

# Teaching Chinese College ESL Writing: A Genre-based Approach

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## Abstract

College students' English writing plays a vital role in their language learning and further education. However, the current college English teaching falls far behind to resolve this issue, which includes insufficient writing ability compared with that of listening and speaking, inadequate teacher instruction and students exercise, negative transfer of cultural differences, and defect teaching materials and methods. To solve these problems, this paper attempts to introduce Sydney school's genre-based pedagogy to be used in some areas, such as guiding textbook organization, classroom teaching, and teaching concepts. The study shows that genre-based approach has many advantages, such as integrating language learning and cultural knowledge, taking writing both as the process and as results, emphasizing learning interaction, and leading to a mutual promotion between reading and writing.

**Keywords:** systemic functional linguistics, genre-based pedagogy, ESL writing, reading/writing learning cycle

## 1. Introduction

Writing has always been a difficulty in English education, as many teachers do their best but receive little effect on the one hand, and on the other hand students who are diligent in practice find it hard to improve their ability. In 2004, as national college English education reform was carried out, many universities have established new teaching objectives in order to "cultivate students' English comprehensive proficiency, especially in listening and speaking" (Yang & Dai 2015). *College English Curriculum Requirements* puts emphasize on writing, which is not only a way of cultivating students' English mind, so to promote the language competence, but also a powerful tool for students' speaking, reading and translating (Higher Education Department of Education Ministry 2007). In last decade, though English teachers and students are gradually accepting the design that emphasizes on listening and speaking, writing, as an important parameter for students' comprehensive language skills, is still a major challenge for college English teaching. The issues in college English writing draws the attention from Chinese scholars who have been exploring the question from different perspectives (Qin, 2009; Wang, 2014; Zhang, 2006). These studies cover almost all aspects of English writing education, however many problems are still far from being effectively resolved. Therefore, we propose to introduce Sydney school's genre-based pedagogy and, after an in-depth study, explore an effective solution to the education of college ESL English writing in China.

## 2. A short survey of Chinese college English writing

Since 1980s, Chinese foreign language academia have been putting an increasing focus on English writing, contributing to a rapid growth in research subject, method and quantity in the area. In recent years, the objective of Chinese English writing research has shifted, laying stress on the students as subject instead of the object. In the education of college English, writing has always been an important part of English teaching and research. To improve teaching effectiveness and students' abilities of English writing, Chinese university English teachers and researchers have carried out a multi-directional theoretical and practical exploration, which could be summarized in the following seven aspects: (1) on analysis, evaluation, and feedback of English writing (Xu, 2013; Zhang, 2010; Zhou, 2013); (2) students' written text analysis (Ma, 2001; Wang, 2002); (3) influential factors for English writing, including linguistic and extra-linguistic reasons (Cheng, 2005; Li, 2005); (4) on the teaching process of writing, focusing on the application of teaching theories and methods (Wu, 2006; Zhou, 2008); (5) language testing, mainly on College English Test Band 4 and 6 (CET-4 & CET-6) (Cai, 2002; Gao, 2010); (6) the

application of computer, internet and corpus in English writing (Dong & Chu, 2010; Ni, 2009); (7) literature review of college English writing (Qin, 2009; Zhao, Hao, & Gao, 2010).

Studies on college English writing are at its full steam, an era of flourishing schools and heated research directions. Some scholars, however, believe that these exploration are “putting old wine in a new bottle”, implying that there are few creative studies that caters to Chinese context. “As to the practical effect, students’ writing abilities still fail to meet the goal” (Zhao et al., 2010). Many issues still remain to be resolved, mainly as:

1). Over emphasize on writing input, instead of output. Traditional English writing course is organized around teacher’s class lecture and followed by students’ after class practice, making the learning mainly a process of knowledge input. Also, college English class has too many students, basically over 30 people and can be as many as over 50. These two reasons leads to an imbalance between input and output in students’ learning.

2). Both teachers and students’ inactive participation in writing. Language knowledge should be taught by teachers, but students’ adequate practice is much more important. Students’ lazy cooperation often contributes to teacher’s inactive and passive teaching. As for students, learning a language is also to learn its socio-cultural background, which is often ignored by teachers. In addition, students usually do not get proper ways to speak their difficulties, and if their writing cannot receive timely feedback and correction, their enthusiasm for learning English writing is easy to suffer a setback.

