Teaching English Writing in College Based on Collaborative Learning in the Network Environment

Xinwen Zhang
School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu, China
478857116@qq.com

Abstract: Writing teaching is one of the most important elements in college English teaching classrooms. However, there has been a tendency to emphasize listening and speaking, and neglect writing teaching on college campuses. Collaborative learning is a very important teaching mode, especially with the development of the times, online collaborative learning in English writing has been increasingly implemented in university English teaching environments due to a wider awareness of the support and benefits of web 2.0 technologies. Web-based collaborative learning provides learners with a new learning environment and learning content, which has important practical significance. Based on this, this paper introduces the common theoretical explanations of collaborative learning based on the network. The article first gives an overview of collaborative learning in the network environment, then explores the operability of collaborative teaching of college English writing in the network environment, and finally proposes strategies for teaching collaborative learning within college English writing groups in the network environment, including conducting competitions, group discussions, and peer collaboration.

Keywords: Network environment, Collaborative learning, College English, Writing teaching.

1. Introduction

Teaching writing is one of the most important elements in the college English teaching classroom. English writing ability affects students’ listening, reading, writing and other abilities at the same time, and requires a high level of overall ability. Therefore, college teachers should pay attention to college English writing teaching to cultivate students’ language application ability and English thinking ability. However, in recent years, the requirements of college English syllabus are more about the cultivation of students’ speaking ability and reading ability, and not enough attention is paid to the teaching of college English writing ability. In university campuses, there are not enough teachers to teach English writing as well as no special college English writing courses. Under such circumstances, university teachers and students generally regard English writing training as a dispensable process, and teachers lack systematic training for students’ English writing skills in the classroom, resulting in university students lack of interest in English writing, difficulty in improving their English writing skills, and inability to use written English comfortably in their future work and social life. Therefore, teachers need to explore scientific methods of teaching English writing in college and adopt a collaborative teaching model to improve English writing teaching.

With the development of technologies such as big data analysis, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence, traditional learning methods are no longer able to meet the needs of social development, and the digital generation is more inclined to acquire information, construct knowledge, and develop skills through online communication with peers or teachers[1]. New online learning tools such as e-learning platforms have developed rapidly and their functions have been expanded, playing a pivotal role in the teaching and learning activities of teachers and students, providing support for building learning communities and offering more opportunities for learners to communicate and collaborate with others. Currently, online education has become a new norm[2]. Collaborative learning activities based on online teaching environment can not only make full use of modern information technology, but also enrich and innovate curriculum forms and teaching modes, implement interactive teaching methods, realize deep and collaborative learning, and advance the development of education modernization. Online teaching is an inevitable choice for modern school education in the era of big data, because of its characteristics of being free of time and geographical restrictions, so that it can truly realize “being learning anytime and anywhere”. Especially with the onslaught of the COVID-19, hundreds of millions of students around the world have to study online at home, making online learning a highly valued learning method, and online collaborative learning is also accepted and adopted by more and more educators and learners. As for English writing teaching, the online environment can provide students with more writing resources and materials, which can allow students to participate more flexibly in the writing teaching process[3]. For example, the normalization of the use of common web 2.0 tools, such as Wiki and Google Docs, has led to online collaborative learning gaining more and more attention in college English writing classrooms. Web-based collaborative learning has become a promising research direction due to its characteristics of writing interactivity, writing reflectivity, and time/space independence[4].

2. Overview of Collaborative Learning in a Networked Environment

Collaborative learning originated from the American model of learning. According to Hiltz[5], “collaborative learning” means that knowledge is not taught directly by the teacher to the students, but is gradually developed through active practice such as communication and interaction among students in the process of understanding concepts and applying skills. “Collaborative learning” is a state in which two or more people gain knowledge or try to learn something together. Typically, students work in groups of two or more to find understanding, solutions or meaning for each other, or to create products[6]. Collaborative learning, as a teaching strategy, is an act of learning in which multiple learners...
participate in small groups for the same learning content and collaborate to help each other, promote each other, and improve together to achieve common learning goals[7]. In the collaborative process, learner interaction and communication are particularly important. Collaborative learning requires group members to jointly construct learning tasks, specify which learning resources are needed, and determine the order in which learning tasks are to be completed and the basic operational steps. The learning environment for students mainly includes the resource environment, organizational environment, and hardware environment. The organizational environment refers to the teacher’s division of collaborative groups in small group teaching and clarifying the learning tasks and collaboration methods of the group members. Teachers need to follow certain criteria to divide groups, and they can use complementary approaches to improve students’ collaborative learning according to their academic performance, knowledge structure, knowledge base, and cognitive ability. Collaborative learning has common learning goals and a certain incentive system. Learning communities in collaborative learning activities participate in learning activities as a collective through the guidance of common goals[8]. Knowledge is not a product of individual cognition, but is constructed in social groups.

