

# The Application of Psycholinguistic Principles in University English Teaching

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**Abstract:** With the new curriculum reform put into effect, new requirements and plans for college English teaching have been put forward. More and more attention has been paid to Chinese college English teaching from all aspects, among which, psycholinguistics is a new frontier subject. The application of psycholinguistic principles in education is more extensive. The research on the osmotic application of psycholinguistic principles in Chinese college English teaching is becoming the focus of education. This paper briefly introduces the characteristics and basic situation of English teaching in Chinese colleges, and the application of psycholinguistic principles in Chinese college English teaching is expounded. The purpose of this study is to understand the principles of psycholinguistics in English teaching in Chinese universities. It is hoped to play a positive role in promoting college English teaching innovation in China.

**Keywords:** Psycholinguistic principles; College English teaching; Application

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## 1. Introduction

Psycholinguistics, as a study of the psychological process of human language activities, mainly focuses on the explanation of language phenomenon by observing human psychological changes in the process of language communication and by examining what kind of reserved skill and ability human beings need to carry out language activities in the process of actual communication. In college language teaching, the practical application of language skills has been emphasized, and therefore, characteristic language teaching pattern will be studied and carried out to a certain degree on the basis of theoretical teaching, to guarantee the practicality of language teaching. At present, in college English teaching, besides the basic instruction of listening, speaking, reading and writing courses, the introduction of psycholinguistic principles to English language teaching has become an inevitable trend in order to cultivate students' practical abilities in applying basic knowledge in social practice. And in this field, many universities in China have launched pilot programs, which has very positive significance in improving the English teaching level and promoting the development of college English teaching in China.

## 2. The Present Situation of College English Teaching in China

With the implementation of new curriculum reform, the

reform of English teaching in Chinese colleges and universities is getting on the right track. Because China's universities have been in a state of enrollment expansion, the quality of the students enrolled has been relatively declined, and the low cultural quality of the students has, to some extent, limited the teaching quality in Chinese universities.<sup>[1]</sup> In general, in this case, most college students' expectation for English teaching during the four-year study is confined to passing college English proficiency tests, such as TEM4, TEM8, CET4 and CET6. And this has led to the emphasis on exam-oriented education, that is, English teaching in colleges and universities paid more attention to examination and neglected cultivating students' practical abilities. Although the students' ability in coping with tests in written papers is guaranteed, it does not mean that the students' practical English proficiency has been improved. Coupled with the rapid development of global integration and economic globalization, the social demand for inter-disciplinary talents has continuously increased, and higher-level requirements have been put forward for the higher quality of foreign languages teaching in colleges and universities. In today's social environment, students who only master the theoretical knowledge of English language without practical abilities in social communication are unable to meet the development demand of the society.<sup>[2]</sup>

However, despite the increase of social demand for inter-disciplinary talents with high English proficiency in expanding globalization, most college students do not

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value English study, and they are psychologically afraid of difficulties in English learning. And many non-English majors in particular have even wanted to escape from college English tests—their mere goal in their English study in universities. Chinese college students has been in a state of passive acceptance of English knowledge for a long time for there is no upward pressure from entrance exams and the students lack of adequate understanding of the employment environment in the society. And the non-native language environment with English as a foreign language in China further deepens the difficulties in English teaching.<sup>[3]</sup> In colleges and universities in China, there are some problems existing in English teaching, such as insufficiency in professional research and backward teaching concept. And for non-English major students, English is just a course of study, and they are thought to finish their learning task if they pass the final exam even in English. And this would lead to the teachers' neglect of English teaching without considering improving their English teaching skills and strategies. In English classes, teachers and students are just paying lip service without real interaction and practical communication, which presents the characteristics of mechanical teaching in English course. Most teachers even don't bother to create English teaching situations, and it hard for them to motivate students' learning interest, thus producing a lot of students who just master English as a kind of "dumb English" and "mechanical English".<sup>[4]</sup>

