The Application of ESA Teaching Model in Teaching English Writing in High School

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Abstract: Inspired by Chinese teachers' one-directional indoctrination English writing class and difficulties of Chinese high school students in English writing, the current study applied ESA (Engage Study Active) method to overcome the situation. The research subject in this paper is the teaching of English writing in high school, and this paper explores the effectiveness of applying the ESA teaching model toward English writing class. This study uses qualitative research to investigate whether the ESA teaching model of writing classes can stimulate students' interest in writing, enhance their writing skills, and improve their writing performances. According to the findings, implementing the ESA method can significantly improve students' engagement and writing performance. Students' motivations to write were increased, and writing activities in the classroom were improved. The study suggests that the ESA teaching model can be an effective approach to teaching English writing in Chinese high schools. To keep up with the changing needs of students, Chinese teachers' traditional approach must be modified. The findings of this study can help teachers and educators improve their teaching methods and improve students' learning experiences.

Keywords: ESA (Engage, Study, and Activate) method, English writing, teaching method

1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards for General High School (2017 Edition) states that language skills include skills in five areas: listening, speaking, reading, viewing, and writing, of which listening, reading, and viewing are comprehension skills, and speaking and writing are expressive skills [1]. As the most comprehensive module in high school English learning, writing requires a high level of proficiency in using English for writing. However, there are some problems in teaching English writing in high school, such as a single and mechanical way of teaching, emphasizing the result rather than the process, and students' lack of motivation to write. Therefore, a certain learning method is needed to help overcome these difficulties. Among the many existing learning approaches, the ESA approach (Engage, Study and Activate) is one that is considered to be effective. Based on some previous studies, the implementation of the ESA method has proven to be able to solve the problem of a single mechanical mode of teaching English writing, and increase students' motivation to learn. Students move from passive to active participation in writing learning activities [2]. Furthermore, the teaching process and activities of the ESA model are flexible, and teachers can adjust the teaching sessions according to the actual situation, so that students are more engaged, and practice and learning are integrated and advanced step by step, in line with students' learning patterns [3]. However,

research on the application of ESA in English writing in Chinese high schools has not received extensive attention, thus this study can arouse the attention of schools and teachers, and help improve their teaching methods and students' performances.

2.   Engage, Study, Active Method (ESA)

In 1998, Jeremy Harmer, a leading British language educator, introduced the famous ESA theory of language teaching in his book How to Teach English. In this book, he pointed out that students should firstly be exposed to a language environment; secondly, they should be motivated and willing to learn; and finally, they should have the opportunity to use the language [4]. Thus ESA refers to the three main elements of language teaching, namely "Engage", "Study", and "Activate".

2.1.   Three Elements of ESA

The engage phase is a point in the teaching section where the teacher tries to stimulate the learner's interest, it also involves feeling. Harmer believes that motivation and emotion are crucial to successful language learning [4]. When students are learning a new language, it is almost impossible for them to remember the language items they are learning if they are not emotionally engaged. For this reason, language teachers need to stimulate students' interest in the learning material through a variety of means that evoke a positive emotional experience of learning and motivate students to quickly enter the language learning process.Games (depending on the age of the learners and the type of game), music, discussions (when handled challengingly), stimulating pictures, dramatic stories, amusing anecdotes, and so on are all activities and materials that frequently get students' attention, motivate them to learn, and thus put them in the learning situation.

In the Study phase, through classroom learning and activities guided by the teacher, students learn to analyze language materials and related phonology, vocabulary, grammatical structures, chapter and paragraph structure, and writing style. Students will gain language knowledge such as phonology, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as a focus on language and its construction. Study can be in many forms, ranging from teacher explanations to students discovering and summarizing language rules on their own, or in group activities to learn vocabulary, chapter reading, and so on [5].

In the Activate phase, teachers are expected to design communicative activities with a particular context or topic and guide students to use language as freely and communicatively as they can. In this phase, teachers should not focus on explaining the construction of language, but how to guide students to use all and any language without limits which may be appropriate for the given situation or topic [4]. Therefore, the main task of teachers is to create situations which is like a rehearsal for the real world, and guide students to participate in communicative activities.

2.2.   Three Models of ESA

Harmer contends that regardless of the content taught, three elements should be present: engage, study, and activate, but these elements do not always occur in the same order. Depending on what we want to accomplish, the order is bound to change [4]. According to the sequence of the three elements and different combinations, Harmer has designed three different models.

2.2.1. Straight Arrows Model

The straight arrows teaching model is similar to the PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) teaching model. It is the most basic model, designed to adhere to the three steps of "engage→study→activate". The teacher first piques students' interest in learning, then teaches the planned content, and finally

organizes classroom activities that allow students to put what they've learned into practice. This procedure is usually adapted at lower levels for straightforward language.

