

A Study on the Application of Genre-based Teaching Approach in College English Reading

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Abstract: Greatly influenced by mechanical linguistics, the traditional teaching model based on the grammar-translation method has dominated in college English reading in the past forty years. But China's traditional reading teaching is the explanation of grammar and interpretation of vocabulary in term of sentence, and the operation of sentence structure discontexted, which can't analyze and explain the whole article as the discourse. Based on the genre theory and its related research, this paper analyzes the application of genre-based teaching approach in college English reading and emphasizes on helping college teachers to analyze the macrostructure of a text in the English reading class, bring genre patterns to students' attention, and improve their reading abilities in consequence.

Keywords: Genre-based Teaching Approach; College English Reading

1. Review of genre theory and related research

In this section, the theoretical background of genre-based teaching approach, such as the concept of genre, theory of genre analysis and the three current traditions in which the theory of genre analysis is applied in teaching practice, will be discussed in detail in order to provide a theoretical basis for this study.

1.1 Genre

The word “genre” comes from the French (and originally Latin) word for kind or class. Till now, “genre is quite easily used to refer to a distinctive category of discourse of any type, spoken or written, with or without literary aspirations” (Swales, 1990). Traditionally, genre research focuses almost exclusively on literary texts. Since the 1970s, genre has become a powerful tool for the analysis of both literary and non-literary discourses, attracting greater attention from various areas of study, including folklore studies, literature, ethnography, anthropology, sociology, new rhetoric and linguistic. However, the concept of genre, which had been so prevalent in other fields for so long time, has started assuming worth in linguistics only recently.

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Genre is a controversial concept, so different linguists have different definition about genre. As a result of this, any study on genre should first review a vast variety of disciplines. Based on the understanding of the rationale underlying various professional and academic genres, the question of “what is genre” can be answered.

Martin (1984) perceives that “a genre is a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity, in which speakers engage as members of our culture. Virtually everything you do involves your participating in one or another genre. Culture seen in these terms can be defined as a set of generically interpretable activities.” On the other side, Martin (1985) makes the three-way distinction like this: Genres are realized through registers, and registers in turn are realized through language.

After Martin, another famous applied linguist Swales (1990) holds that a genre is a class of communicative events. The principal feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes. There are variations about exemplars or instances of genres in their proto typicality. The rationale behind a genre establishes constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their content, positioning and form. A discourse community’s nomenclature for genres is an important source of insight.

According to Bhatia’s point of view, Swales’ definition integrates the linguistic and social elements but underplays psychological factors, thus undermining the importance of tactical aspects of genre construction (Bhatia, 1993). Then on the basis of Swales’ illustration of genre, Bhatia (1993) further perfected the definition of genre as follows: ① Genre is recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. ② It most often is a highly structured and conventionalized communicative event. ③ Various genres display constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. ④ These constraints are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the frame work of socially recognized purposes.

As a number of linguists have given their definitions to genre, it is perverse to go on with the endless listing of definitions that have been proposed for genre. We can draw a conclusion that there are three common elements for the interpretations of all these linguists. First, a clear communicative purpose determines genre. It is communicative purpose that makes up the schematics structure of text and affects the choices of content and style of the text; Second, a set of rules are prescribed with which members of a community should be familiar. It is characterized by its repetition and convention, whose constraints cannot be changed casually; Third, it does not suggest that one should be confined to all these “constraints”, on the contrary, with the change of literary element and text parameter, there exist some differences in the text of the same genre. Therefore, genres are dynamic, even though they are essentially seen as embedded in conventions associated with typical instances of language use in social settings.

On the whole, it is the communicative purpose that brings any genre into being. Linguistic contributions to the evolving study of genre lie in the emphasis given to: ① Genres as types of goal-directed communicative events; ② Genres as having schematic structures; ③ Most strikingly genres as disassociated from registers or styles.

1.2 Genre analysis

Genre analysis is an insightful and thorough analysis of literary and non-literary texts’ genres. It is a product of multidisciplinary study involving both stylistic analysis and discourse analysis.

The development of genre analysis. Genre analysis is comprised in discourse analysis. It has experienced three important developing stages.

(1) Register Analysis: Register analysis is the earliest original method to analyze discourse. It is based on register theory of functional linguistics. It emphasizes on lexical-grammatical features of a linguistic type. It offers discourse analysis with much more complete theoretical basis. Because of this, discourse analysis is isolated from the non-scientific way of pure impression. While, this approach stays at the surface level because it emphasizes the vocabulary and grammar and cannot provide enough views on the organization of information in certain discourses. It neither can give an explanation to the questions why some linguistic characteristics present more commonly in a specific text than others, and why different linguistic styles show up while changing the communicative goals. So, register analysis is not an overall method for discourse analysis to some degree.

