

Application of Situational Cognitive Learning Theory in College English Teaching

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Abstract: College English teaching is a crucial component of higher education. Enhancing college students' English learning outcomes has long been a primary focus for educators. With the continuous evolution of educational philosophies, traditional college English teaching methods no longer meet the learning needs of contemporary students. Situational cognitive learning theory emphasizes learner-centered approaches and highlights the contextual and practical application of knowledge, offering innovative perspectives for reforming college English teaching. When applied effectively, situational cognitive learning theory can optimize teaching methods and significantly improve learning outcomes. This paper explores the connotation and characteristics of situational cognitive learning theory, evaluates its applicability in college English teaching, and discusses its practical implementation in this context. The aim is to provide theoretical and practical references for improving the quality of college English education.

Keywords: Situational cognitive learning theory; College English; Teaching application

Online publication: March 4, 2025

1. Introduction

In the context of the modern era, societal expectations for high-caliber professionals are continuously evolving. In addition to mastering specialized knowledge, excellent communication skills—particularly in foreign languages—have become indispensable. Therefore, college English teaching should place greater emphasis on cultivating students' practical abilities. Students need to acquire a solid foundation of language knowledge and develop the ability to apply it flexibly in real-world scenarios. The application of situational cognitive learning theory can help students optimize their English thinking processes, strengthen their practical communication skills, enhance their overall English proficiency, and better align with the demands of future society.

2. Connotation and characteristics of situational cognitive learning theory

Situational cognitive learning theory originates from social cognitive theory. Its core idea is that learning and

behavior occur within specific contexts, and learning cannot be separated from these contexts. The theory posits that the acquisition and application of knowledge are situational processes, resulting from learners actively constructing meaning through interactions within a specific environment. Learners are not passive recipients of knowledge; instead, they actively select, organize, and integrate information during situational interactions, ultimately forming their own cognitive structures^[1].

The main characteristics of situational cognitive learning theory include:

- (1) Contextualization: Situational cognitive learning theory asserts that the acquisition of knowledge and skills is inseparable from the specific situational environment. Learning should take place within specific contexts, enabling learners to integrate knowledge into these situations to truly understand and apply it.
- (2) Social interaction: The theory emphasizes that learning is a social practice involving interaction between learners and others. Knowledge and skills are acquired through participation in social practices, as well as through communication and collaboration.
- (3) Practical application: Situational cognitive learning theory highlights the importance of focusing on real-world contexts rather than abstract learning. Learners must engage in specific practical activities to construct and apply knowledge effectively in real-life situations.
- (4) Emotional engagement: Emotional factors play a critical role in learning, according to the theory. Intrinsic motivation, interests, emotional responses, and other affective factors profoundly influence cognitive activities and learning outcomes.
- (5) Constructivism: The theory views learning as an active process in which learners construct knowledge rather than merely accepting it. Learners reorganize and integrate knowledge based on their cognitive structures and the characteristics of specific contexts^[2].

3. Applicability of situational cognitive learning theory in college English teaching

First, the “situational” characteristics advocated by situational cognitive learning theory align closely with the goals of college English teaching—namely, cultivating students’ practical English skills. Unlike the traditional knowledge-focused teaching model, this theory emphasizes integrating knowledge into real-world contexts. Such an approach enhances students’ ability to use English in authentic communication scenarios, thereby improving their overall language proficiency.

Second, situational cognitive learning theory prioritizes learners’ active participation and subjectivity, which corresponds to the direction of ongoing reforms in college English teaching. These reforms advocate shifting from the traditional, exam-oriented, and lecture-based teaching model to a student-centered, interactive approach. This transformation encourages students to think critically, engage actively, and develop their language application skills alongside independent problem-solving abilities. Situational cognitive learning theory offers a theoretical foundation to support this shift.

Third, the theory highlights the social and contextual nature of knowledge, aligning well with the developmental characteristics of college students. College students are in a critical period of cognitive growth; they possess a certain level of analytical thinking and intrinsic motivation, which makes them more receptive to constructing knowledge through social interaction and situational practice. Integrating situational cognitive learning theory into college English teaching can stimulate students’ intrinsic motivation, foster teamwork, and enhance their communication skills.