3). Writing falls far behind listening and speaking. Tang and Wu (2012) found that in recent years students’ scores in listening and reading increase significantly in CET-4 and CET-6 while their writing is hardly improved. The reason is probably related to poor requirement of writing in *College English Syllabus* in previous years, and may also be associated with traditional teaching methods employed by teachers.

4). Chinese and western thinking differences and negative cultural transfer. In college English education, there has long been a history that emphasizes on teaching vocabulary and grammar and put relatively light weight on the instruction of social and cultural backgrounds, resulting in students’ vocabulary misuses, Chinese English, defective textual layout, and other similar problems.

5). Improper writing pedagogy and inadequate textbook organization. Many college English teachers receive insufficient intake on pedagogical theory, resulting in their poor teaching methods and restricting their teaching at the level of vocabulary. Meanwhile there is no textbook designed for college English writing so far, and the content in the current book are not coherent.

### **3. Overview of Genre-based Pedagogy**

#### *3.1 Schools of Genre Research*

Genre, a word derived from Latin, originally refers to the kind of things, and is later widely used in the research of various literary styles. Genre studies have a long history, which could be traced back to ancient Greece in the West when Plato and Aristotle discussed poetry, drama and debate. In modern linguistics, Bhatia (2014) is the first one who extends genre theory in literature to language studies. What he referred as genre is the “relatively stable discourse types”, ranging from dialogue in daily life to poetry, drama, academic works, and all other texts. Starting from Bhatia, genre study attracts attention in linguistic schools, such as Systemic Functional Linguistics, the New Rhetoric, and English for Specific Purposes. In the 1980s, influenced by socio-cultural theory, the New Rhetoric proposed that the nature of genre is the abstract social acts (Bhatia, 2014). Their proposal contributes to the rapid growth in genre study. Hyon (1996) summarizes schools in genre research as: (1). the New Rhetoric, represented by Miller (1984), Miller (1984), Freedman and Medway (2003) and Bazerman (2009), holding the idea that discourse reflects the dialogue between different voices and is the way that realizes identity and power of the voice; (2). English for Specific Purposes, led by works of Swales (2002) and Swales (2002) and Bhatia (2014), believes that genre is the communicative event during the structuralization of discourse community, which represents similar discourse structure, shared audience, and same communication purposes, carrying similar language patterns, contents and styles; (3). Sydney School, which defines genre in rich theories of systemic functional linguistics, focuses on the relationship between language, context and function, and divides context into genre and register (Martin & Rose, 2008).

#### *3.2 Sydney School’s Genre-based Pedagogy*

In systemic functional linguistics, based on Martin (1992), Halliday and Hasan (1985), Hasan (1996) and other scholars’ works on context and register, genre concept was initially developed and then extended and improved by Martin and his colleagues, and gradually developed into Sydney School’s genre theory. The school defines it as: “a regular configuration of meaning, which performs social acts in certain cultural background” (Martin & Rose, 2008). From the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, genre is a comprehensive theory about

context and language, and the relationship among them is realization, in which the lower level realizes the higher ones. Genre is the staged, objective and goal oriented social activity in a given culture. Each genre has its specific and stable schematic structure, meaning that genre achieves its social goal through a series of sequenced stages and phases, in which phase is the lower level of meaning structure than stage (Martin, 1999).

Genre-based pedagogy was proposed by Martin in 1979, and has ever since become increasingly prominent in English education. It is widely used, not only in language teaching, but also in teaching subject knowledge of other disciplines (Martin, 2012). Most of its application are in the field of language education, covering almost all the language abilities in students' learning. Applying genre-based pedagogy, some scholars carried out research on writing teaching in different discourses; other scholars investigated to develop students' generic awareness, believing that: an important component of good writing is the genre sensitivity, teachers should understand the actual use of various genres, and it is an effective way to improve students' writing by rising up generic awareness (Yasuda, 2011).

In language education, the most sufficient research in genre-based approach is reading and writing, in which the most effective tool is Genre-based Learning/Teaching Cycle (Martin, 1999; Rose, 2007; Rothery, 1994). Rothery (1994) designed the most effective writing cycle (see Figure 1), which includes three modules, the deconstruction, joint construction and independent construction. The figure shows that teachers play primary role in deconstruction, students are in dominant in independent construction, and teachers and students have interaction in joint construction, which decides the success or failure of genre-based writing. Through teaching interaction, language patterns in deconstruction are easy for students to learn and use, and these patterns can again be applied in independent writing module (Martin, 1999). Genre-based learning/teaching cycle is built on the theory that, while teachers build discourse field and register; it promote students' learning and help them to develop specific knowledge field; and ultimately help them build distinctive language patterns in certain genre (Martin, 1999).

