

College English Listening and Speaking Teaching Guided by Memetics

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Memetics confirms the importance of recitation and imitation in college English teaching. Starting with the explanation of the replication cycle of language memes, this paper discusses how to use the memetic perspective in college English listening and speaking teaching, effectively transform the input language information into language output, and improve the classroom effect of college English listening and speaking teaching.

Keywords: memetics, meme, replicate, imitation, listening and speaking teaching

Introduction

College English teaching is an important link to improve the overall quality of college students, among which listening and speaking skills are an indispensable and basic part. With the development of the times and the deepening of college English teaching reform, the new English teaching mode based on computer and network which can effectively enrich classroom contents and learning forms, thus arousing students' interest in learning, plays an essential role in college English teaching, especially in listening and speaking teaching practice, because it can provide a large amount of information and knowledge in the form of texts, images, and videos. Moreover, in daily life, students can also be exposed to a large number of rich English news, European and American films and television works, and experience a more authentic cultural atmosphere. However, it is also gradually realized that although students receive a large amount of information input in the learning process, they ignore that the language learning process must be an organic combination of language input and language output. Many students will not convert the language information they come into contact with into effective output, that is, they still cannot express their ideas in English fluently after listening to a lot of materials. Rod Ellis, an applied linguist, emphasizes that successful language learning must focus on three processes: language input, internalization, and output. Without students-centered internalization and output, language learning can never achieve the ultimate goal. In recent years, the research on memetics by scholars and language teachers at home and abroad has provided a new perspective for college English teaching. We realize that in the teaching of college English listening and speaking, teachers should make full use of memes, so that the input language information can be effectively internalized and output smoothly.

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Memetics

Introduction to Memetics and Meme

Memetics is a new theory to explain the law of cultural evolution based on Darwin's theory of evolution. In 1976, Richard Dawkins, a famous zoologist and behavioral ecologist at Oxford University in England, pointed out in his famous book *The Selfish Gene*: "Darwinism is too big a theory to be confined to the narrow context of genes" (Dawkins, 2006, p. 111). He put forward the concept of "meme" for the first time, and thought that "meme" can be referred to as the process of imitation in a broad sense, which is transferred from one brain to another, so as to reproduce in the meme pool. The original definition of a meme was based on the concept of replicator. From the perspective of etymology, "meme" is derived from the Greek word "mimeme", which means "something to be imitated". The Cambridge English Dictionary defines meme as "a cultural feature or a type of behaviour that is passed from one generation to another, without the influence of genes"¹. This definition contains two concepts: First, a meme is the basic unit of culture; and second, it can be reproduced and transmitted through non-genetic means.

Imitation—The Core of Memetics

Professor He Ziran further pointed out that the core of meme is imitation. As one of the carriers of culture, language itself is a meme. In the process of language learning and application, memes are mainly embodied in language learners' imitation, replication, and transmission of language. Therefore, imitation and replication play a very significant role in the internalization and output of language.

Language memetics holds that the reproduction and spread of memes mainly come from imitation. However, the traditional concept has always been biased against imitation, arguing that in imitation there is a lack of innovative ideas or creativity, and imitation is just a low-level behavior form with low requirements for cognitive level. Dawkins' student Blackmore has made a new interpretation of imitation in his book *Meme Machine*. He believes that "imitation" is not a simple copy that we commonly understand. As a means of cultural transmission, a meme actually has at least three abilities: (1) the ability to make decisions about what to imitate; (2) the complex ability to convert one view to another; and (3) the production ability that matches with physical actions (Blackmore, 1999). Therefore, the imitation it involves is mainly a cognitive behavior of human beings.

Meme Replication Cycle and College English Listening and Speaking Teaching

According to Francis Heylighen, the replication of memes needs to successfully pass through four subsequent stages: assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission (Heylighen, 1998). At each stage, there is selection, meaning some memes will survive while others will be rejected, forgotten, or otherwise eliminated. Only the memes which are best adapted to the underlying cognitive and communicative processes will spread farthest. When applied in language teaching, it is completely in line with the fact that language learning is the organic combination of input and output. Krashen believes comprehensible input is a necessary condition and prerequisite for second language acquisition.

Assimilation

A successful meme must have the ability to "infect" a new host. In the context of language learning, the new host refers to a language learner while the original host refers to the teacher. Then, it can be perceived, understood,

¹ Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/meme>.

and accepted by the new host. At this stage, learners need to be exposed to the language content to be learned, i.e., encounter an existing mediotype form of a meme, or independently discover the meme, by observation of outside phenomena or by thought, i.e., recombination of existing cognitive elements to reorganize and integrate memes. Therefore, first of all, learners should get in touch with the language content that meets the students' knowledge level from the original host via various carriers, such as videos, listening materials, reading materials, etc. Secondly, in order to make the language materials understood, accepted, and replicated by means of imitation by students and become memes successfully, teachers should select some practical and interesting audio materials that are closely related to students' study and life, fit with students' interests. In this way, learners' attention and interest will be aroused. Consequently, learners will actively perceive the memes by observing, understand, accept them, and finally allow the memes to enter their cognitive system.