In summary, situational cognitive learning theory provides valuable theoretical support for the reform of college

English teaching. Its application to curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessment is expected to facilitate a shift from knowledge transfer to skill development, thereby improving students' comprehensive English proficiency and achieving an overall enhancement of college English education ^[3].

4. Application of situational cognitive learning theory in college English teaching

4.1. Curriculum design and teaching objectives

Situational cognitive learning theory emphasizes that college English curriculum design should take into account students' actual needs and the contexts they encounter. It advocates for formulating teaching objectives that align with students' characteristics while creating favorable conditions for their English learning and practical application.

Firstly, curriculum design should adopt a student-centered approach, clearly defining English learning goals for different stages of study. For instance, during the freshman year, the focus can be on developing students' foundational English skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the sophomore year, the emphasis can shift to fostering intercultural communication competence and enhancing students' ability to use English in real-life contexts. By the junior year, attention can be directed toward cultivating professional English application skills, preparing students for future career opportunities and personal growth ^[4].

Secondly, when setting curriculum objectives, priority should be given to students' ability to apply the language effectively in daily life, academic contexts, and professional settings, rather than merely emphasizing knowledge retention or isolated language skills. For example, objectives such as “conducting effective business negotiations in English” or “writing academic paper abstracts in English” can be introduced to encourage students to apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios. Additionally, exercises targeting future career situations—such as participating in interviews or writing resumes—can be incorporated to help students prepare for professional development ^[5].

4.2. Integration of teaching content and resources

Situational cognitive learning theory emphasizes embedding knowledge acquisition into real-life contexts. Therefore, when selecting college English teaching content and integrating teaching resources, it is crucial to fully consider students' actual needs and circumstances, create diverse English learning environments, and enhance the contextual and practical application of knowledge.

First, regarding course content selection, situational tasks closely aligned with students' needs and interests should be designed. These tasks can be derived from their daily lives, academic pursuits, or future career aspirations, incorporating relevant language knowledge points. For instance, tasks such as “booking a hotel room” or “participating in an international academic conference” can be introduced. While completing these tasks, students naturally acquire and apply vocabulary, grammar, oral communication, and other related language skills ^[6].

Second, in the integration of teaching resources, multimedia technology should be fully utilized to create immersive and realistic situational environments. For example, scenarios like business negotiations and academic presentations can be visually simulated using videos, images, and other multimedia tools, allowing students to engage in role-playing and on-the-spot practice. Additionally, real-life materials, such as school-organized social practice reports or alumni employment experiences, can be incorporated into lessons. These resources enhance the authenticity and contextual relevance of learning ^[7].

4.3. Teaching methods and activity design

According to situational cognitive learning theory, the acquisition of knowledge should be grounded in real-world contexts. Therefore, situationally centered teaching methods should be implemented in college English teaching, with

corresponding teaching activities carefully designed to enhance learning outcomes.

Firstly, regarding teaching methods, task-driven approaches, situational simulation, and case-based teaching can be employed to encourage students' active participation and facilitate the application of knowledge in real-life scenarios. For instance, when teaching English business negotiation, students can take on the roles of buyers and sellers, engage in specific negotiation scenarios, and simulate the negotiation process. This approach helps them practice English negotiation skills while gaining hands-on experience. Similarly, when teaching English news reporting, students can undertake tasks such as conducting interviews, searching for news materials, and writing news articles. This not only develops their ability to use English in news gathering and editing contexts but also sharpens their critical thinking and communication skills. By employing such participatory learning methods, students can master both language skills and the ability to think independently and collaborate effectively^[8].

Secondly, in terms of teaching activities, interactive practices such as situational simulations, role-playing, and group discussions can be designed to foster active student engagement and demonstrate the practical use of English in diverse contexts. For example, organizing an English debate contest allows students to assume different social roles and engage in debates on current hot topics. This activity not only enhances their English expression skills but also cultivates critical thinking. Similarly, English sitcom performances, where students create plots and dialogues based on given situations, provide an engaging way to practice and refine their English skills through performance^[9].

