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Task design and analysis of English reading teaching from the perspective of Activity Theory

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Abstract

From the perspective of Activity Theory (AT), this paper analyses the author's task-based teaching practice of English journal and newspaper reading and adopts a qualitative study approach to examine the influence of task design on students' reading competence development. The tasks are designed mainly in the form of group work, highlighting the students as the subject and the regulating role of mediating artefacts, community, rules and division of labour. The data of students' reflection journals, reading reports and group work records show that after the training of a series of tasks for eight units, students' ability in reading English newspapers has been greatly developed, and they are also more confident in speaking and writing.

Keywords: English journal and newspaper reading, Activity Theory, task-based teaching

1 Introduction

Reading articles from English journals and newspapers can broaden our cultural horizons and help us understand idiomatic language expressions, which is an important way to effectively improve one's English reading ability. In recent years, with the deepening of higher education reform, many colleges and universities begin to offer English newspaper and journal reading courses for non-English majors. However, owing to its wide coverage of subjects, usage of professional terms and difficult language, it is not easy for the non-English majors to

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master this course. Many teachers are still using the old teaching method, leaving the class lifeless and students puzzled. The current situation deserves every foreign language teacher's reflection.

Given the important role of the social and cultural environment in English newspaper reading, Activity Theory (AT), the core concept of Social and Cultural Theory (SCT), can provide an important theoretical basis for the teaching practice of this course. Therefore, from the perspective of AT, this study regards the author's classroom teaching practice as an activity system, and makes an in-depth analysis of the task design in class and its teaching effect, hoping to provide a reference for relevant research and practice.

2 AT and task-based language teaching

Since Long proposed task-based language teaching (TBLT) in the 1980s, this new language teaching mode has attracted widespread attention at home and abroad [1], and has been widely applied in classroom teaching. Its related research mainly focused on the task itself, exploring some important concepts, such as task characteristics, task evaluation and so on, from the perspective of cognitive linguistics [2]. The role of socio-environmental factors was accordingly paid little attention to [3]. Therefore, in recent years, many scholars began to use the main concepts of SCT to study TBLT [4].

As one of the core concepts of SCT, AT was originally proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and developed by Leont'ev (1981) and Engeström (1987). This theory proposed an activity system that includes the elements of the socio-cultural environment, as shown in Figure 1. The six key elements of AT, including subject, object, community, tools, rules and division of labour, interact with each other in the learner's cognitive practice. In order to achieve the object, the subject forms a community with other individuals who have a common goal and completes the practice activities with the help of certain mediating tools under the premise of certain rules. In this process, each member of the community has a different division of labour in terms of task allocation, status and power.

Fig. 1 Engeström's (1987) third generation AT framework. AT, Activity Theory.

The activity system can reflect learners' learning process and the means by which they achieve the goal in a multi-dimensional and dynamic way, which can be used to observe and analyse the second language classroom teaching [5]. At present, there are few researches on TBLT from the perspective of AT in China, and most of them focus on foreign countries. For example, the influence of different language environments on learners' task performance is explored through the activity analysis of the tasks [6]; the process and results of learners' participation in tasks are analysed in the activity system from the perspective of business English course [7]; some researches use AT to guide curriculum design [8] or analyse teachers' cognition of TBLT [9]. With the widespread development of TBLT, integrating AT into TBLT can help teachers know about students' task completion process more clearly, to timely adjust the task design and achieve better teaching results. Given the above, this study established reading groups in the TBLT to make up a community that aimed to improve students' English newspaper reading ability, during which the rules and division of labour were determined and

appropriate mediations were provided. This paper will use qualitative research method to deeply analyse the task design and its effect in the English newspaper and journal reading teaching from the perspective of AT, in an attempt to answer the core research question: How do classroom tasks affect the students' development of English newspaper reading ability?

3 Research method

3.1 Participants

The author works in an undergraduate university in central China. English newspaper and journal reading is a public elective course for non-English majors in the second semester of the second year. This study selected 42 students from Class One taught by the author as the participants to carry out classroom teaching observation and research. A total of 34 students in the class passed CET-4, while the other eight scored between 380 and 425. Although there are some differences in their basic level of language, none of them has ever taken any systematic training in English newspaper reading before learning this course, and they are eager to broaden their cultural horizons and improve their reading through this course.