(2) Grammatical-rhetorical Analysis: Grammatical-rhetorical analysis is represented by the studies of Selinker, Lackstrom, Trimble and others in 70s and early 80s. Unlike register analysis, grammatical-rhetorical analysis is not focused on how frequently a syntactic feature appears; However, it often means to analyze discourse from the viewpoint of the writer to investigate how a scientist communicator makes certain grammatical choices as he writes and somehow limits the level of analysis to certain specific syntactic features of these texts. In a word, the grammatical-rhetorical analysis pays too much attention to the study on the specific particular events or phenomena, restricts the analysis in surface level and fails to answer why certain discourses display certain linguistic features.

(3) Interactional Analysis: Interactional analysis emphasizes on the interactive nature of discourse. Discourse's meaning is conveyed successfully only under the efforts of the two participants (writer and reader or speaker and listener). The communication can be achieved only when negotiation between the two sides is done. On one hand, due to its emphasis on the discourse's interactive nature and the structural concept in language use, interactional analysis is valuable as it has made important contribution to the theory and application of discourse analysis. Nevertheless, on the other hand, it has many shortages, for instance, it overlooks the social, cultural and psychological factors in interaction. Therefore, it fails to explain the problem why writers or speakers express meanings in certain way under certain specific context.

The differences among three schools of genre analysis studies. As for genre analysis, there are some differences among these mentioned three schools. First, they focus on different genres. Many researchers in ESP have focused on the genres of the university, particularly those in the sciences such as research articles and professional texts like medical reports or business letters, etc. The focus of New Rhetoric Studies is more or less similar to that of ESP genre school. In contrast, the focus of Australian genre researchers is on the writing of the students in primary or secondary schools. A lot of school science texts and lab notes are examined. Therefore, the genres of school writing are the major focus for Australian genre analysis.

Secondly, the research methods are different. As for ESP Genres Studies and Australian Genre Studies, they both pay attention to the text structure. So, the text analysis is their research method. With regard to New Rhetoric Studies, socio-historical and ethnographic methods are often involved in genre analysis. The socio-historical method means that the researchers observe and analyze the developments in communities in different periods and study historical documentation of changes within the discourse communities and then combine the changes with genres used in these contexts. Ethnographic methods comprise many different research methods such as cases study, interview, observation, etc.

Thirdly, the analysis unit is different. The ESP school analyzes genres in the units of “move” and “step”, however, the Australian school use “stage” as its unit.

2. Genre-based teaching approach

2.1 Theoretical issues of genre-based teaching approach

In the recent years, genre-based teaching approach has attracted many teachers and specialists' eyes. As it is a pedagogy based on genre and genre analysis, it has incomparable advantages and is favored by language analysts and practitioners. It not only avoids too much emphasis on the structure of the rhetorical analysis, having much more room for explanation and freedom, it also stresses the communicative purposes.

Genre-based teaching approach is to study how language is used on a particular articles of the same genre. Such knowledge of a genre stored in the memory may help readers to read and even write later. It is facilitating readers to be aware of the traditional regulations of a certain genre. Reading the typical articles of a certain genre is very important to familiarize articles of the same genre. Such knowledge of a genre stored in the memory may help readers to read and even write later.

2.2 Three traditions of genre-based teaching approach

With the research of Swalesian School represented by Swales and Bhatia and Australian School represented by Martin, for the genre and genre analysis in language teaching practice, three traditions in genre pedagogy have been formed. They are: ① ESP and EAP genre-based teaching approach. ② New Rhetoric genre-based teaching approach. ③ Australian genre-based teaching approach (Qin, 2000). Researchers in the three approaches have developed

genre-based pedagogy in different directions and with different goals and educational sites in mind (Hyon, 1996). To assess the suitability of genre-based teaching approaches for various education settings, it is necessary to understand these differences in their pedagogical contexts, aims, and instructional frameworks.

(1) ESP/ EAP: Researchers of this tradition have focused on the implications of genre theory and analysis to regard genre as a tool to teach non-native speakers of ESP and EAP classrooms. Scholars in this field have suggested that genre-based applications can help non-native speakers master the functions and linguistic features of academic and professional discourses that they need access to and comprehend communicative purposes. Teachers and researchers engaged in this domain particularly emphasize grammatical features and the teaching of genre structures. They examine scientific genres and propose that their analyses offer pedagogically useful information for helping students control the organizational and stylistic features of the texts. Just as Swales (1990) observes, “a genre-based approach is likely to focus student attention on rhetorical action and on the organizational and linguistic means of its accomplishment”.

