The Application of Memetics Into College English Writing[*]

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We explored the college English writing issue from the memetics perspective. Unlike previous research, this research addressed the importance of writing mode in the study of memetics. In particular, we aim to introduce memetics theory into writing instruction. We start with a brief introduction of memetics. In what follows, we want to introduce memetics. Then we propose a writing mode theory to test memetics theory. An additional discussion of writing mode is also provided. We end the study with the conclusion that writing mode contributes to college English writing. We identified in our study that memetics is a reasonable theory for interpreting cultural evolutionism and writing instruction. Some useful implications from this study include that memetics applied in writing instruction, now a new pragmatic theory, needs further exploration of this research.

Keywords: college English writing, memetics, writing mode

Introduction

Over years, English teaching in China has made great advances, however, writing instruction, from most teachers' and instructors' perspectives, is the most demanding language skill to learn and instruct. For the purpose of improving English writing, diverse teaching methods and theories have been attempted and put into practice. Kepner (1991) argued that, technically speaking, English writing includes complicated cognitive and psychological process and other mechanisms. Among the mechanisms, memetics is a newly developed theory concerning linguistic and cultural evolutionism, which is based on Darwin's evolutionary theory, and now becomes a new pragmatic theory. Dawkins first proposed the word "meme" and the memetics theory in his fundamental book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Since then, scholars in linguistics made new contribution to the research of language evolution, among whom, Blackmore who wrote the significant works *The Meme Machine* in 1999 is the most outstanding and fruitful. His book explicitly explains the close relationship between meme and language development. From then on, most teachers, instructors, and scholars attach importance of the memetics theory to the English writing to explore how memetics theory has a positive effect on college English writing, and this paper is no exception.

The Application of Memetics

Memetics, based on Darwin's theory of evolution, gives detailed explanation of cultural evolutionism. The basic term in memetics is meme which was coined by Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. This theory has experienced its development for three decades before it aroused the study interest of our country. In 2003, Professor Z. R. HE and X. L. HE published the paper "Memetics and Social Pragmatics" in the journal of

Modern Foreign Language, first introduced memetics into Chinese academic field, and detailed some elementary but significant explanations respecting meme, including the elements, such as its origin and definition, power, and life cycle. YANG (2008) argued memetics not only explains the widespread phenomena of different cultures but also provides a new theoretical explanationto understand the intangible thoughts, concepts, cultures, customs, and habits. Memetics provides a new path to language communication.To some extent, memetics provides a brand-new perspective for examining and explaining the phenomenon of language, and the theoretical framework for exploring language writing. Similar to gene, meme can also be copied, as Dawkins (1976) explained meme as follows:

> Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, and ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (p. 206)

Generally speaking, in memetics, memes can be classified into two categories, strong meme and weak meme. When memes are successfully noticed, faithfully remembered and completely transmitted to other people, they are called strong memes; when memes are only copied for a few times or even cannot get copied, they are termed as weak memes or dead memes. According to Dawkins (1976), successful meme (replication factor) has the following features: Firstly, copying fidelity, that is to say, through a series of imitation and replication, the replicators remain unchanged; secondly, fecundity, which refers to the speed of replication. Namely, the quicker the copying speed, the faster memes spread; thirdly, longevity, which refers to the survival time of memes. In other words, the longer memes survive, the more the number of copy becomes. Consequently, in the process of college English writing, strong memes, such as idiomatical words and expressions, powerful sentences and structures, and impressive essays and even writing modes must be given high priority.

According to Heylighen (1998), in order to be successfully replicated, memes need experiencing four stages: The first stage is assimilation. Assimilation refers to a meme assimilates individual, and the individual becomes the new host of this meme. When a meme meets three conditions of noticeablity, understandability, and acceptability, it can be successfully assimilated. The second stage is Maintenance. Maintenance refers to memes keeping themselves in the host's memory. The longer memes stay in the host's memory, the more chance they have in the process of transmitting themselves to a new host. The third stage is expression. In order to interact with other individuals, memes must change from the state of memorizing and storing to the state of being felt by other new hosts. The last stage is transmission. Transmission refers to the process of memes spreading to other individuals through some carriers.

Based on Heylighen's statement on memes, we need to objectively re-examine the theory of memetics, which is an important part of teaching theory. Also, memetics provides a series of academic vision, academic outlook, teaching practices for college English writing.

The Application of Writing Template

According to the analysis of memetics, in order to enhance student writers' competence, writing template for the students can be used as strong meme. At the same time, writing template prepared for the students possesses the features of memetics, which is a shortcut to get good performance and a high score in college English writing. Like memes in memetics, writing templates have the following features: Firstly, copying

fidelity, that is to say, through a series of imitation and replication, the writing templates remain almost unchanged; secondly, fecundity, which refers to the speed of replication of writing templates. Writing templates generate a wide interest among students, so they are adopted and replicated by a majority of college students; thirdly, writing templates bear the feature of longevity, that is to say, the survival time of writing templates. In other words, the longer writing templates survive, the more the number of copy of writing templates become. Writing templates reduce the difficulty of student writing, and have aroused the students' attention. DUAN and XIAO (2009) argued that students only need to bear writing templates in mind, than fill in the blanks in accordance with the demand from the writing exercise or examination. Practical writing template is easy to use, so that the template is widely accepted by students. The above analysis indicates that writing template with three conditions of successful memes may be completely assimilated.

Conclusions

The theory of memetics, to some extent, provides a new path to enhance the writing performance. Writing templates possess the characteristics of strong meme, whose existence is reasonable and necessary. Writing templates have already stored in the learner's brain. Through continued extraction, practice, and use of these templates, writing templates can be permanently kept in the learner's memory. Memetics provides a solid foundation for the use of writing templates. Writing templates enable students to improve writing skills for they reduce the difficulty of writing. In summary, due to limit of time, students who want to improve writing skills must rely on their long-term practice, which easily make the student writers lose interest and confidence. Writing templates are effective in handling a variety of writing exam and writing exercises in a short period.

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