3.2 Research design

Given the existing problems in TBLT research of being too short the period [4], this study carried out TBLT for a semester of 18 weeks during which students were organised to complete a series of single or group reading tasks in order to improve their reading ability. In order to better explain the relationship between classroom tasks and the development of students' reading ability, the following section will be discussed from two aspects: teaching design and activity analysis of tasks.

3.2.1 Teaching design

The textbook for this course is selected as *New Mass Media Reading* (Fourth Edition). With a wide range of topics, the articles in this book are about major hot issues in recent years, which are informative, timely and interesting. The author chose eight units, including different topics about culture, politics, global personage, finance, sci-tech front and sports. At the beginning of the semester, students were divided into eight reading groups.

In the first week, the teacher introduced the teaching plan and requirements and especially emphasised the importance of independent reading. In order to build students' confidence and interest in reading, the author shared her reading experience of English journals in the first week. Then, group discussions were carried out to make a semester reading plan and the discussion records were submitted after conclusion of the classroom session.

From the second week on, TBLT was carried out based on the topic of each unit. The task design of each unit was divided into input-based tasks and output-based tasks [10]. Authentic input materials with moderate difficulty were selected so as to promote students' subjectivity and initiative.

Previous studies have proved that task complexity is closely related to the degree of completion of learners [11]. Therefore, the tasks of each unit were designed from easy to difficult, gradually transiting from input-based tasks to output-based tasks to improve students' understanding ability and benefit their speaking and writing in the meantime. Next, the author will take four periods in one unit as an example to illustrate how the tasks were designed.

Before the first period, students were required to read the article independently, memorise important words in the article, search relevant background knowledge on the Internet, write a summary of the general idea and hand it in. In class, after introducing background knowledge, the teacher explained the common stylistic features of newspaper articles and the reading skills required to successfully assimilate information from them. During the second period, students were organised into group discussions to find out specific cases of the stylistic features

from the articles and analyse them based on the content of the articles. During the group work, the teacher joined in the discussion according to the needs of the students and provided the necessary help. At the end of the discussion, the representative of each group chose one case from their discussion to make a presentation in class, after which the teacher gave comments on each group.

Before the third period, students were asked to read the text thoroughly, discuss with group members about the assigned tasks and work together to prepare a 4–5 min presentation. In the cases of problems that could not be solved through discussion, students were permitted at any time to consult the Internet or seek help from teachers through QQ or DingTalk. In the third and fourth periods, each group gave a presentation based on the assigned task. After the teacher was satisfied that the students had finished learning each part of the article, each group was organised so as to facilitate discussion of some topics about the unit in order to improve students' critical thinking ability. After class, each student should hand in a reflection based on the discussion before class, preparation for the presentation and the feedback from classmates and teachers.

The author shared with students a lot of useful websites from which to access English journals and newspapers and required them to make their own reading plans. At the end of each month, a reading journal should be handed in to report the main ideas of the articles students read and their reflections.

At the end of the semester, students can choose an article of about 1000 words from the English journal or newspaper; analyse it from the aspects of stylistic features, main idea and understanding of important sentences and paragraphs; and finally form a reading report.

In order to urge students to pay attention to reading accumulation, the author emphasised the importance of independent reading after class and also informed students of the proportion of the assessment: attendance 10%, class performance 10%, 8 group presentations 40%, reflection 20% and final article analysis 20%.

3.2.2 Activity analysis of tasks

In the stage of the input-based tasks, students are the subject of the activity system. The object is to understand the background of the article, understand the main idea and write a summary of the general idea. The understanding of English journals or newspapers is closely related to the social and cultural environment. Therefore, in order to better understand the text, students need to get relevant information with the help of mediations such as textbooks and the Internet, which facilitates a positive interaction with the social and cultural environment. As an important mediator, the teacher introduces the important background information, guides the students to master the language and stylistic characteristics of the articles, and gives timely feedback to the students' reflections or reports. In this process, teachers' requirements are rules, according to which students complete their tasks to deepen their understanding of the articles and gradually improve their reading ability.

In the stage of the output-based tasks, the types of tasks are different. The task is mainly carried out in the form of group work. The objects include preparing a presentation based on students' understanding of the paragraph or article and reporting their group discussion and reflections. Group members form a community to achieve the goals according to the teacher's rules and some division of labour. While doing the tasks, students need help from some mediation tools, such as DingTalk, QQ or the teacher's help.