Furthermore, in college English teaching, teachers should strive to establish a positive interactive relationship with students, encouraging them to ask questions and providing timely feedback and guidance. For instance, when assigning homework, teachers can invite students to pose questions and respond patiently. During lessons, teachers can engage in real-time discussions with students to gauge their understanding of new concepts. Such meaningful interaction enables teachers to monitor students' learning progress, adjust teaching strategies as needed, and promote effective learning outcomes^[10].

4.4. Teaching evaluation and feedback mechanism

Situational cognitive learning theory emphasizes a learner-centered approach, focusing on emotional experiences and the application of knowledge transfer during the learning process. Therefore, these aspects should also be incorporated into the evaluation of college English teaching.

Firstly, regarding evaluation methods, emphasis should be placed on process evaluation, highlighting students' actual performance in using English in specific contexts. For instance, students' abilities in English communication and problem-solving in various scenarios can be assessed through situational simulations, role plays, and group collaborations. Additionally, self-evaluation and peer evaluation can be employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' learning progress, encouraging self-reflection and mutual support among learners^[11].

Secondly, in terms of evaluation content, attention should be directed toward students' ability to apply English, rather than being limited to the mastery of linguistic knowledge. For example, assessments can focus on students' proficiency in using English in daily communication, professional settings, and other practical contexts, evaluating whether they can effectively apply what they have learned to real-life situations. Moreover, students' learning motivation and emotional engagement should also be considered to identify their challenges and needs during the learning process^[12].

Finally, with respect to the feedback mechanism, teachers should provide timely and targeted feedback and guidance based on evaluation results. For example, specific recommendations can be offered to help students enhance their English usage in particular contexts. Teachers can also analyze students' learning motivations and emotional states to assist them in discovering suitable learning strategies. Simultaneously, it is essential for teachers to collect

feedback from students to continuously refine teaching plans and improve overall teaching quality ^[13].

4.5. Teacher role and professional development

Situational cognitive learning theory introduces new requirements for the roles of college English teachers and their professional development. Teachers are expected to redefine their roles, acting as guides and regulators of the learning process, while continuously enhancing their situational teaching skills to meet the evolving needs of college English instruction in the modern era.

First, regarding role orientation, teachers are no longer merely transmitters of knowledge but facilitators and regulators of the learning process. They should develop a thorough understanding of students' needs and cognitive characteristics, design scenarios relevant to students' lives and future careers, and guide them in actively engaging with learning to explore the essence of knowledge through practice. Additionally, teachers should position themselves as learning partners, collaborating with students to reflect on and discuss challenges in English learning, thereby jointly advancing teaching reforms ^[14].

Second, in terms of professional development, teachers must continuously improve their situational teaching skills. This includes not only acquiring a comprehensive understanding of situational cognitive learning theory but also developing competencies in situational design, interaction, and evaluation. For instance, teachers need to analyze students' specific needs and design teaching content and activities that align with their real-world contexts. They should master instructional strategies such as situational simulations and role-playing to foster active student participation. Furthermore, teachers should employ diverse evaluation methods, focusing on students' ability to use English effectively in practical situations.

In addition, teachers should maintain a proactive and innovative learning mindset, continuously exploring effective pathways for situational teaching. They should share their teaching experiences and contribute to the professional development of the broader teaching team. For example, participating in relevant training programs or learning exchange activities can help teachers stay updated on the latest theories and practices in situational teaching. Collaborative teaching research and reform practices with peers can further drive improvements in the quality of college English instruction ^[15].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, situational cognitive learning theory offers new insights into college English teaching. Applying this theory across teaching objectives, content, methods, and evaluation contributes to cultivating students' practical English skills and enhancing teaching quality. However, its implementation should be flexibly adapted and optimized based on institutional conditions, student characteristics, and other factors to ensure effective outcomes.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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