### 3. The Design Concept of Permeating Psycholinguistics in College English Teaching

As is analyzed above, in the process of college English teaching in China, students are lack of English learning motivation, which makes the teachers' classroom teaching very passive and has largely restricted the promotion of teaching quality. Most colleges and universities in China are especially lack of effective English curriculum and the development of the design of actual teaching situations to cultivate students' oral English ability and English communicative competence. In a complete set of effective English teaching system, teaching should keep a whole ecological chain, making the students more actively involved in English learning and better interact with teachers' teaching process, which would cultivate both teachers' and students' initiative in English teaching and learning. Compared with the course instructions in compulsory education stages in primary and middle schools which emphasize knowledge instillation, college English teaching should be prepared to pay equal attention to both theory teaching and practice teaching design, taking into account the importance of both the instillation of knowledge and

research on scientific teaching mode and improving students practical ability in real world communication. Theory is the basis of practice teaching and practice teaching is the purpose of theory teaching, and therefore, it is necessary to increase the proportion of practice teaching in the curriculum design, strengthening the teaching methods of cultivating students' practical ability, such as abilities of oral communication and listening skills, meeting the target to open teaching content design.<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, the permeation of practical psycholinguistic principles in English teaching in Chinese colleges and universities is very urgent and necessary, which would direct the healthy development of English teaching in China theoretically and practically.

### 4. Reasonable Path of Applying Psycholinguistic Principles to College English Teaching

#### 4.1 Principle and Application of Interaction Theory

As a basic and important principle in psychological linguistics, interaction theory is a completely new view point about the relationship between heredity and environment on the basis of the general recognition of the existing genetics and environmental factors. The idea of interaction theory consists of two parts: (1) heredity and environment are interdependent, and there is a relationship of correlation and mutual-dependence between them; and (2) heredity and environment interact with each other, and there is the possibility of mutual transformation between them, which can be changed by external stimuli.

When the concept of interaction theory is applied to English language learning and teaching, it will be found that the environment plays an irreplaceable role in learning and is one of the material bases to guarantee the quality of English teaching. English learning can be achieved through imitation and stimulation, but it cannot be limited to simple stimulation and imitation, and the creation of real situations is very necessary. English learning in real situation is just like the teaching and learning of mother tongue, which is not limited to the teaching of sentences or grammar but repeated practice in complex logical infiltration and sentence transformation in the real language environment.<sup>[6]</sup> In mother language environment, there is a real situational reinforcement learning, rather than a deliberate imitation. If real situations can be set up in English teaching in Chinese colleges and universities, students would acquire practical English communicative competence and better teaching results would be achieved. Language learning ability is a kind of innate ability of human beings, and human beings have the genetic factors of learning various languages, and the acquired environment is necessary to guarantee the learning effect.

According to the interaction theory, language teaching and learning is a dynamic process, which requires the creation of a good learning environment for students and good teaching atmosphere for teachers. In the process of college English teaching, the basic principles of practical teaching should be observed, creating a real situational teaching environment for students. For example, in teaching the unit related to the topic "Asking the Way", teachers can divide the students into groups to simulate the situation of asking the way and directing the way, practicing dialogues or conversations in a real situation. The students just "play" into the teaching situation and make their roles alive. And at the same time, classroom atmosphere is made active and students' initiative is exerted, which arouses students' interest in English study.<sup>[7]</sup> For another example, in a lecture to English majors on an article about how to write English poems, the teacher can let students follow the author's guidance and ideas to write the author's desired poem step by step. In this way, students not only have completed the study of English words, phrases and grammar, but also finished the task of discourse reading, and more importantly, under the guidance of the author and the teacher, the students use the target language they are learning (English) to produce their own English poem, and understand the beauty and charm of the English language in poetry. In applying this teaching method, teachers could enable students not only to be interested in English learning, but also to have a sense of achievement in using English and mastering English.

#### **4.2 Principle and Application of Metacognitive Ability Theory**

In psycholinguistic field, metacognitive ability is regarded as one of the important research subjects. Metacognitive ability theory deals with human beings' cognition and feedback on their self-learning situation in the process and activities of language learning. Metacognitive ability is in fact a kind of learning mechanism of human being. And this learning mechanism is reflected in English learning: students with metacognitive ability will be able to be clear about the meaning and value of English learning, know exactly the correct way of learning and improving themselves, analyze their own situation of grasping the language, actively adjust their methods and strategies in learning English, and this kind of ability is in fact what we call "power of understanding". As teachers, we should actively guide students and motivate them to generate the "power of understanding" and metacognitive ability in English learning, and apply them to their study process. In the process of English teaching, College English teachers should strategically help students build self-cognitive framework and encourage students to work hard and learn to analyze their own learning situation to find their short-

comings and errors, developing the students' ability of autonomous learning.<sup>[8]</sup> After each test or quiz, for example, teachers can provide chances and organize students to discuss with each other about their learning methods and their achievements in the form of group discussion. In this way, the students can recognize and understand the connotation of English learning through mutual evaluation and self-assessment and build their knowledge framework. The application of metacognitive ability theory in college English teaching can help students better understand their own advantages and deficiencies, find out the problems existing in their learning process, and integrate their learning into the real situation of English learning.<sup>[9]</sup>