In the age of information technology, collaborative learning is no longer limited to the traditional face-to-face interaction in the classroom, but is now possible to create a modern collaborative learning environment in China’s network environment by using online collaboration tools. Collaborative learning in the network environment refers to the learning guided by collaborative learning theory, with the help of the network and multimedia and other related technologies. There are some common online collaborative tools include Wiki, Google Docs, Blogs and other collaboration tools abroad. For example, Wiki and Google docs, in collaborative writing activities, provide the whole writing process from task negotiation, language, text co-construction, revision and editing until the final writing product is produced[4]. In China, common used online collaboration tools are conducted through QQ, Wechat, Tencent Docs, etc. The online collaborative learning model is mainly composed of two parts: “online learning” and “collaborative learning”, and its basic elements include active interdependence, interaction, individual responsibility, interaction skills, group self-assessment, common tasks, coordination and monitoring, etc. The online collaborative learning model, which is based on collaborative learning, has the characteristics of “online learning” and can break the boundaries of students’ learning in time and space, so that students can work together at any time and any place to achieve teaching goals and improve students’ learning effect in the form of collaboration, mutual assistance and common progress. The core of online collaborative learning is the interaction between group members, which makes knowledge shared through different perspectives and is the basic activity unit to stimulate and create common knowledge. Interaction is the key to understanding the nature of collaborative learning, and it is also an important basis for exploring the laws of collaborative learning and grasping the changes in the collaborative learning process. Some studies have shown that learning interaction behavior is a key factor affecting the quality of collaborative learning[9].

3. Exploring the Operability of Teaching Collaborative Writing in College English in the Online Environment

After analyzing a large amount of relevant data, we found that collaborative writing teaching in college English in the network environment has strong operability. Teachers should grasp the operability of collaborative teaching of college English writing in the network environment in order to be more scientific and effective in teaching collaborative college English writing.

First, collaborative learning can help students build a complete body of English knowledge. In collaborative learning, teachers adopt to use group teaching method. Teachers need to assign different students to a group according to their grades, gender, etc., and have students engage in discussion and writing activities. Students in the group can share information resources, discuss English writing topics, exchange ideas and write first drafts through brainstorming, etc. Based on this, group members can dig deeper into the connotation of the English writing topic and scientifically determine the main idea and content that needs to be expressed in English writing. Communication among students helps students expand their horizons and enhance their feelings for each other. Using a collaborative learning model within a group can facilitate effective communication among students and between teachers and students, and the classroom atmosphere will be more democratic and harmonious. Such a classroom environment can be motivating for students to learn and share, as well as inspire motivation, inspiration, and enthusiasm for learning in the classroom. By actively exploring, students can help find inspiration and materials for English writing skillfully, and make their essays richer in connotation and more delicate in thought and feeling, thus effectively improving the quality of English writing.

Second, collaborative group learning can develop students’ cognitive skills. Supported by Vygotsky’s[10] sociocultural theory, the scaffolding built between students in collaborative activities facilitates the internalization of knowledge and promotes the development of the human mind and cognition. The collaborative learning teaching model is based on a student-centered approach. The student-centered teaching concept can stimulate students’ learning enthusiasm and initiative and help them develop their cognitive abilities. This learning model requires students to actively search for writing materials, and in the process of searching for materials, students can be exposed to a large number of English resources. The collaborative learning process helps to bring students into full communication, and students communicate with each other before revising their essays. In this process, students need to think deeply about the topic, which is also the exercise and improvement of students’ thinking ability. And it is very beneficial to their future employment and development.

Third, the network environment is the technical guarantee of collaborative writing teaching in college English. The collaborative writing teaching mode of college English in the network environment is more efficient than the traditional teaching mode. Teachers can use the network environment to
collect writing materials when they carry out teaching activities, and the whole process of communication and exchange is also more convenient. This advantage is not available in the traditional teaching mode. The network environment contains modern technology elements that can prompt students to find problems and solve them in the process of communication and interaction, and students can explore English writing topics in a deeper level based on in-depth discussions. The rapid development of the Internet and big data technology has made it possible for online learning space learners to share information resources, tools, ideas and creativity openly at any time. The unique open sharing mechanism of e-learning space makes learners actively participate in it, and learners can not only gain a sense of identity, but also quickly absorb and receive new knowledge, so that their comprehensive ability can be rapidly improved. The characteristics of the online learning space sharing model are that learners not only make full use of the online space to search for library and database resources, but also use various learning communication software, support devices and tools to share resources and feel the satisfaction of free discussion and learning[8]. The improvement of the information technology of college English writing teaching is very helpful to the development of writing teaching activities based on collaborative learning[11]. Of course, this requires teachers to have a positive attitude towards the use of new technologies and to be able to apply them efficiently in their educational activities[12].

Fourth, students’ collaborative group writing practice in the online environment is beneficial to the cultivation of students’ collaborative ability. High collaborative learning ability has a certain effect on improving students’ writing ability. Group collaborative English practice can change the boring individual writing mode into an interesting writing mode, and motivate students to establish a sense of collaboration. Within the group, students can review each other’s strengths and weaknesses of English essays, and students can revise their essays again in response to their shortcomings, so that each student can improve in the writing exercise, which is very beneficial to students’ learning motivation, and students can promote each other and make progress together, and regulate students’ cognitive emotions that giving students a positive emotional experience, these are very beneficial for developing students’ writing skills. In the collaborative learning activities in the online learning space, the most important feature of the online space is that virtual communication can be conducted at any time. Through the communication system, the learning community resolves, eliminates, and suppresses conflicts, so that the interaction between members always moves in a harmonious and orderly direction.