(2) New Rhetoric: New Rhetoric represents a newly emerging field of genre studies in North America. The educational context for New Rhetoric is on mother tongue education at advanced levels. It lays stress on the sociocontextual aspects of genres. Unlike ESP and EAP genre-based teaching approach, New-Rhetoric has less concern with the potential of genre theory for teaching text form and more with its role in helping university students and novice professionals understand the social functions or actions of genres and the contexts in which these genres are used (Freedman & Medway, 1994). Therefore, no conceptual model in New Rhetoric is designed for detailed linguistic analysis; Rather, the theoretical framework highlighting the socio-cognitive nature of genre is preferred by scholars in this particular area (Lin Wei, Yang Yuchen 2007).

(3) Australian: Though Australian genre-based teaching approach has developed more or less during the same period as those of ESP / EAP and New Rhetoric, it has evolved mainly independently of both traditions. Australian genre-based application has mainly paid attention to mother tongue education in primary and secondary schools or in adult migrant English education and workplace training programs. The pedagogical aim of it lies in helping students “participate effectively in the school curriculum and the broader community” (Hyon, 1996). Researchers in this tradition suggest that all texts in a genre should have a uniform, invariant organization and all the practitioners in a field will follow the pattern in their writing and reading. Australian approaches to genre have been largely characterized by the theory of language known as systemic functional linguistics, developed by Michael Halliday. Systemic functional linguistics is concerned with the relationship between language and its functions in social settings. From the perspective of systemic functional, text is known only because the context gives it life. That is to say, the nature of the text one produces at any time depends on context of situation. The contexts as well as some of the goals for instruction of Australian genre-based teaching approach have differed from those of ESP and New Rhetoric. In addition, it is the most influential tradition among the three approaches.

Despite the slight variation in different traditions, the essence of genre theory is the functional relationship between form and situation (Halliday, 2002). And their aims are similar in the aspect of empowering and helping student become successful readers and writers.

3. Nature of reading

In second or foreign language learning, reading even plays more important role than in the first language learning because people always regard reading as the only easily available channel into the target language. In fact, as for anyone who learns the language of another country, reading indeed opens up a world of literature or culture or history representing that country in a way that other means cannot easily achieve.

In a narrow sense, reading process means reading something with mouth and in voice. But generally speaking, reading does not equal to reading aloud. “It is a complex cognitive and psychological process in which various subcomponents, such as decoding skills, knowledge of text structure, schematic knowledge, and processing strategies interact simultaneously to help readers construct meaning from the texts” (Carrell, 1983; Grabe, 1991). So as for the nature of reading, it has three features in nature: It is a cognitive, interactive and strategic process.

4. College English reading under genre-based teaching approach

Greatly influenced by mechanical linguistics, the traditional teaching model based on the grammar-translation

method has dominated in college English reading in the past forty years. The grammar-translation teaching method has been most influential in China and reading is taught by means of mother tongue. Translation approach holds that since native language provides the base for foreign language learning, L2 learners will be at their best in understanding when they can translate the text into accurate native language. Nowadays in China, there exist continuous debates about the best way of doing the teaching and learning. For the important role of reading and the poor situation, researches on the English reading teaching and learning have harvested a lot. As far as reading theories are concerned, many teaching approach have been used. Compared with other teaching approaches, the writer finds genre-based teaching approach owns many advantages which others do not possess. In fact, reading comprehension is an activity of language communication. Though many reading models and different ways of analysis for text are in application of college English reading, in terms of real communication and satisfying comprehension abilities, these approaches seem insufficient.

The application of genre-based teaching approach in college English reading is significant. According to cognitive psychology, perception of organizing patterns of texts could help students form background knowledge and make sound prediction and judgment. So it is necessary for teachers to analyze the macrostructure of a text in the English reading class, bring genre patterns to students' attention, and improve their reading abilities in consequence. Genre-based teaching approach lays stress on text analysis and the writer believes that texts in every professional area have their intrinsic structure and features. Teachers should assist students to sum up the regularity which can be observed and text model which can be used for reference, so that students' reading confidence and interests can be improved. After analyzing a certain genre of text skillfully, students can draw inferences about other text structure of same genre, which can develop their creativities.

Many researchers and language teachers have tried their effort to put genre-based teaching approach into practice and have harvested a lot. Yet there is much room for improvement. Based on the discussion of reading theory and genre theory and inspired by the former study, the writer attempts to convert their pedagogical goals and instructional framework into action. In the next two chapters, the writer intends to explore the validity and feasibility of genre-based teaching approach to help improve current English reading instruction at college level.

5. Conclusion

Whether at home or abroad, many linguists and scholars have been trying their best to put genre-based teaching approach into practice and have harvested a lot. However, in China's college EFL reading instruction, in which the Grammar-translation teaching method are still mainly adopted, the application of the genre-based teaching approach is less than that in writing and listening instruction. For this reason, it is meaningful for the author to do a research concerning its application to college English reading instruction and to prove its effectiveness of this approach in reading instruction. So in the following, an efficient way—combining genre analysis with reading instruction, namely, the genre-based teaching approach will be discussed thoroughly.

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