theme through perception and attention activities, activate students' existing knowledge and experience, clarify problems to be solved, and enable students to

establish connections between existing knowledge and experience and learning subjects, find cognitive gaps, and form learning expectations. For example, teachers can show students pictures or videos related to the topic of the lesson before class, and ask relevant questions for students to watch purposefully. This can help students recall some relevant background knowledge of the topic and lay a foundation for future learning.

Applying and practicing activities guide students to carry out a variety of meaningful language practice activities such as description, interpretation, analysis and application based on the formed structured knowledge, internalize language knowledge and cultural knowledge, deepen the understanding of cultural meaning, consolidate structured knowledge, and promote the transformation of knowledge into ability (Brown, 2008)[16]. At this level, the activities combined with the specific situation of discourse help students transform their acquired information or skills into problem-solving abilities, and truly promote the transformation of students' knowledge into skills.

Transferring and creating activities mainly include inference and demonstration, criticism and evaluation, imagination and creation and other learning activities beyond discourse. These activities guide students to carry out reasoning and argumentation activities based on the value orientation behind the text and the attitude and behavior of the author, learn to appreciate the stylistic features of the text, grasp the structure of the text, discover the means and characteristics of language expression, and evaluate the views and behaviors of the author through analysis, so as to deepen their understanding of the meaning of the theme. Then, students can use the learned knowledge, skills, methods, strategies and ideas to know about and understand the world from multiple perspectives, creatively solve problems in new situations, rationally express emotions, attitudes and opinions, and promote the transformation of ability into quality.

4.3. Evaluation design of English writing teaching activities in senior high school

4.3.1. Combine formative assessment with summative assessment

The evaluation of writing teaching effect should be based on practical teaching rather than subjective judgment. Whether students have mastered and can use learned knowledge well should be evaluated by observing their performance. Specifically, it can be judged by students' classroom performance, active participation or not, group assistance with peers, and the written texts based on the activity-based approach in the final writing output process. In the process of writing teaching, teacher should combine the formative and summative assessment. To be more specific, in writing teaching, the implementation of formative assessment is mainly achieved through continuous feedback and monitoring. Teachers provide immediate feedback at every stage of the students' writing process, such as brainstorming,

drafts, revisions, etc. This kind of evaluation focuses on the students' thought process and writing strategies, and aims to guide the students' progress through concrete suggestions and suggestions for improvement, rather than just giving a grade. Unlike formative assessment, summative assessment is usually conducted at the end of the semester to assess students' learning outcomes throughout the semester which may include asking students to submit a complete written work that is assessed against clear grading criteria. In addition, standardized writing tests can be used as part of a final assessment to see how well students perform on specific writing skills.

In order to effectively combine formative and summative assessment, teachers can adopt a balanced scoring method to combine the formative assessment results of students' daily homework, engagement and self-editing with the final assessment such as final exams or works to determine the final grades of students.

4.3.2. Combine self and peer editing

After students have completed the first draft, teachers should guide them through a self-editing, focusing on the following key points: 1. whether the essay stays on topic; 2. whether it covers all the points required by the topic; 3. whether there are some spelling and grammar errors. In the process of students' self editing and evaluation, teachers should provide timely guidance and tips to help students carry out such task effectively.

Peer editing involves exchanging writing, revising and annotating each other among group members, with the aim of helping each other find and correct errors, as well as promoting mutual learning. Through this interaction, students are able to exchange ideas so that they can inspire new writing ideas and gain richer perspectives. Peer editing should not only focus on micro-level corrections, such as spelling, punctuation, writing and other details, to enrich the expression of the sentence, but also should examine the content and structure of the article from a macro perspective to ensure that it is reasonable. In the evaluation process of group mutual examination, students can listen to each other's opinions and assist each other, analyze and evaluate from the perspective of students, and such feedback is easier to be accepted by peers. More importantly, students' own writing skills will be significantly improved in the process of evaluating their peers' compositions. In addition, teachers can use motivational strategies, such as having representatives from each group read aloud in front of the class to share the best work. Other students can then rate the showing compositions and evaluation criteria to further promote their participation and progress.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the application of the activity-based learning approach in senior high school English writing instruction, aiming to address existing challenges

such as teacher-dominated classrooms, fragmented activity design, and insufficient opportunities for practice and innovation. By aligning writing teaching with the core tenets of NECS, especially the cultivation of students' core competences in language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability, the activity-based approach offers a structured and student-centered framework for effective writing instruction.

The proposed teaching strategies emphasize a holistic, theme-based design that integrates the three key stages of English learning activities: perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and creating. This hierarchical and logically coherent progression enables students to gradually internalize language knowledge, deepen their understanding of cultural contexts, and develop critical and creative thinking skills. Moreover, by shifting the focus from passive knowledge reception to active engagement, the learner-centered model empowers students to take ownership of their writing process, fostering autonomy, collaboration, and personal expression. Effective implementation also requires a comprehensive evaluation system that combines formative and summative assessments, along with self and peer-editing practices. Such an approach not only enhances linguistic accuracy and structural coherence in students' writing but also promotes reflective thinking and continuous improvement.

In conclusion, the activity-based learning approach provides a powerful pedagogical model for transforming senior high school English writing instruction into a dynamic, meaningful, and competence-oriented process. However, future research should further investigate the long-term impact of this approach on students' writing proficiency and overall language development across diverse educational contexts. So that teachers can better be encouraged to adopt and adapt these strategies to meet the evolving needs of their students, ultimately nurturing confident, capable, and creative English writers.

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