Take *New Horizon College English—Viewing, Listening and Speaking (Book Two)* as an example. The theme of Unit 1 is a topic that students are generally interested in—music. The unit's target requirement for "speaking" is to learn to express preferences. In the listening materials of Listening in—Task 2, the two speakers are talking about a concert, in which they express their likes and dislikes. The two speakers use various expressions of preference, such as be crazy about, be a big fan, prefer, be hooked on, be dying to do, etc. In order to encourage students to actively discuss their own preferences for music with more interest, teachers can introduce some specific songs for students to compare and choose, and express them by using the phrases appearing in this unit.

Retention

Retention means a meme infects the host like a parasite, and stays in the host's memory for a long time and appears repeatedly. The retention time of memes in the memory of the host is often directly proportional to the transmission opportunities the memes can get. The longer memes can stay in the memory of the host, the greater possibility there is that memes can be spread further successfully by infecting other hosts. The host will select the memes according to his own self-cognition and personal preference. Therefore, in order to ensure that memes can stay in the minds of new hosts for a long time and survive, teachers should consciously pay attention to the repetition rate of memes. In that case, while learners are learning new materials, the old memes that already exist in learners' memory should be arranged to appear again and again, and learners should be asked to imitate and recite them in order to achieve proficiency. In the process of imitation, learners will combine new memes with existing knowledge again, and reorganize and integrate them into meme blocks. Only when the language materials replicated by memory have accumulated to a certain amount can a solid foundation for expression and dissemination be laid and memes enter the next stage.

Expression

Expression means when communicating with other individuals, the host transforms memes into tangible expressions that can be perceived in a specific context and driven by psychological intentions. Among them, speaking is the most prominent means of expression. Other common ways of expression include texts, pictures, behavior patterns, and so on. At this stage, learners are asked to imitate and practice the pronunciation, intonation, sentence patterns, etc. of the language materials they are exposed to after listening to these materials attentively. At the beginning, the imitation will inevitably be mechanical, but with the deepening of imitation, learners' language internalization process will be accelerated, and more cognition will be infiltrated in the process of

imitation. Learners will start to try coding initiatives, reorganize memes, and produce creative imitation and reproduction, thus entering the next process of meme reproduction.

Again, let's take *New Horizon College English—Viewing, Listening and Speaking (Book Two)* as an example. The theme that appears in Unit 2 is “Movies”. After the teacher arranges the listening training and reproduces the expressions about preferences learned in Unit 1, learners are encouraged to imitate and replicate the phrases in Unit 1 according to the dialogue in Listening in—Task 2, creating a new dialogue about movies. Therefore, the recurrence rate of memes can be improved and learners' memories can be enhanced.

e.g.

W: Hi, XX! Do you want to go to see a movie with me?

M: A movie? What is on?

W: *Moneyball*. It is a melodrama starring Brad Pitt. Are you interested?

M: Hmm, I was crazy about Pitt when I was in high school, but now I'm no longer a big fan. I'm starting to prefer Leonardo DiCaprio.

W: Yes. I am also hooked on Leonardo's movies. He won the Best Actor in the 88th Oscar for his performance in *The Revenant*.

M: Oh, I am dying to see it.

W: So, let's go together next time when *The Revenant* is on.

M: Of course.

After this imitation activity has been repeated several times, the meme will be internalized and reproduced in various situations.

Transmission

Meme expression needs a stable tangible carrier or intermediary to ensure the authenticity of the expressed content, such as photos, videos, and the Internet, so as to avoid being distorted or deformed. Memes often use language in different forms as a carrier when expressed and spread. For instance, books or electronic devices should be used to reproduce texts and graphics. In order to ensure that memes can be successfully replicated and spread repeatedly in communication, teachers should constantly create a language environment at this stage, and provide learners with abundant opportunities to use memes, so that they can communicate by constantly using language tools, and transmit the memes they use and infect new hosts.

In the listening and speaking class, apart from the study of relevant textbooks, teachers can motivate learners to participate in sitcoms and encourage them to reproduce their acquired language knowledge in performances. Outside the classroom, English speeches, debates and English corner activities will expose learners to memes more frequently and give them the opportunity to express memes more creatively. However, no matter in what kind of activities, teachers need to give directions and guidance in an organized, purposeful, and planned way, so that the input learners get can be fully internalized and transformed into effective output.

Conclusion

The purpose of college English listening and speaking teaching is to cultivate learners' communicative competence. Since we have realized that the teaching process of listening and speaking is actually the process of imitation and reproduction, teachers should have a thorough understanding about the replication cycle of memes, the characteristics and laws of language meme replication and dissemination and follow the rules to create the

linguistic atmosphere suitable for learners' learning, so that they can better monitor the selection, input, internalization, and transmission of language materials to improve the effect of college English listening and speaking classroom teaching.

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