

Teaching Reform on Comprehensive English— in Light of John Dewey’s Pragmatism

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Abstract—This paper analyzes problems in Comprehensive English teaching in light of John Dewey’s Pragmatic education philosophy and proposes suggestions to reform Comprehensive English teaching from the perspective of Pragmatic thinking intelligence cultivation, the student-centered approach and proactive assignment outlook.

Index Terms—pragmatism, influence, comprehensive English, teaching reform

I. INFLUENCE OF JOHN DEWEY’S PRAGMATISM

John Dewey (1859-1952), a famous educator and philosopher of the 20th century, a leading representative of Pragmatic education philosophy. His masterpiece “Democracy and education” published in 1916 marked the fulfillment of construction of Pragmatic education ideas as well as the establishment of education philosophy as an independent subject. John Dewey’s Pragmatism represented Progressivism emerging in the USA, in the late 19th century, which transformed the traditional American education into modern. As a comprehensive education philosophical system, the core idea of Pragmatism is the essence of education—education is life; education is growth; education is experience, which serves to be the basics for Pragmatic Thinking Intelligence ideas, curriculum theory, and proactive assignment outlook. John Dewey held “students-centered” teaching model and “learning by doing”; he proposed “reflexive thinking intelligence” and “5-step situational teaching” based on the “5-step of thinking intelligence”. During his visit in China in 1919-1921, Pragmatism which had greatly influenced Chinese academician, Hu Shi, Tao Xingzhi, Yan Yangchu, Jiang Menglin, and in a great measure, accelerated modern Chinese education reform. Since 1978, the study on John Dewey’s Pragmatism revived. Professor Shan Zhonghui, an expert on John Dewey’s Pragmatism studies maintained in 2007 “Currently John Dewey’s ideas still full of life” and appealed to re-study his thoughts.

John Dewey’s Pragmatism bears realistic instructions to current English teaching reform, in particular to Comprehensive English teaching—the core course of English major curriculum. Yang Limin, Professor of Beijing University of Foreign Studies pointed that cultivation of students’ critical thinking be stressed which was in accordance with Pragmatic Thinking cultivation. Nowadays the student-centered teaching model reveals implications of Pragmatic students-centered teaching model; and current Comprehensive English teaching model introduces situational teaching in line with Pragmatic instructions.

II. PROBLEMS IN CURRENT COMPREHENSIVE ENGLISH TEACHING

Comprehensive English, featuring integrated skills, is the core course of English major curriculum of higher education. It developed from “Intensive Reading” in the 1950th and adopted traditional “reading-reciting” teaching model, with the grammar-translation as the major teaching approach. Since then the task of teaching has been based on the text from which teachers specialized in words, phrases, grammar analysis to intensify vocabulary, grammar, translation and writing competence. With the introduction and development of foreign linguistics and foreign language teaching methodologies in China in the 1980th, comprehension on foreign language teaching has deepened. And hence the objective of English Intensive Reading, centered on reading was in question. “The English Teaching Program for basic stage of higher education” (1989) transformed “English Intensive Reading” to “Comprehensive English”. With a historical viewpoint, Comprehensive English has been firmly connected with Intensive Reading, while from the developmental perspective it has taken on a brand new look in that Comprehensive English attaches emphasis on students’ comprehensive language competence, still Intensive Reading on grammar.

The 21st century has called for cultivation of highly-qualified English talents, with which the teaching of Comprehensive English, the core course of English major curriculum, would keep in pace. Influenced by the traditional English Intensive Reading teaching, prime problems have occurred in current Comprehensive English teaching.

A. Inadapatability of Traditional Teaching Concept to the Objective of English Talents Cultivation in Modern Advanced Education.

“English major teaching program of higher education” (2000) requires the contemporary English talents of five essential qualities, which are in pace with socialist marketing economy, that solid language basics, vast field of

knowledge, sufficient major knowledge, practical capacity and all-round qualities. This means that English talents possess both comprehensive language competence and communicative, social, practical potentials as well. It is stated in the new Program that the objective of Comprehensive English lies in promoting students' English competence systematically- listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating and potentials for problem-solving and communicating from skills training and discourse analysis.

