A Cognitive Approach to the Teaching of College English Writing*

SHAN Xiao-ming
China University of Petroleum-Beijing (CUPB), Beijing, China

One major objective in the teaching of college English writing is to help students master basic language skills, in the hope that students will finally learn to write passably well in English. In keeping with the concept that a language is a huge system, a cognitive approach to college English writing aims at the link and association of various language elements to help to inspire the formation of the linguistic instinct on the part of the students. Based on the practical teaching practice, ways are recommended to coordinate various elements of a sentence, including “vowel spectrum”, “sentence analyzing spectrum”, and “focus in context”.

Keywords: college English writing, a cognitive approach, coordination of “vowel sound spectrum”, “sentence analysis spectrum” and “spectrum of focus in context”

Introduction

In order to learn to write in English, students need to have basic language skills in the first place. However, generally speaking, Chinese college students have not mastered satisfactorily basic language skills when they begin to learn to write in English. An official from Ministry of Education has made the remark that “there is still a part of the students who do not understand, can not say and read in English.” (LIU, 2012, p. 44). The fundamental difficulty in learning to write in English lays in the fact that a language is a huge system that comprises of many fields of study. A simplistic or sole approach will never yield the desirous result. A cognitive approach to the teaching of college English writing will be more effective and efficient because it makes use of various fields of study while focusing on the links and association of various language elements. In this way, students will be inspired to form their linguistic instincts to help them learn to write. However, in the practice of a cognitive approach to the teaching of college English writing, most efforts are tentative and exploratory in nature.

The present study of a cognitive approach to college English writing starts from the basic cognitive practice and suggests that the most basic elements of the written language are like the musical notation and atomic weight, which can be utilized for the teaching of college English writing. It then moves on to provide a more systematic cognition and study of college English writing, consisting of mainly three parts, “the vowel spectrum”, “sentence analyzing spectrum”, and “the focus in context”.

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SHAN Xiao-ming, associated professor, master, Schools of Foreign Language Studies, China University of Petroleum-Beijing (CUPB), Beijing, China.
Discussion

Basic language skills are closely related with meta cognition as far as college English writing is concerned. The general metacognition refers to the cognition of the cognitive subject to its own cognitive phenomenon and the knowledge of cognition, such as the individual factors that affect cognitive processes and outcomes, the way these factors work. In college English writing, the way to use the basic language skills is a metacognitive strategy. It includes conscious planning, monitoring, and evaluation. In the course of metacognition, the following questions are frequently asked: What kind of linguistic basis should English writing have? What language skill should be mastered to avoid primary mistakes? Is writing purely a matter of language, or depended on interacting with the reader via language? Which is of greater priority, to develop the ability to read, dictate, speak, and translate in a comprehensive way, or to highlight the main text? Should one be guided entirely in writing by his or her sense of language, or should one parse sentences word by word to learn to write? All these questions people encounter in writing should be answered with metacognitive knowledge and the answers to these questions are conducive to the development and formation of the linguistic instinct and English writing ability.

From “Word Core” to “Five Basic Sentence Patterns”

The cognitive process starts from the very basics. Writing involves word, sentence, and text. Each word, sentence, and text has a core. The basis of writing can then be summed up as the coordination of “three cores”.

The “word core” includes the “core of meaning” (word root) and “the core of the sound” (the vowel of stressed syllable). The consciousness of word root is strongly beneficial to the expansion of vocabulary. The confusion in spelling out the 20 vowel phonemes from the five vowel letters affects seriously reading comprehension and ultimately writing.

The “Five basic sentence patterns”, a combination of “vowel spectrum”, and “sentence analyzing spectrum” are suggested in the light of cognition.