In the after-class reading stage, students can freely choose the English journals or newspapers they are interested in reading. During this stage, students will actively analyse and examine what they have learned in class to form their own learning model, and constantly check and improve it in future reading practice.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

In this semester, the data the author collected include the students' summaries in each unit, group discussion report, reflections, reading reports and so on. The author has read 30% of each kind carefully and classified them according to their content themes. In order to facilitate the data management and analysis, e-folders are established. Due to the limited space, this paper will use reflections, reading reports and group discussion reports as the main data to find out the influence of classroom tasks on the development of students' reading ability, and other data will be used to assist in confirming the main data. After sorting and analysing the data, the initial data

are classified and coded according to two themes: course evaluation and learning gains, as shown in Figure 2.

Fig. 2 Data analysis and coding.

4 Results and discussion

It is found that students' reading ability, as well as their oral and writing skills, have been greatly improved after systematic training for a semester.

4.1 Course evaluation

A series of tasks are designed based on the textbook in the teaching process of each unit. These tasks are relevant and progressive, proceeding in sophistication from simple to complex. The object is to enable students to deeply understand the characteristics and content of English journals and newspapers by completing one task after another. As the subject of the class, students have a high degree of acceptance for such teaching design and most of them can complete the task actively. For example, the following descriptions offer an understanding of what students wrote in their reflections after learning Unit 4:

I have been learning this course for more than 2 months, and I'm feeling a very different reading class. In the past, the teacher usually analysed the article and then asked us to do the exercises, which were all multiple-choice questions. However, in this class, a series of tasks have been designed for us in each unit in advance, and the requirements were very clear for each step. Completing these tasks was just like fighting against monsters, giving us a sense of achievement. Of course, we also met difficulties, but the teacher would help us in time. In class, the teacher gives us enough time for group discussion, and everyone participates in the discussion and makes his own contribution to the group work. Finally, I'm not listening passively as before, but taking the initiative to participate and improve myself. (Student 1).

After feeling their dominant role, students made better preparations for each task. The emphasis on the formative evaluation can urge students to pay attention to their daily accumulation in reading and take each task seriously. Community members participate in group activities according to certain rules, during which they can also provide peer support for each other in the group interaction.

The teacher told us the assessment of this course in the first class. The proportion of daily work is very high. If we don't finish each task carefully, we might fail. It is true that reading requires everyday effort, so I usually prepare a lot so that I can have something to say in the group discussion. We've got a lot of group work in this semester. At first, I think it's a waste of time to discuss with others. But twice participation I found each

person had different mastery and preparation. Communication with each other can solve a lot of doubts in our minds. It's a wonderful experience. After a period of running in, we're having a more harmonious relationship and enjoying such a good learning atmosphere. (Student 2).

I was deeply impressed by the first class of this semester. The teacher shared her experience of reading foreign magazines. I could feel her sincerity, which also made me feel closer to the teacher and more confident about reading foreign magazines and newspapers. As a group leader, I need to organise the group discussion and assign tasks to each member. I'm trying my best to help my partners when they encounter problems, and they can also help me a lot, but there are still some problems that cannot be solved. At this time, we often ask the teacher for help. She is just like our friend and always very kind to give us many inspirations. I can learn a lot from her. (Student 3).

It can be seen that the attitude of Student 2 towards group work changed with the passage of time, and he began to feel the various gains brought by the new learning mode. A harmonious relationship between teachers and students, in conjunction with maintaining a participative atmosphere in the classroom, is one of the important affective factors in foreign language teaching [12]. As an important mediation in foreign language teaching, the teacher should not only be responsible for designing classroom activities and evaluating teaching effects but should also be a scaffold to promote the further development of students' learning ability.

4.2 Learning gains

After training, students have mastered the basic methods of analysing English journals and newspapers. They have known how to improve their reading ability by reading foreign journals.

In the past, I thought I could understand an article as long as I looked up the new words in the dictionary. After learning this course, I found that besides looking up the words, it's also important to know about the social background of the article. The invisible information will be in the way to understand the article. I just learned the article 'Paris, Los Angeles Confirmed as Olympic Hosts'. When I first read it, I didn't understand why Hamburg, Rome and Budapest would drop out of bidding for the Olympic Games. After knowing about the history of Olympic bidding, I'm clear that the Games may be a cash cow for some countries, but they can also be a drain on the economy. It became much easier to understand the whole passage. (Student 4).