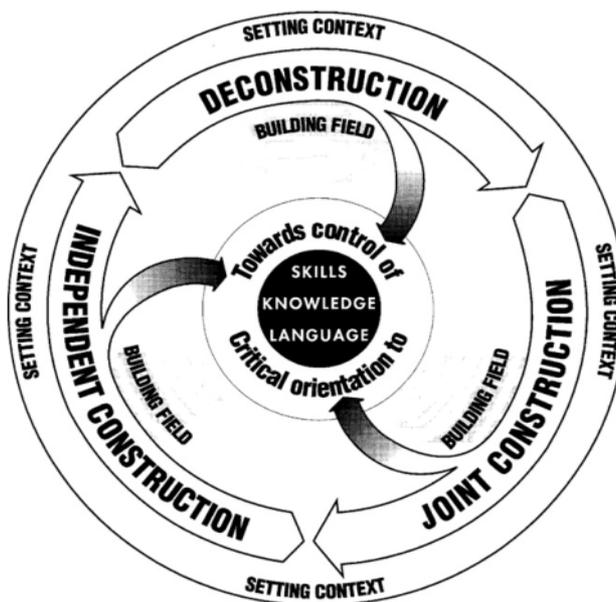


Figure 1. Genre-based learning/teaching cycle (Rothery, 1994, 1996)

It is reported that genre-based pedagogy is applicable in teaching reading and writing in all levels and in all subjects, starting from primary school to college; it improves students' abilities while bridging the gap between students in the same class (Dell, 2011). Practice shows that students' learning efficiency will be raised up to 2-4 times instructed by the pedagogy (Rose & Martin, 2012). Johns (2002) argues that "genre-based approach is a major shift in pedagogical research in past 15 years, and it is leading education to a social and contextual direction". Genre-based pedagogy is applied in education in various levels, all stages, and multiple subjects, and has so far been promoted to design curriculum, teaching contents and teaching goals in countries and regions such as China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, South Africa, Australia, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Sweden (Martin, 2012).

#### 4. Genre-based Approach in College English Writing Education

In the last decade, Sydney school's genre-based pedagogy gradually became an intact methodology, "contributing to Australian and other countries' educational reform across a range of disciplines" (Martin, 2012). However the research on Sydney school's genre pedagogy has just started in China, there are few convincing results. Liang and Liang (2010) applied Rothery's genre-based learning/teaching cycle to English class, and found "this methodology is applicable for classroom teaching of foreign language in China". Chen (2010) carried out an empirical study that uses genre-based scaffolding academic reading/writing pedagogy in college English, however with a small sample it is not likely to provide powerful arguments on college English teaching reform. Zheng and Chen (2014) used genre-based learning/teaching cycle in college English classroom, and concluded that "research must also be adapted to Chinese conditions and improved in practice; to solve the problems in college English teaching, it has to find an integrated approach that combines internet resources and contexts". We believe that genre approach would greatly promoted Chinese college students' English writing skill, and an in-depth study on its application should be carried out so that it can contribute to college English educational reform.

##### 4.1 Genre-based Model of College English Writing

###### 4.1.1 Organizing Textbooks and Syllabus

Discourse, as an abstract concept, is crucial in both oral and written communication. Therefore, the primary purpose of language teaching is to promote communication, and a major task for organizing textbooks and syllabus is to answer how communicative skills can be acquired by learners through language learning. Based on genre pedagogy, many scholars proposed various teaching theories and models, among which Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999)'s model of textbook and syllabus organization is in great value to borrow (Figure 2). It is a four-staged model, including: the first stage is to build field knowledge, in which teachers and students jointly build cultural context, share experience, and discuss lexical-grammatical patterns, laying a foundation for the next stage; the second stage is the modeling of text, in which students read various texts with the same communicative purpose, get to know its social and linguistic features and social functions, understand its schematic structure, and receive teachers' feedbacks; the third stage is called joint construction of text, in which students write and deconstruct the text through teacher-student and student-student interactions, which consolidates students' understanding of text's schematic structure, field knowledge, and language patterns; the fourth stage is independent construction of text, a step that students write a text by their own. Through these four stages, students can read and write texts by themselves. The organization of textbook and syllabus should follow above stages, and appropriate knowledge need also be consistent with the characteristics of each stage.

