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Individualized Teaching English Writing in China

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of a teaching model in the context of the System-Activity Approach within "English Writing" as an academic course for English major students at the university in China. The main goal is to design an effective tool for a university teacher suitable for teaching each individual student in the condition of a large-in-number group of students that is typical for China. In purpose to achieve high educational results by organizing and managing independent in-class activity of each learner, a method of system analysis in teaching English Writing at the stage of interiorization of academic knowledge is implemented. The results of practical use of the model are presented to prove the efficiency of the teaching model.

Keywords*: system-activity approach, method of system analysis,interiorization, exteriorization, action orientation matrix, systemic-type orientation schemes, English writing, English in China, Chinese learners of English*

1. Introduction

Significant improvement of the competitive position of the country in the global world is one of the basic goals of Chinese People Republic nowadays. According to the updated paradigm, academic education is considered to be a factor for economic growth and development of China. Key-strategies like "Human potential will establish the power of the nation" and "Education and science lead the country to the prosperity and success of the whole nation" stimulate the positive changes in education of all types and levels (Wan-hua, 2007).

Without any doubt, the declared priority of education and its development as an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative force the academic reality to be significantly upgraded and education to be high-quality oriented. International strategy of China is aimed to breakthrough of national education and research up to the world-class level(Guruleva, 2017).

At this point an academic society faces certain contradictions between the social demand in high-class specialists and university graduates with no more than just acceptable medium academic results. It is an effect of teaching technologies that do not consider psychological processes due to the lack of an educational strategy that clarifies teaching models based on psychological and pedagogical common factors and laws. On the one hand, there is a strong requirement to organize and manage individualized in-class activity of each student; on the other hand, lack of learning/teaching materials in academic theory does not support academic practice. Generally speaking, the demand in "psychologizing" in teaching any academic course is in a serious conflict with the lack of using the psychological knowledge in everyday educational practice.

A top-level academic teacher or lecturer understands in full psychological in their nature processes of acquisition, interiorization, and exteriorization in each learner; psychological images and psychological actions in learner's consciousness, their function, characteristics, structure and content; methods, forms, means, and conditions to be used in educational process; the way the psychological image in learner's consciousness will support his practical activity.

The picture of educational reality shows that university teachers represent academic knowledge to passive listeners during a lecture, practical lesson, seminar, tutorial, but effectiveness of such a presentation is below expectations. Experimentally proved that in purpose to achieve productive cognition, learner's speaking activity cannot be less than 85% of all lesson time, while teacher's speaking time tends to 15% (Verbitskiy, 1999, p. 75).Thus, the academic goal of a teacher for any effective lesson is to organize and manage individualized in-class activity of each student.

In addition, there are some challenges for international teachers working in China in the field of education that should be taken into consideration. First, Chinese students are used to teacher-

ISSN: 2005-4289 IJDRBC

fronted styles of learning. It means that they are no more than just passive receivers and their academic activity is listening and, probably, writing some notes. Second, types of exercises are close-ended calling for specific answers (gap-fills with keys) which does not provoke any thought developing activity and systemic type of thinking. Third, fluency-accuracy balance in foreign language training is in favor of accuracy, though the professional linguistic competencies require both at equal level. Finally, the most challenging part is large-in-number groups of students that really leave no chance for a teacher to contact each student often. What kind of academic quality are we talking about? (Wyss & Thrush, 2007).

The extraordinary epidemiological situation that happened in Chine in the beginning of 2020 demanded development of distant training models initiated by pedagogical communities of all educational levels. The offered teaching strategy aimed to individualization of education seems to be supportive in the respect of remote variant of training Chinese students.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical and methodological background of this research is based onfamous Psychological Activity Theory (PAT); Action Theory of Acquisition of Social Experience in the section concerning function of psychology to orient a subject and subject's activity in materialized reality; conception of social and historical nature of human's mentality; understanding of interiorization and exteriorization as psychological processes (Vygotsky, Leontiev, Galperin, Reshetova).