Firstly, the “Five basic sentence patterns” perform the function of sound spectrum. Each of them represents a vowel letter (including a letter cluster) that can spell out all the different vowels and every phonetic codes. All the vowel spectra make use of only 10 symbols: a short line (-) signaling “long open vowel” (ā[æ][o][u][e][I]:[u]:[I]:[y][i]); a positive hook (‘) signaling “short shut vowel” (ã[æ][o][u][e][I]:[u]:[I]:[y][i]); an inverted hook (‘) and two points (¨) signaling two R tones (ã[æ][o][u][e][I]:[u]:[I]:[y][i]); a long open vowel (ā[æ][o][u][e][I]:[u]:[I]:[y][i]); left skimming (’), right skimming (´), and middle point (’) are used to signal three special spelling vowels of each letter, with the exception of letter “o” which is signaled by a wave line (‘a[æ][o]:[u]:[e][I]:[u]:[I]:[y][i]:[j][i]). If the same letters in different syllables spell the same vowel, their symbols are the same. For example, in both the two words “car” and “father”, the letter “a” is considered as the same symbols as [ã].

Secondly, the “Five basic sentence patterns” reflect the function of sentence element spectrum. All the elements of a sentence are represented differently. This way, we can determine the basic sentence pattern, centering around the predicate (the sentence core) of the sentence.

The different elements of a sentence are represented as follows:

- subject, predicate, object, object clause^, predicative, predicative clause^, {attribute}, [adverbial], *
- attributive clause, # adverbial clause, <object supplement>, appositive=\appositive clause=/, non-predicate
By coordinating “vowel spectrum” and “sentence spectrum”, five basic sentence patterns are suggested as follows:

1. Sentence pattern one with “a”: A sentence made of words with letter of “a”.
   Examples: 
   - Some snakes, rats and wasps [in many glass boxes] are put at a corner [of the village square].
   (A sentence pattern of subject + predicate + object in passive voice)

2. Sentence pattern two with “o”: A sentence made of words with letter of “o”.
   Examples: 
   - The words = that the nose [of a fox], the tooth [of a wolf], the joint [of a monkey], the horns [of a cow] are all important. [Some poor women] living by a reservoir said [commonly].
   (A sentence pattern of complex sentence with an appositive clause)

3. Sentence pattern three with “e”: A sentence made of words with letter of “e”.
   Examples: 
   - A woman entrepreneur sewed her nephew [hastily] a sheet [with pictures] of eight different bears near an elephant.
   (A sentence pattern of subject + predicate + double object)

4. Sentence pattern four with “u”: A sentence made of words with letter of “u”.
   Examples: 
   - They have been quickly busy [digging something] in a building of the zoo until now for some rubies [put in a purse] are surely buried [under it].
   (A sentence pattern of coordinate sentence)

5. Sentence pattern five with “i”: A sentence made of words with letter of “i”.
   Examples: 
   - Some Indian policemen [with blue ties] in a taxi carried materials [for winter] in holidays [to a field] friendly [to make birds and lions] there quiet [ly].
   (A sentence pattern of subject + predicate + compound object sentence)

Contextual Cryptography and Unique Core of Writing

After the repeated practice and analysis of the five sentence patterns suggested above, in terms of cognition, students will be greatly helped in college English writing. For example, a detailed analysis of a short poem by Keats, with the application of the five sentence patterns, will help them better understand the different sentences and their elements and after sufficient practice, students tend to write in the similar fashion, inspired by the linguistic instinct developed and formed in the course of time. There are only two sentences in the eight lines of the poem (the main clause is in bold).

**This living hand**, [now warm and capable]
[Of earnest grasping], would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence, [of the tomb],

So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
#/[That thou wouldst wish thine own heart <dry of blood>]
#/[So] in my veins red life might stream [again],
And thou be conscience-calmed——see here it is

I hold it towards you. (DING & ZHU, 1994, p. 13)

Commentary:

(1) The first line to the seventh line is one sentence. The subject of the sentence is “this living hand”. The predicate is juxtaposed “haunt thy days” and “chill thy dreaming nights.”
(2) Before “would” in the second line, there is an adjective phrase to modify “hand”. Behind it is the “of structure” as an adverbial modifier, modifying “capable” and meaning “this hand” can grasp one’s feelings.

