

Student-Centered Strategy in Academic English Teaching

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Based on the current situation of academic English teaching, this paper discusses “student-centered” teaching strategy in the Academic English Reading and Writing, and explore how to integrate it in classroom activities.

Keywords: student-centered strategy, situational learning, open learning, cooperation

Current Situation and Problems in Academic English Teaching

In recent years, China’s college English has experienced transformation and innovation in order to keep in line with the development of education. It is a key point in the reform to carry out academic English teaching in college English and promote college students to acquire skills for academic communication, because nowadays there appears a great need for college students to read English documents, complete academic reports, write and publish papers in English. Therefore, more and more researchers start to explore and discuss academic English teaching in terms of teaching status, mode, teachers’ status, students’ academic ability, and evaluation of academic teaching, etc. However, there are still many problems in the specific academic English classroom practice.

First of all, most of the teachers of Academic English Reading and Writing are foreign language teachers. This course is aimed at all students, most of whom are students majoring in science and engineering. There are some differences between the writing of foreign language papers and the writing of science and engineering papers in some parts. When reading science and engineering papers, foreign language teachers also have difficulty in reading and understanding cross-disciplinary papers because of different majors, which will also reduce the teaching quality of this course.

Secondly, many published academic English textbooks can be found, but in fact, most of them are not qualified for both teaching and learning. Some textbooks even choose directly some news reports from the internet to be the major content while how to write academic English is rarely involved. When teaching academic writing, teachers have to find teaching materials related to writing by themselves.

In addition, academic English is a course for second-year college students in many universities. Students who take this course find it very difficult, even if they have acquired certain level of English learning. What’s more, there are still some students who need time to improve their language and they usually find it more difficult to keep up with the course.

Therefore, how to realize students’ dominant position in the academic English class, and how to achieve true “student-centered” are important. It has become urgent curriculum goals of academic English teaching to

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optimize the academic English teaching and help students master certain academic communication skills through course study.

The Student-Centered Teaching Method

The concept of student-centered teaching originated from John Dewey, an American educator. Dewey advocates that teachers should teach through activities, so that students can learn by doing. He believes that the teaching method is not about “how to teach” but about “how to learn”. The key to “how to learn” is the fact that teachers should take students as the central part to lead teaching and teachers only play the role of observers to guide and assist in classroom activities. Dewey’s teaching method has given great enlightenment and far-reaching influence on educators. After Bruner, an American psychologist, put forward the learner-centered cognitive teaching theory in 1960s, American psychologist Carroll and British educator Corder also put forward in 1980s that foreign language teaching must be student-centered.

In “student-centered” teaching model, teachers should guide students to learn with their initiative and actively participate in classroom teaching activities. Teachers try to create all conditions for students to have full opportunities for language practice and cultivate their ability to think and work independently, instead of just listening to teachers’ lectures in class. “Learner-centered” is to let students use their enthusiasm and initiative in the learning process and become the real learning subject and the creator of meaning. Teachers should help students observe, analyze, and summarize through teaching designing and their roles have changed and become instructors and promoters, rather than masters in traditional classes.

However, in the current academic English teaching, many teachers, as designers of classroom activities, still focus on analyzing difficult point of language, key words, and complicated sentences in reading materials, which occupy most of the time in the classes. In the classroom, students mainly listen to the teacher’s explanation and analysis of the text, and as a result the learning effect is not very satisfactory. The main position of “learners” in both “teaching” and “learning” has not been realized, and students’ academic ability cannot be improved, nor can they lay a certain foundation for further development in Academic English Reading and Writing.

Student-Centered Academic English Teaching

From traditional college English teaching to academic English teaching, it is obviously impossible for teachers to arouse students’ enthusiasm and create a win-win situation of “teaching” and “learning” together if they do not innovate their teaching methods. “Learning” actually is the purpose of “teaching”, and the key lies in how to “teach” in a better way to make students “learn” more effectively. This requires the “teaching” side to create an ideal “learning” environment for learners. Teachers need to motivate students to the greatest extent, and involve them to actively participate in the study of this new course. The ideal “student-centered” teaching should blend situational learning, open learning, and cooperative learning in the whole process.