Fifth, in a collaborative teaching model, each student plays a different role; for example, in a collaborative writing activity in small groups of two, one student may be given the role of author for the entire assignment, or it may be decided that each person will take turns being the author. Meanwhile, each member is responsible for the overall product and prepared to take over some of the work if a member of the team is unable to do so. A variety of roles are given, such as leader, writer, grammar checker, vocabulary checker, structure checker, etc. During the collaborative writing exercise in the group, each student takes on a different role and plays a different role.

Each student is a participant in the collaborative writing exercise and also takes on the role of resource gathering and information sharing, and by taking on different roles throughout the collaborative learning and writing process, students’ various abilities are enhanced. For example, writing and cognitive skills and teamwork skills can be improved. Students’ grammar and vocabulary application skills are practiced during all aspects of the writing exercises in the group, which require discussion among students to revise their texts. In addition, the discussion among students can play a role in monitoring and promoting the students’ English writing practice.

4. Strategies for Teaching Collaborative Writing in College English Groups in the Online Environment

Compared with the traditional writing teaching model, collaborative English practice in small groups is more scientific and effective, requiring students to uphold the principle of communicating, learning, and improving with each other. Teachers need to explore more scientific strategies for collaborative writing in small groups. Teachers should adopt scientific teaching strategies to make students grasp the teaching content easily, allow students to exchange information online, and have timely access to information resources and online help, so as to improve students’ English writing ability. The specific analysis of the teaching strategies of collaborative writing in college English groups in the network environment is as follows:

First, the use of competition-based approach to collaborative group teaching. In group collaborative learning, competition-based learning method is very effective. This learning method mainly targets the same learning content, but the learning content is learned by more than one learner, and teachers can use the network environment to carry out competitive collaborative teaching, and teachers should guide students to participate in competition within the group to enhance students’ competitive consciousness and competitive ability. Teachers can use web-based learning systems to set up scientific learning content and learning objectives and provide students with relevant information to effectively solve various problems encountered in the writing process. Competitive group learning can inspire students’ motivation and confidence to explore their skills in English writing more actively. During the competition, each student can learn from his or her competitors’ learning experiences and improve his or her own writing skills. In addition, each student has a competitive mentality, and each student will study harder in order to win in the group, forming a healthy competition atmosphere, which will lead to a more significant improvement in the students’ English writing learning effect under the domination of their active will.

Secondly, group collaborative English writing teaching is carried out through the mode of group discussion. Teachers can use the Internet to carry out collaborative teaching, allowing group members to freely combine or combine according to gender, scores and so on. After the teacher raises a problem in class, group members can negotiate on the problem so that they can form a consensus opinion on the
problem. In the process of solving the problem, group members need to use the Internet and the e-library to check the information, and students in the group will eventually form a unanimous answer after discussion, which will then be written into a report. The group discussion model is also very useful for improving students’ ability to analyze and solve problems. In addition, the group discussion model is very useful for improving students’ analytical and problem-solving skills.

Third, group teaching is carried out through a partnership approach. Group members need to form partnerships for learning in small groups, and issues of common concern to group members can be solved through discussion and negotiation. In the negotiation process, group members learn from each other’s writing inspiration and experience as partners, check each other’s learning, and form a learning mode of helping each other in the checking process. This partner-based collaborative learning approach requires students to work with their partners and choose their learning methods scientifically, such as how to divide the work, how to use online resources scientifically, and how to agree their respective opinions through negotiation, and each member can get emotional support from their partners. The partner learning mode can make the whole learning process smoother, the learning environment more harmonious, and each student can feel the support within the group and be able to complete the English writing task more smoothly.

Fourth, collaborative group learning is conducted using role swapping. There are different roles within each collaborative group and different students take up these roles, including the roles of learners, coordinators and instructors. Each role has a clear division of responsibilities, and in the process of collaborative group learning, students can swap roles with each other. By swapping roles, each student will have a different role experience and a deeper understanding of the problem, thus prompting each student to increase his or her sense of responsibility.

5. Conclusion

Collaborative learning has become a big trend today, and online teaching has become an important teaching mode. Collaborative learning teaching of English writing based on the network environment is conducive to promoting the effective improvement of students’ writing ability. Therefore, it is of great significance to explore the basic theories and practical methods applicable to the needs of collaborative learning for the study of collaborative learning. In China’s online environment, the teaching of college English writing can be carried out by using the teaching mode of group collaboration, so that each student can give full play to his or her strengths in the group, discuss and help each other, improve the English writing level of each group member, and achieve the optimal learning effect in the classroom. Collaborative teaching of college English writing in the online environment is operable, and teachers can carry out collaborative teaching by means of competitions, group discussion models, and partner collaboration etc.

References