The stages of the offered model of training in the frames of our research are designed in accordance with Theory of Step-by-Step Formation of Mental Activity (Galperin, 1998). The central role belongs to the statements of System-Activity Approach (SAA) about structure and content of activity as a structural substance, as well as investigation of an object exploring procedures of Method of System-Analysis (MSA) and formation of an action orientation matrix of a systemic type (Reshetova, 2002).

The term "activity" stands for motivated actions of a person as a social subject; activity is always socially based and ethically limited. It is aimed at the objects of the external and internal world of a human, changing these objects and the person (subject) himself. Activity is inextricably linked to the substantive and socio-cultural components without which they are just empty abstractions. Its performance is mediated by a mental image that serves in its orientational function.

The structural stages of the activity are motivation, orientation, planning, performing, self-control, self-assessment, self-correction and reflection. The content of each stage is revealed in the following set of components: purpose, object, method, way, technology, means, forms, other conditions, actions and operations, product and result (Kolomiets, 2019, p. 149-150).

These structural stages and components are combined into a systemic unity with clear mutual systemic links. As a result, none of them can be omitted in the performance of the activity. Each one plays a certain function, has its own content, and occupies a definite position in the integral structure of the activity. The quality of the activity, the level of comprehension and effectiveness always depend on how well a person understands the structure and content of the activity and correspondently constructs it (Kolomiets, 2019, p. 16).

The student's academic and professional activity is organized in accordance with the psychological nature of the learning process and acquisition of social experience. PAT discloses the mechanism of the subject's activity to master the object of learning as the general ability of the subject to acquire objects of culture. These activities involve two interrelated processes: interiorization and exteriorization. According to Reshetova, to acquire an object means, first of all, to "decompose" it: to detect an object of social need in it, an objectified activity, and abilities that have mediated it. The subject "… must perform the relevant activity of their interiorization – that means to transform them from generic to his individual abilities, which now mediate his activity" (Reshetova, 2002).

The starting and the key point of PAT is the approach to investigating, understanding, and formation of psychics in its orientational function. The image of the object of acquisition, formed by mental reflection in the subject's mind, turns into orientation matrix for further transformation of the object. The subject "returns" to the activity its transformed psychological content, which is now captured in its product as his individual-generic abilities; i.e. he exteriorizes them. So, the process of

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acquisition is the process of mutual transitions of external activity into internal activity and vice versa. (Reshetova, 2002, p. 23).

Thus, students acquire academic knowledge in accordance with the psychological nature of the learning process at two stages. At the first stage, so-called the stage of interiorization, a mental image of the learning material is formed in the student's mind, which involves construction of a materialized image of the academic knowledge in the form of a "didactic orientation scheme" and further transition of it into the internal plan. At the second stage, the stage of exteriorization, this image acts in the orientation function for the practical activity. The learner uses this mental image in his practical activity, that is, he exteriorizes it now as a tool of this activity.

The effectiveness of training is determined by the system of psychological and pedagogical conditions implemented in the process of learning on the basis of interiorization and exteriorization. The first condition is construction of a materialized image of the structure and the content of knowledge in orientation schemes using sign-symbolic means.

The second condition is related to the construction of orientation schemes, where a special role belongs to the theoretical activity of the student in the form of academic investigation and analysis of an object.

Any academic investigation is organized by a special program based on the procedures of the general scientific cognitive method - the method of system analysis (MSA).

Procedures of MSA include the following steps:

1. Select an object from the environment.

2. Examine object structure and identify blocks or levels (vertical and horizontal).

3. Detect cross-level systemically important links between blocks/levels (vertical and horizontal).

4. In each block/level:

4.1. Detect elements.
4.2. Identify systemically important links between them.
4.3. Reveal the content of each element.

5. Establish common and different elements and relationships between elements of all blocks/levels.

6. Construct an integrative hierarchical system.

The academic investigation of the object ends with the schematization of the knowledge in systemic-type didactic orientation schemes using sign-symbolic means. Thus, theoretical knowledge of the object of learning in the process of academic investigation becomes the subject knowledge of its investigator (Kolomiets, 2019, p. 71-72).