English journals and newspapers are like a mirror, reflecting all aspects of the world under the social and cultural background. Understanding the background information ensures a positive interaction between learners and the social and cultural environment. It is also a necessary step to achieve the object while learning to read.

In addition, after a semester, students have known about the basic stylistic features of journals and newspapers and the structural features of the discourse:

I gained a lot from this course. I learned that newspaper articles have their own unique stylistic features, such as omissions in titles, novel words used to attract readers, compact and concise sentence patterns and paragraph structures, as well as various figures of speech and idioms that make me confused. Although there is still a long way to go before I can easily understand English newspapers, I've got the basic methods and know what to do in the future. (Student 5).

Besides stylistic features, vocabulary and discourse structure, it is also an important goal to cultivate students' ability in critical thinking. In the text *Reuters Top 100: The World's Most Innovative Universities –2017*, there is one sentence worth pondering: Given China's massive population and economy, just three universities out of 100 still represents significant underperformance. The author designed two questions for students to discuss: Among Reuters Top 100, there are few Chinese universities; why? How to boost the competitiveness of Chinese universities? The following conversation is from Group 3's discussion report.

Student A: Our academic performance is falling behind that of western countries.

Student B: The hardware facilities of domestic universities are not as good as those of foreign universities.

Student C: We're still a developing country with a huge population. We don't have so much money for the research expenditure. It should in some way influence the development of our universities.

Teacher: Your ideas are excellent! Do you know what the ranking is based on?

Student D: The number of patents and citations; and the creativity.

Teacher: Yes! But only the patents and papers published in English can be seen in the ranking.

Student C: I know. Maybe the ranking is not so objective. The language of the academic world is dominated by English, but our universities do not use English as the language for teaching and research; so, they are not competitive when competing with western countries.

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Through brainstorming in the community, this group analysed the questions from various aspects, such as hardware conditions, the current situation of China's population and economy and so on. Due to the mediation of the teacher, they realised a new aspect with which to analyse the question critically. Finally, this group summarised more constructive suggestions to enhance the competitiveness of China's universities, such as further development of national competitiveness, increasing investment in scientific research, training teachers and students' consciousness and interest in English academic writing.

In terms of the benefits, many students mentioned their surprise from the reflections.

We are asked to write reflections after each unit in this semester. At first, I was not willing to write it, because I thought it was a waste of time. I didn't know why I had to do that. But when I really did it, I found that I need to recall every step of the learning process carefully to sum up the experience and discover the problem. In order to write something in my reflection, I took notes carefully while doing each task, which also made me more focused. After a semester, the reflections really helped me make a lot of progress. Meanwhile, I had a dialogue with myself, and I also knew how to learn in the future. (Student 4).

This course mainly focuses on the input-based task, but the students' speaking and writing ability have also been greatly improved with the completion of each task.

While preparing the presentation, I must try to understand the article, and I'm also pushed to speak out fluently, which is a big challenge for me. After practicing over and over again, I gradually dare to speak out and became more confident. It was a surprise. In addition, the classroom learning and extracurricular reading practice have enabled me to have a clear understanding of the text layout and sentence structure of articles in foreign journals. It is much easier for me to write a summary, and the mistakes I often made in writing before are much less now. (Student 7).

In short, students, together with other community members, can complete the tasks the teacher designed actively with the help of all kinds of mediations, which has deepened their understanding of vocabulary, sentence and discourse of English journals and newspapers, made them form into good reading habits, and greatly improved their reading ability.

5 Conclusions

This study analysed the author's teaching of task-based English journal and newspaper reading, from the perspective of AT. Different kinds of data, such as group discussion report, reflections, reading reports and so on, are collected, classified and coded in a qualitative approach. The results show that tasks should be designed to highlight students' dominant position, and teachers should pay equal attention to input-based tasks and output-based tasks. Students need different mediations such as teachers, textbooks and Internet resources to get help and complete the tasks with other community members in accordance with certain divisions of labour under the premise of rules. At the same time, teachers should strive to establish a harmonious relationship with students, choose reading materials with moderate difficulty, and give timely feedback to students' inquiries and tasks, so as to encourage students to improve themselves through mediating regulation. In addition, teachers should pay more attention to formative evaluation; this would in turn encourage students to pay attention to the daily accumulation and finish each task seriously. In short, scientific and reasonable task design, coupled with the timely adjustment of various mediations, can enable students to master the basic methods of reading English journals and newspapers and can also improve their speaking and writing abilities.

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