Traditional teaching focused on language points teaching, from which teachers regarded that English language were composed of a set of articulation, words and grammar and the objective was to make the students acquire information, the teaching approach featuring "grammar-translation". In this case, teaching approach fell into the weird circulation with word-grammar teaching as its core, which caused students to wrongly comprehend the course and restrained their overall development in pronouncing, listening, speaking and further affected advancement of students' language quality and thinking intelligence in the long run.

B. Conflict between the Teacher-centered Teaching Model and the Student-centered

Due to the level of the interaction between teachers and students, teaching model consists of the traditional "teacher-centered" and the student-centered. The student-centered is a relatively advanced teaching model that with the instruction of teachers, students are active in solving problems. This model helps students positively construct language points and effectively create harmonious class atmosphere and improve teaching effect.

While the teacher-centered, a relatively backward teaching model, that the interaction between teachers and students is kind of unilateral information transmission, with memorization as the major teaching approach. This model neglects cultivation of students' thinking intelligence competence and puts students into a passive position. Under the influence of traditional teaching concept, the current Comprehensive English teaching has somehow adopted the traditional one which hampers students' learning motivation as well as teaching efficiency.

C. Unsuitability between Traditional Assignment and the Open One

Students' initiatives are detained by the traditional assignment form that they just take down words and sentences by referring books or simply recite the text. The assignment doesn't take its due effect. Besides, the task of assignment is far from reality and lacks variety. In respond to the "Burden Relief on Students", in many cases, students are not required to do any homework. Thus, having caused the students negative motivation for learning that they are engaged in "tackling homework" and by-pass its significance, traditional assignment is not able to complement or further the teaching task. In this case, the traditional assignment to Comprehensive English needs improving greatly and replacing by open assignment, in which students are encouraged to explore various paths to further comprehend class information and development their overall competence.

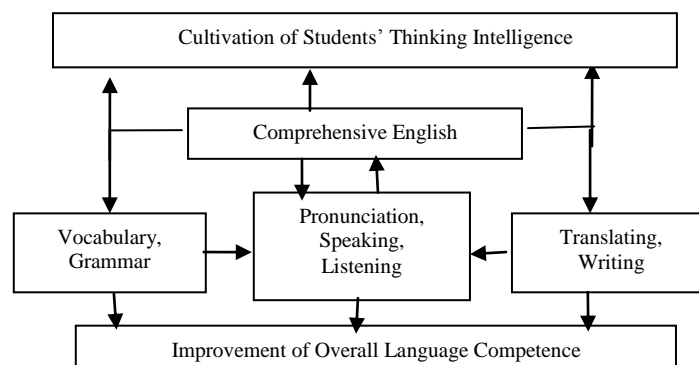
III. IMPLICATIONS OF PRAGMATISM TO TEACHING REFORM ON COMPREHENSIVE ENGLISH

A. Changing Teaching Concept

John Dewey held that the unique way to directly develop teaching and learning approach lied in that attention be attached to various conditions of requirement, improvement and assessment on thinking intelligence, which was essential to wise learning. Therefore, the traditional teaching concept on language points imparting is supposed to be substituted by the leading teaching concept that cultivation of students' thinking intelligence and overall development of language competence be prioritized.

It is manifested in the graph the interdependence of students' thinking intelligence cultivation, integrated language skills and overall English language competence. It shows that students' thinking intelligence cultivation plays the essential role to lifting students' language qualities systematically in that transforming, expanding, and improving of students thinking intelligence activate students' learning motivation and better their listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating competence to achieve the progress of all-round qualities.