The third important psychological and pedagogical condition is organizing the purposeful and manageable process of interiorization of materialized image of the knowledge performed by the investigators in orientation schemes. The activity of any learner should be organized in stages in different forms: from cooperative with the teacher and with other students to the individual activity of the student performed by himself. The activity is carried out in different speech variants: in "external loud socialized speech," “external in-mind speech,” "internal speech" (Galperin, 1998).

One more significant psychological and pedagogical condition for the implementation of the process of effective learning is the organization of independent practical activity on the use of educational material in solving professional tasks.

Thus, our teaching model is based on the academic activity with identified structural stages and components combined into a systemic unity with clear mutual systemic links.

ISSN: 2005-4289 IJDRBC

3. Research Questions

The topic of our research is an individualized educational strategy based on SAA. The research is performed in Jiujiang University, China, within the academic course of English Writing. Thus, we investigate the educational process from the position of SAA.

The main goal of our research is to design an effective teaching model of the academic course "English Writing" on the basis of the SAA concept.

Objectives of the research are the following:

1. to elaborate a working model of an academic activity of a teacher aimed to teach students in the way that each one achieves high academic result in the condition of a large-in-number class;

2. to prove experimentally the effectiveness of the educational activity in accordance with the offered model.

Hypothetically, within the frames of educational process a teacher/lecturer can make each individual student achieve high academic results according to educational standards, if teaching is organized on the SAA basis. To be more exact:

a) if characteristics, structure and content of teacher's activity are determined by the required academic results of students;
b) if a teacher organizes theoretical academic investigation to be performed by a student with an investigated object, aimed to "produce" new (for a student) knowledge, so-called "subjective knowledge";
c) if a student interacts with the new knowledge reproducing it in materialized didactic orientation schemes, characterized as full, generalized, systemic;
d) if a student in his activity follows steps and changes types of pseudo-professional activity from cooperative with a teacher and other students to individualized, as well as from out loud socialized activity to mental activity;
e) if educational aids of teaching materials – for a lecturer/teacher and for a student - are specially elaborated in purpose to organize manageable individualized in-class activity of each student.

4. Methods

To prove the success of our research we choose pedagogical experiment as the basic method, which is supported by theoretical and empirical methods as well. Theoretical methods include analysis of philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, andragogical and methodological literature; analysis of academic standards and normative documentation; analysis of academic results of students; modelling of educational activity. Some empirical methods, such as lesson observation, expert revision, and interview of students, additionally support the research from the scientific point of view.

Experimental research of the academic activity of a teacher within the academic course of English Writing from the position of SAA is structured in 3 stages: preparatory, main and final.

To organize an academic investigation based on the MSA, at the preparatory stage the teacher develops two major sets of teaching aids: for a student of the experimental group and for a teacher. The selected material normally coincides with the academic knowledge presented in the regular textbook for students that match the content and didactic objectives of the academic discipline and equal to the students' level of knowledge.

The teacher designs the course in accordance with the actual professional competencies the students must acquire. The content includes the student activity book to model and organize the student's cognitive and academic research activity by MSA. Templates of systemic-type schemes for orienting the student through the learning material in the form of reference tables and reference maps are a significant part of the activity book. Each unit contains some necessary instructions intended to help orient the student through the academic knowledge, which will serve as a guide to the structure and content of the learning material on a certain topic. Such schemes orient the learner through the subject-specific academic material to be mastered and provide insight into the topics under study, as

ISSN: 2005-4289 IJDRBC

well as the key structural components of the target competencies and core relationships between them. A teacher can add some important academic data from educational literature, practical professional tasks, creative assignments and problems, some logical problems aimed at the development of logical and systemic thinking – the basis of professional thinking. There is also an important component of testing and assessment materials for self-checks with a system of normative criteria for self-evaluating the tests taken, the keys and practical assignments completed.