2.2.2. Boomerang Model

In this model, the teaching sequence is "engage→activate→study→activate". First, the teacher introduces a topic or situation that will stimulate students' interest and provide them with something to think about. Second, the students try to use the language on their own, and the teacher records the mistakes and difficulties they encounter in the application process. Third, the teacher focuses on the difficulties and mistakes that students encounter in using the language. The students compare and contrast the mistakes, and then focus on memorizing them. Finally, the teacher designs a topic or situation linked to the language knowledge already imparted and the students practice it again in this context to consolidate what they have learned. The boomerang model emphasizes student learning autonomy and is suitable for intermediate language learners.

2.2.3. Patchwork Model

The teaching sequence of patchwork model is varied. It is usually "engage→activate→study→activate→study→engage→activate". First, the teacher proposes a topic that arouses students' interest and stimulates their motivation to learn; second, the teacher designs teaching activities that incorporate students' passion for learning and guides them to use their existing knowledge to communicate; second, the teacher provides students with relevant knowledge, students try to use it, and then the teacher explains the typical mistakes that occur during students' language use. Then teachers and students have discussions to solve them; finally, the teacher provides students with similar topics, students consolidate what they have learned and achieve the use of the target language.

3. Advantages of ESA Teaching Model

Similar to the PPP model and Task-based Learning (TBL) model which are most commonly used in English teaching, the ESA model is also originated from the communicative language teaching method. By comparing these three instructional models, it can help teachers better understand and apply the ESA model.

3.1. Comparison of ESA Model and PPP Model

Skehan summarizes the teaching of PPP in three stages: Presentation, Practice, Production [6]. With the continuous updating of the teaching concept, the disadvantages of the PPP teaching mode in the process of practical application have become increasingly apparent.

First, the ESA teaching sequence is flexible by using the different kinds of E-S-A stages and conducting activating activities in specific contexts which differs from PPP teaching sequence that seems to be overly structured. The practice phase is mainly conducted with a large number of mechanical drills, which are criticized owing to their lack of relation to real-life communication because they simply focus on forms at the expense of meaning. PPP model emphasizes formal accuracy or correctness while ignoring student language acquisition laws which is not dominated by language structure and function, but rather by practice in authentic contexts.

Second, the ESA teaching sequence is student-centered in contrast to the PPP, which places too much emphasis on teachers' talk or control over the class. Although the first stage (presentation) of PPP teaching is concerned with the teacher's presentation of the teaching task and the second stage (practice) with how students practice the language [7]. There is some teacher-student interaction

between these two stages, but it is essentially a mechanical one-way response rather than substantive language communication [6].

3.2. Comparison of ESA Model and Task-based Learning (TBL) Model

In A Framework for Task-based Learning, Willis divided task-based learning into three stages: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus [8]. In this model, the teacher presents the task, students work in small groups or one-on-one, and then do an oral or written report, and finally the teacher explains the language points. However, TBL also has its limitations.

Seedhouse implies that students' communication is task-constrained in TBL classroom, and the entire organization of the interaction is aimed at accomplishing the focused task [9]. The TBL model places far too much emphasis on learning style over learning content. The goal of the task is for students to learn new words, but if they do not master the new knowledge, it is likely that they will complete the task using their original knowledge and only "complete the task" in form. While it is important to realize that there is a lot more to communication than performing tasks.

Besides, the TBL model focuses on the fluency and coherence of communicative activities, but does not require high accuracy of sentences and vocabulary. This teaching method requires a high level of communicative competence, which is weak in Chinese students.

The ESA model lies between the PPP model and the TBL model, and can bridge both the PPP model, which is commonly used in elementary school, and the more demanding TBL model. In addition, the ESA model has both simple and complex teaching models that are suitable for both novice and experienced teachers. It allows the teacher to try to design the best teaching sequence for a specific purpose of teaching by flexibly combining the three teaching elements (Engage, Study, Activate) according to the teaching objectives, avoiding a traditional classroom with only one-way output from the teacher and preventing the classroom from being occupied by a lot of meaningless activities. It is suitable for Chinese English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms.

4. The Application of ESA Teaching Model in High School English Writing

The ESA teaching method will be implemented to this writing lesson in this study, with Reading for Writing in Unit 1 of PEP Book 2 as an example. This study will employ the patchwork model, which is more complicated and appropriate for the level of high school students.

4.1. Pre-writing

The first stage is Engage. The teacher first shows a picture of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang and asks the students to guess what cultural heritage is shown, then shows a short video about the preservation of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang's cultural heritage. Following the viewing of the video, the teacher poses the following question: Do you believe it is necessary for us to promote our cultural heritage to the world? The teacher evaluates the students' responses before introducing the topic of the day's lesson. Then the teacher displays the writing text for this lesson, Promoting Culture Through Digital Images.