#### **4.3 Principle and Application of Input Hypothesis Theory**

Input hypothesis theory, as a common language learning theory in psycholinguistics, was put forward by Stephen Krashen, an expert in foreign language learning. This theory was originally called the monitoring model and later referred to as the input construction model. According to Stephen's point of view, language learning is an autonomous and independent activity. When the students are in the process of learning a foreign language without the influence of psychological barriers, it is easy for them to enter a state of self-awareness or autognosis, in which, the students' output of language learning will be much better than the effect of input. This means the less psychological burden students bear, the smaller language barrier they will have, and they will yield twice the result with half the effort. Based on the theory of input hypothesis, the biggest barrier in students' learning a foreign language is the psychological block, which includes the loss of the sense of direction due to the lack of language environment and the fear of difficulty caused by language learning disabilities. In order to break through the students' cognitive barrier, teachers should carry out their teaching in two directions: psychological guidance and classroom guidance. In the aspect of psychological guidance, teachers should provide psychological counseling for the students, encourage students to actively participate in teachers' teaching process, and try to use encouragement instead of criticism on the students to reduce their psychological burden and enhance the students' confidence. In the aspect of teaching guidance, teachers should actively guide the students and keep the balance between language input and output. After finishing the project of a unit, for example, the students can be encouraged to have their extracurricular investigation on the knowledge they have acquired in classroom and later on share the information they collect by demonstrating the outcome of their practical field work. The students can break through themselves by fieldwork practice and classroom presentation in the form of trying teaching. And

in this way, the students can improve their ability, hence the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning.

#### 4.4 Principle and Application of Error Analysis Theory

According to the research results of psycholinguistics, it is a long-term process for learners to achieve good effect in learning a foreign language, and many cognitive approaches are imperfect in foreign language teaching in compulsory education period before learners enter university. In compulsory education stage, the language knowledge infused to the students is not systematically precise in organization, and the learners cannot grasp the language framework due to lack of learning strategies and methods. Some insignificant errors cannot be timely corrected in sentence pattern drilling and conversation simulation, which leads to the potential syntactic errors kept as legacy, causing the wide spread of "Chinglish" expressions. If teachers have loose requirements for their own teaching methods and are just satisfied with the students' language outcome with superficial meanings instead of grammatically accurate and correct expressions, the students will gradually generate a "mistaken" recognition in language habits and the long-term formed syntactic errors can even affect the formation of students' language sense. And this kind of mistakes can't get corrected through written tests, which further amplifies the potential harmfulness, leading to the students' habitual errors in later study. In the process of English teaching, teachers should restrain the students with strict requirements and timely point out the errors they make in both oral expressions and written forms, so as to avoid the influence of such mistakes on the formation of way thinking in foreign languages. And meanwhile, teachers should reasonably keep the proper proportion in the usage of Chinese native language and English second language in the process of English teaching, maximizing accurate and correct English and minimizing Chinese native language in class. Chinese native language is only used as classroom instruction in some activities if necessary or switching language in translation. The way of maximizing English second language and minimizing Chinese native language to avoid mother tongue interference in English learning helps to promote the formation of English way of thinking.

#### 5. Conclusion

By introducing the characteristics and basic situation of English teaching in Chinese colleges, this paper expounds the design concept of applying psycholinguistic principles in Chinese college English teaching, hoping to help promote college English teaching innovation in China. Psycholinguistics, as a borderline subject in rapid develop-

ment, has been widely applied in language teaching. In the process of applying principles of psychological linguistics to the practice of college English teaching, teachers should accurately perceive relevant theories in psycholinguistics, such as interaction theory, metacognitive ability theory, input hypothesis theory and error analysis theory. The application of such theories has positive significance in improving the English teaching level and promoting the development of college English teaching in China.

The permeation of psycholinguistic principles in English teaching in Chinese colleges and universities would direct the healthy development of English teaching in China theoretically and practically. The benign interaction between psycholinguistic theories and the improvement of English teaching level requires English teachers and professional experts to have further theoretical research and carry out more teaching practice innovation in this field.

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