A set of materials for a teacher includes are presented in a teacher's book and aimed at organizing and managing the learners' activity, that is mostly an academic investigation performed by MSA. It contains a number of instructions intended to orient the teacher through the structure and content of the subject-specific academic knowledge and serving as a scenario for the organization of the student's academic activity and the teacher's pedagogical activity associated with the study of learning material related to a certain topic. The essential part of the teacher's book reduplicates the student activity book with the information that students must extract from their educational literature while working with it independently. The templates of systemic-type schemes in the form of reference tables and reference maps are filled with subject-specific academic knowledge to orient a learner through the learning material. Practical professional problems, as well as creative assignments and logical tasks, are presented with different variants of the solution to them. Testing and assessment materials for self-checks contain keys and correct variants of how to do and solve them.

At the main stage of the experiment, participants of the experiment are selected and the divided into two groups: experimental and control. An experimental group is trained from the position of SAA with use of didactic materials elaborated by a teacher at the preparatory stage, while a control group is going through the traditional teacher-front way of learning. The training lasts for one academic semester, 16 academic weeks, 32 academic hours.

At the final stage of the experiment all the participants are tested by the standard written test covering all the competencies, including theoretical knowledge and practical skills, acquired during the semester. At the end final academic results of the experimental and control groups are compared to analyze the training process and to make a conclusion about the effectiveness of the working model of the academic course "English Writing" on the basis of the SAA concept.

5. Results

Experimental academic investigation within the academic course of English Writing from the position of SAA is structured in 3 stages. At the preparatory stage, the teacher completely arranges the topics of the academic discipline and designs a scheme for orientation through the specific for the discipline learning material to be learnt and mastered, which provides the description of knowledge the students are expected to acquire as well as abilities and skills they are expected to develop. A mandatory requirement is to establish the core relationships between knowledge, abilities, and skills as the components of students' professional competencies which are developed during each certain topic.

An activity book for students as a didactic tool is elaborated to design the cognitive and academic investigation aimed at independent work of a learner with academic literature, lecture course material, and other courses associated with the discipline.

Each student will be enabled to generalize the specific discipline knowledge produced as a result of his academic investigation and capture it on a mean of data storage in materialized form for future use. For that reason, a teacher develops and includes in the activity book templates of special orientation scheme in the form of reference tables and reference maps. Students will use these reference tables to represent the system of discipline knowledge on the topic, and the reference map to demonstrate the system of knowledge on the activities and actions that should be performed to solve practical problems as a part of future professional work with the topic under study.

The teacher may also include in the discipline content a set of practical professional problems, creative assignments, as well as logical tasks to develop logical and systemic thinking as the basis of professional thinking. Relevant testing and assessment materials make students perform self-checks;

ISSN: 2005-4289 IJDRBC

they are accompanied by a system of normative criteria for self-evaluating the tests taken, the logical and practical problems solved. The final component of the discipline content is a set of instructions to guide learners through the learning content, which also serves as a vector for independent in-class work.

The teacher also develops a teacher's book for organizing his own pedagogical activity. Afterwards, activity books with the theoretical materials are provided to each student, who will then work with them independently in the condition of a large-in-number group.

At the main stage of the experiment the teacher arranges the in-class lessons for students to work with academic specific-discipline knowledge that will be generalized and materialized in the activity book. A detailed discussion of the content of the material under study – didactic units – and their theoretical generalization and systematization in the reference tables and reference maps takes place based on doing theoretical assignments.

The teacher acts as a manager who organizes students' activity related to assimilating in class new didactic units on the topic by their "verbalization" and materialization in the systemic-type orientation schemes. The teacher arranges a common discussion on solving professional practical problems and analyzing various ways of solving them. The students offer various ways of solving the problems, demonstrate the ability to come up with a solution independently, provide a practical rationale for solutions offered, put forward relevant arguments. To help develop logical thinking, students may also be offered logical problems that require systematizing, grouping, and classifying things, building cause-and-effect relationships, based on the didactic unit material on the topic. In solving professional practical problems, students rely on the systemic-type orientation schemes they have already built – reference tables and reference maps, which are employed for practical use, and can help forestall errors on the student's part. At this stage, a teacher uses various forms of working with students: individual, paired, or group.