Situational Learning

Situational learning model highlights the teaching concept of “student-centered”. Taking the classroom as a place for language practice, the autonomy of students for learning is stimulated and encouraged to actively participate in classroom teaching activities. Based on the concept of “learning English through using English for communication” rather than “learning English communication through learning English”, teachers design practical and workable situational models similar to academic activities in the classroom, so that students can “learn” by doing and create meaning and acquire skills in the process of practice.

According to students' needs in learning, it is necessary to design teaching activities that match the cultivation of students' academic communicative competence in college academic English classes. In addition to training students' academic vocabulary and phrases, teachers should also simulate academic activities, create an academic atmosphere, attract students to the classroom, and build an effective academic English class. When preparing the thesis proposal, students report orally in groups and demonstrate in class the research thesis, research methods, research questions, and research schedule. In this way, students can gradually use appropriate academic language to make academic reports through professional language output.

Academic English teaching should adopt situational learning model to improve the reality of learning content, and enhance students' interest and enthusiasm in learning. At the same time, teachers should also actively use academic English in the classroom in order to create an environment which helps accumulate academic language acquisition for students. Through the input and exchange of academic language in situations, students can not only consolidate their academic knowledge, but also improve their ability to use academic English for communication.

Open Learning

For a long time, college English classroom is a very closed small environment with teachers as the main body and teaching materials as the center, which limits their creativity and restricts students' ability to access information. Open learning refers to the method in which the focus of learning has been attached to the development of learners and acquiring knowledge is regarded as the primary teaching goal. By creating a teaching environment beneficial to students' active improvement, this method provides students with space for full development, thus promoting students' all-round cultivation in the process of active exploration. In open learning, teachers are only the assistants of students, and how to learn, what to learn, how to think, and what kind of results are all decided by students themselves. Teachers provide a question or a topic, or a task, and students think independently or work together with team members about what they have learned and what they need to learn to solve the problem. Thus, they together collect and study information to finally complete the task. The first thing that "opening up" needs to do is to avoid a single teaching model, so that students can study in a free academic atmosphere.

In the teaching of Academic English Reading and Writing, vocabulary teaching should not only continue to adopt the traditional teaching method, such as explaining vocabulary and analyzing sentences with examples, but also need to guide students how to use online databases, such as academic English vocabulary, synonyms, and vocabulary collocation to help students learn the usage of academic English vocabulary in depth. In the part of searching documents, teachers should give students enough guidance to master the methods of searching documents online quickly and effectively. Through the use of the network, both teaching and learning are no longer limited by textbooks, and an open academic atmosphere is formed, which undoubtedly provides students with room for further improvement. Open-learning approach helps to cultivate students' initiative and ability of exploration. Open learning requires students to find new information, transform information, determine the knowledge required for research, ask questions independently, and find solutions to problems.

Cooperative Learning

In student-centered teaching, cooperation is needed between teachers and students, and among students as well. In cooperative learning, teachers and students form a learning team. In this team, teachers should not only set an example of cooperation in their own work, but also promote cooperation among students in the teaching

process. In cooperation, teachers and students share academic information and construct the class together, so that students can improve their learning autonomy and innovation ability, while teachers also have more opportunity to communicate with students and promote understanding.

In the class of Academic English Reading and Writing, there are differences in students' majors: language ability and learning needs. Grouping students according to their differences is the key to promoting cooperative learning. Through group cooperative learning, students can complete various tasks assigned, such as delivering academic reports, collecting materials, reading documents, and writing papers through cooperation. Through cooperation between teachers and students, between students and students, students can learn from each other in a more efficient way, and become the mastery of the class. The team spirit established in cooperation can greatly promote the teaching. Every student can master the skills needed for cooperation, which will benefit students enormously for their academic study and their future career in workplaces.

Conclusion

Student-centered teaching approach is constructive to cultivate students to form academic habits of independent thinking, improve their ability to solve problems, and maximize their potential. In the "student-centered" class, students actively participate in the classroom activities. "Learning through doing" and "learning through academic communication" will change passivity of students into activeness and initiative. Students are both language learners and language users. They actively exercise their language skills and jointly create a constructive academic environment with teachers in the classroom. Academic English teaching can be optimized consequently.

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