The second stage is Activate. The teacher instructs students to skim through the article, summarize the main idea, and respond to questions about the article's content: What are the researchers and scientists trying to do? What modern technology are they using? Students complete the teacher's task after reading the article. According to the teacher, this is an article about collecting digital images to protect the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang.

Next stage is also Activate. The teacher instructs students to reread the article, analyze the structure of the article, and summarize the main idea of the paragraph, and students scan the article to understand and analyze the structure of the article.

The Activate phase is followed by Study. The teacher acknowledges the students' analysis of the article's structure and then leads them through the structure of the article again, summarizing the composition of each part of the article: (1) Headline: using active and short action verbs; leading readers to what the report is about; (2) Introduction: information about who, what when where; (3) Body: facts, important details, examples, what the person or group does, using relative clause, quotes and paraphrase; (4) Ending: a short summary to help the readers remember the main idea.

The teacher provides enough scaffolding for the students' next writing through the above step-by-step process, assisting them in clarifying the structure of their compositions, giving them a clearer understanding of the content of their compositions, and making them more confident in completing the next writing tasks [10].

4.2. While-writing

The first stage in while-writing process is Activate. After identifying the topic, the teacher facilitates a brainstorming session in which students list their ideas about the topic on the board or in their notes, drawing inspiration from the ideas of one another.

Then, followed by the Study phase. The teacher guides students through the process of categorizing and organizing their ideas in the form of a mind map.

After building adequate scaffolding, the teacher guides students to the Activate stage again. Students create an outline based on their mind map and write a first draft of their composition using the outline as a guide.

4.3. Post-writing

The post-writing begins with Engage stage. After students have completed their first drafts, the teacher divides the class into small groups of four to five students each. The teacher assigns a composition to each group and asks them to discuss and evaluate it at the discourse level, such as whether the composition's central idea is clear and whether the meaning is clear. Following the evaluation, the students wrote their comments on a piece of paper and handed it to the teacher, who added to each group's comments. Students will have a clear understanding of the structure of the composition and the expression of the central idea as a result of this group discussion, and they will be able to evaluate the structure of the text and the expression.

The next stage is Activate. Based on the results of the discussion, students will revise their compositions, this time focusing on the discourse, such as the structure, the logical order of the paragraphs, the connection, and whether the center of the composition is prominent.

The Activate phase is followed by Study. Students collaborate in pairs to correct each other's compositions. The teacher emphasizes on spelling, grammar, verb tense and other linguistic aspects. During this process, the students assume the role of the teacher, which piques their interest. When they point out the flaws and mistakes in other students' compositions and suggest appropriate corrections, their motivation to write and correct increases [11].

Then there is another Activate phase. Students revise their compositions a second time based on feedback from other students. The revision focuses on the errors in the discourse and language.

The final stage is Study. After the students have corrected the linguistic errors and improved the structure of the composition, the teacher reviews the students' compositions and writes comments after the composition, communicating directly with the students if necessary. Because there are fewer errors and the structure is clear at this point, the teacher's task of correcting the compositions is relatively simple. The teacher can focus the review on the overall organization of the composition and provide constructive feedback.

Based on the examples above, it is easy to see how the three elements of Engage, Study, and Activate sometimes overlap. As a result, it is critical to avoid focusing too much on the form and applying it for the sake of application when using the ESA teaching model. Teachers must be adaptable in combining the three elements in order to create a classroom that is both rich in engaging activities and effective in meeting teaching objectives.

5.   Conclusion

To summarize, ESA's flexible classroom model can better stimulate students' interest in writing and develop their writing self-confidence than the traditional English writing teaching model, which is lengthy and one-way output from the teacher. Students actively participate in classroom activities, cooperate with their peers in the group, actively think, and summarize in time in the ESA classroom. Instead of making students memorize mechanically, the teacher is always ready to answer questions and guide them to understand and memorize language knowledge, and students' attention to the classroom will be greatly improved.

The main limitation of this study is that it is only theoretical, lack of reliable data or empirical investigations. This is due to a scarcity of existing research on the topic in China. Furthermore, as an undergraduate student, the researcher was unable to conduct this research in a real classroom setting. Despite the fact that few studies in China have been able to demonstrate a link between the use of the ESA instructional model and improved second language writing outcomes, the researcher discovered many quantitative studies in Indonesia confirming the effectiveness of the ESA instructional model for improving ELT classroom instruction, and this study was guided by Harmer's ESA theory, which is both instructive and practical.

Future ESA teaching theory research should focus on teaching practice application, that is, in-depth research on how to apply ESA teaching theory to improve students' core competence of English discipline. In terms of research methods, future ESA teaching theory research should focus on gathering data through teaching practice and conducting quantitative research to demonstrate the relationship between ESA teaching theory and students' English application ability [7].

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