(3) The fifth line is an adverbial clause of purpose to modify the main predicate, meaning “you will expect the blood of your heart to become thirsty”.

(4) The sixth line is an adverbial clause of the result, meaning “I will save your feelings”.

(5) The seventh line is the coordinate part of the adverbial clause of the result from the above line, meaning “I am waiting for you here”.

(6) The eighth line is the “poetic eyes” (it is equal to the “core of prose”), meaning “Grasp my hand soon, please”.

From these sentences, students can go on to coordinate “focus in context”, as can be explained by the following:

(a) The nouns and subject, containing five focuses which coordinate: (1) number, (2) article, (3) pronoun, (4) adjective, (5) preposition.

For example, in “This living hand”, The noun “hand” is a core of the subject. Using the pronoun “this” instead of article “the” means this hand is a specific hand; it refers to the poet himself. From this we know that the poet is “capable and warm” to be worthy of love.

There are also several attributive nouns in the poem, such as “in the icy silence of the tomb”. Nouns like “tomb” have the connotation of horrifying environment (silence, cold) on the part of the poet’s girlfriend.

(b) Verb and predicate, including 10 focuses to coordinate (6) morphology, (7) tense, (8) voice, (9) modality, (10) adverbial, (11) predicative, (12) object, (13) subjunctive mood, (14) non-finite verb, (15) verb phrase.

In the poem, the “would” is changed to “wouldst”. It shows that the poet is anxious to face his girlfriend. He hopes she will love him.

(c) Clause, with 5 focuses to coordinate: (16) coordinate clauses; (17) noun clause; (18) attributive clauses; (19) adverbial clauses; (20) special clauses.

There are more than four clauses in the first sentence of the poem. In accordance with the principles of English writing, the logic focus is in the last clause of the poem. When the poet says, “see here it is”, it means if not, his red vein would not stream again. So, he would hold his living hand to his lovely girl as soon as possible.

**Conclusion**

The main function of language is expression and communication. The purpose of writing is to enable the reader to empathize with the work. Otherwise, it can only be parole, not real language. Dukas, an American scholar, said:

> The use of words to express personal intention is to convey it to others, and, if possible, use it to influence the behavior of others. However, this performance may not achieve the purpose of communication, so it still stays at the level of parole. (Dukas, 1988, p. 27)

A cognitive approach to college English writing is to coordinate all aspects of language to test the author’s precise and accurate cognition of complex things. It is very much in keeping with the concept that language is a huge system. As far as its signifier series is concerned, it can include pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, text, and so on; As far as its signified series are concerned, they involve a wider range. The cognitive linguistic schools
in recent years mainly study the relationship among language, communication, and cognition. In language, cognition, consciousness, experience, embodiment, the brain, the individual, the human, the society, the culture, and the history are all blended in a rich, complex, and dynamic way. Therefore, language learning involves all aspects of cognition (GUI, 2010, pp. 275-281).

Stephen Pinker, a famous cognitive psychologist, affirmed the role of linguistic forms. In his book *Language Instinct*, he advocated the acceptance of cognitive linguistics on the basis of scientific understanding of Chomsky’s transformational generative grammar. He said, “if I were to comprehensive opposing views on both sides of the debate, such as formalism and functionalism, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, got inclusiveness for all, this may be because there are no differences between them.” (Pinker, 2015, p. 93). He went on to say:

Language instinct is both genetic and inseparable from the environment…… It is a natural learning ability of human being to get induction according to “similarity”. Although we speak different languages, we have the same mental structure. Language is a window on human nature. (Pinker, 2015, p. 203)

In sum, a cognitive approach to the teaching of college English writing is to enforce the basic language skills by coordinating the various elements of a sentence, in the hope of inspiring the students’ mental structure of language instinct.

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