210 students of Jiujiang University, China, majoring in English are chosen as participants of the experiment and divided into 2 groups: experimental (81 students) and control (129 students). All the participants are native Chinese speakers learning the English language for the second year in the university. According to the teaching plan and educational Standard of China the academic discipline "English Writing" is taught in the 1st semester of 2019-2020 academic year. The experiment takes place from September 2019 till January 2020.

The results of the experiment are summarized at the final stage. The participants are tested by the standard written test covering all the theoretical knowledge and practical skills acquired during the semester. The final academic results in January 2020 are the following: 90,5% for the experimental group and 80,5% for the control group (Table 1).

Table 1
Results from the final academic assessment of students at the Departmentof Foreign Languages at Jiujiang University in the discipline "English Writing"

	Class	**Number of students in class**	**Total number of students**	**Average score of the final test**
Experimental Group	A1711	40	81	90,5%
	A1712	41		
Control Group	A1811	42	129	80,5%
	A1812	43		
	A1813	44		

It is evident, that students of the experimental group whose educational process was organized according to the elaborated educational model based on SAA concept and MSA have shown significantly greater final assessment scores after 32 academic hours of training: 90,5% VS 80,5%. It means that the offered teaching model aimed to individualize the process of training is proved to be highly effective in the condition of large-in-number group.

ISSN: 2005-4289 IJDRBC

6. Discussion

The effectiveness of the teaching model based on SAA is proved experimentally during the 1st semester in 2019-2020 academic year. The educational process organized by a teacher from the position of SAA with the use of the above-described methodology yields the following inferences:

1. The quality of the knowledge and skills acquired by learners trained in the individualized manner from the position of SAA is significantly higher due to the complete, generalized, systemic knowledge acting in orientation function in respect of the tasks and assignments.
2. The academic investigation performed by students is adaptive and accessible for each student notwithstanding his individual abilities and starting level.
3. Attitude of the students to the lessons organized in experimental way essentially changes: they prefer arranged and managed in-class investigation activity performed with MSA that allows to work independently in large-in-number group. The cognitive motive for the students becomes leading, and students get interested in the technology of learning.
4. Specific discipline knowledge is easily acquired by the learners and applied in practice, because this type of knowledge is the product of their own academic investigation.
5. In addition to specific academic knowledge and skills the learners obtain the "ability to learn", that means designing their own pseudo-investigation using MSA to discover new knowledge, to generalize and schematize knowledge with signs and symbols.
6. The method of academic investigation arranged by MSA and managed by the teacher boosts systemic way of thinking in learners.
7. MSA itself acts as a generalized method for investigation, and it may be used for learning any other subject.
8. During the educational process, a teacher and each student feel psychological comfort and moral satisfaction which are very important from the point of view ofphysical and mental health.
9. The teacher feels a sense of satisfaction with success of each student, that is the key outcome of his pedagogical activity.

7. Conclusions

Elaborated working model of an academic activity of a teacher aimed to teach each individual student up to high academic result in the condition of large-in-number classes may serve as one of the key factors for ensuring the effective development of professional competencies in students and their final academic results. Within the frames of educational process characteristics, structure and content of teacher's activity are determined by the required academic results of students. A teacher organizes theoretical academic investigation to be performed by a student with an investigated object, aimed to "produce" so-called "subjective knowledge". A learner interacts with the new knowledge reproducing it in materialized didactic orientation schemes, characterized as complete, generalized, and systemic. Under the supervision of a teacher, each student follows steps in changing types of pseudo-professional activity from cooperative with a teacher and other students to individualized, as well as from out loud socialized activity to mental activity. The designed educational aids of teaching materials – for a lecturer/teacher and for a student - are highly efficient to organize manageable individualized in-class activity of each student.

Thus, this study may serve as an effective experience to upgrade the educational reality in the direction to high quality and breakthrough of Chinese education up to the world-class level. It may also be used in some extraordinary conditions when there are certain restrictions in attending in-class lessons, and the whole training is performed in a remote variant.

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ISSN: 2005-4289 IJDRBC

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ISSN: 2005-4289 IJDRBC