TABLE.I



B. Establishment of a Student-centered Teaching Model

Changing of teaching concept determines changes in teaching model. To transform the traditional teacher-centered teaching model into student-centered one has been instrumental in English teaching reform. “4-stage teaching approach” proposed by Johann Friedrich Herbart represents the traditional teaching model. Based on teacher-centered theory, he put forward “comprehension—association—systemization—approach” teaching model. John Dewey, representative of Progressivism opposed the traditional teaching model and insisted the student-centered model, featuring thinking intelligence teaching, which stressed multilateral convey of information between teachers, teachers and students and students. By inspiring and motivating students’ initiatives, teachers instructed students in their learning competence. Besides, he believed that elements in teaching methodology equaled to that of intelligence. The elements are: First, a real experienced situation which generates continuing activities to the student’s interest; second, a real question in the very situation which acts as the stimulus to the thinking; third, command of knowledge by which the student observe and cope with the question, fourth, successive approaches to problem-solving; fifth, an opportunity in which he can reflect and evaluate his ideas and test their validity.

This teaching process comes from “learning by doing” and thinking in “activities”, from which students are able to detect and solve problems. In the meanwhile, he came up with “5-step teaching approach from “learning by doing” that: to detect the task in the situation; to propose the problem in the task; to raise any presumption to solve the problem; to deduce the very presumption and test it in the situation and conclude.

With the instructions of the student-centered teaching model and 5-step Situational Teaching Approach proposed by John Dewey, the key to teaching model transformation rests with teaching approach development—to employ socialized approach, inquiry approach, open approach in class teaching.

C. Concern about Comprehensive English Assignment Reform

Assignment serves to complement and heighten class information and it is a parameter to testing students’ knowledge acquisition. The elastic open-style assignment enhances students’ cognition, thinking intelligence and better command of knowledge from multi-dimensions.

John Dewey believed that the objective of assignment corresponded to humanity or daily experiences, in that case, students learned knowledge had more access to the real life. The open assignment puts students in the relatively “real” situation in which they take the initiative to choose the task and style of completing the task and apply knowledge flexibly to experience the “activity” and internalize knowledge. Hence, the teaching objective and task of Comprehensive English require students of highly overall competence. To meet the requirement, the open assignment is introduced.

It is the major objective of Comprehensive English to promote students’ pronouncing, listening, and speaking competence. So regarding listening and speaking assignment, class report of new style is suggested that students work in groups, with each group responsible for reports in Comprehensive English class for a week and members of the group free to choose the topic and form of reporting. Studying, life, political issues, leisure and entertainment can be the themes via various approaches, such as delivering a lecture, interviewing, acting and talents show. The rich content and a variety of styles make class vivid and true to the students’ life and make them fully explore their creativity, express their ideas, and reveal their personality and faculties and improve their creative thinking, teamwork and cooperative spirit.

In view of Education Psychology, influenced by objective and subjective circumstances, differences of learning acquisition show up between students. In order to make students of various levels experience success, the assignment of various levels is introduced in that a student is entitled to flexibly designed assignment and take the chance to choose the assignment fit for him and his confidence and motivation for learning are guaranteed.

As regards the assignment of observation and surveys, students are advised to make full use of the online information and keep in pace with the latest information, through which the learning efficiency is greatly enhanced. Combined with their practical experience, this approach is conducive to students’ independent thinking and problem-solving capacity.

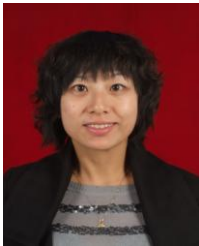
IV. CONCLUSIONS

John Dewey maintained that the nature of education lied in the communicative and cooperative activity. His Pragmatism has left far-reaching impact on current curriculum reform and teaching reform. In line with the prominent position and significance of Comprehensive English in English major curriculum and the objective of English talents cultivation in the 21st century, his ideas have been firmly associated with the reality.

Besides the reforming on teaching concept, teaching model and assignment style in light of Pragmatism, the interrelationship between teachers and students should also be noted that harmonious interaction between them influences students’ interests in learning, class atmosphere and teaching effect. The teachers’ unique personality traits, flexible teaching style and profound major knowledge not only win over students’ trust, respect and understanding, but also help to construct the platform for better communication. In short, John Dewey’s Pragmatism has been fundamental in innovative English teaching. And hence in Comprehensive English teaching, with Pragmatic instructions, new style teaching model and innovative teaching approach can mainly motivate the students and create the agreeable learning atmosphere and cultivate all-round English talents.

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