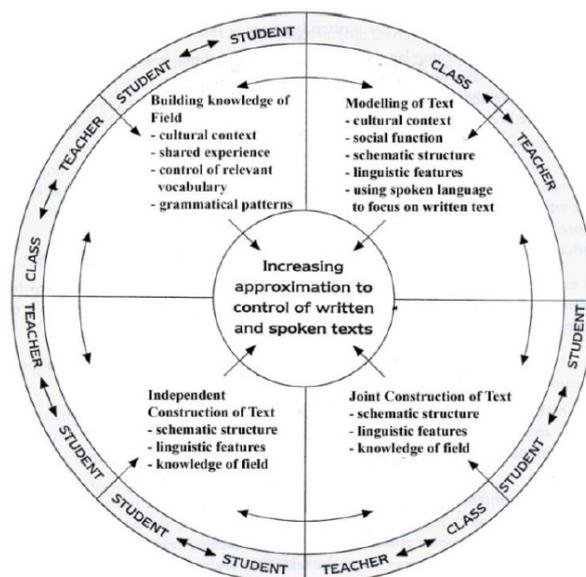


Figure 2. An English writing textbook and syllabus organization model built on genre-based pedagogy (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999)

#### 4.1.2 Applying genre-based Learning/Teaching Cycle

To put genre-based learning/teaching cycle into practice, the teaching process goes in a cycle composed of deconstruction, joint construction, and independent construction (see Figure 1). In deconstruction, the model text is introduced, with its genre and function being discussed, its structure and linguistic features being analyzed. Built upon construction, joint construction is a process that teachers and students are jointly compose a text in a given genre. In order to let students experience writing process, teachers play the role of “scribe” who writes a text in the same genre according to class discussion. The independent construction refers to text composition by students themselves, going through a series of processes, such as drafting, teacher and peer assessment, and final draft (Hyon, 1996). From these stages in genre-based learning/teaching cycle, text’s communicative purposes, rhetoric features and cultural context can be revealed through teachers and students’ language comprehension, analysis and application (Martin, 1999). The realization of field, tenor and mode in certain situation determines the structure of register, which reflects genre structure to a large extent, and register and genre together constitute discourse structure (Fang, 1998). Under the framework of genre theory, Sydney school constantly develops its pedagogical theory, establishes genre-based writing learning/teaching model in classroom. Macken-Horarik (2002), for example, proposed a writing framework for exposition (Table 1).

Table 1. Genre-based exposition writing framework (Macken-Horarik, 2002)

	Genre: Explanation
Social purpose	Account for how and why things are as they are. An explanation sets out the logical steps in a process.
Social location	Explanations are written by experts for textbooks, for nature programs, environmental leaflets, healthcare booklets, and so on.
Schematic structure	General Statement Implication Sequence (State)
Description of stages	General Statement: provides information about the phenomena to be explained; Implication Sequence: sets out steps in a process or the factors influencing a phenomenon in a logical sequence.
Register features	Overall features: Logical, not temporal, organization. Relational processes. Timeless verbs. Expanded nominal groups. Variety of clause themes. Field: Giving information about how something works. Tenor: Addressing to an unfair expert/ audience. Mode: Written to be read; semiotically distant.

#### 4.1.3 Updating Teaching Concepts

Genre pedagogy has a wide range of applications. It does not only benefit students’ writing, but it also improves teachers’ educational concepts. The first updating is the starting point of learning/teaching. Language is a complex system, which is reflected in its organization and teaching tools and methods. Traditional teaching philosophy believes that language education is similar to “laying bricks”, following the direction that starts from smaller units to larger ones, i.e. a bottom-up way. However genre pedagogy takes the opposite path, a top-down approach, starting from text’s social function, genre, to particular text, paragraphs, sentences and words. The concept of the pedagogy draws on natural language learning theory, and is of great help in guiding college English writing.

Secondly, genre pedagogy borrows Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” theory and the “scaffold” theory. The latter term comes from the construction industry, referring that learners can take advantages of peers, teachers, parents and others to complete learning tasks in educational activities. Such help would disappear just as the scaffold will be taken off after the construction is completed. Eventually learners can achieve independent learning and realize learning purposes. Inspired by this idea, genre pedagogy insists that language learning has to be put under teachers’ modeling text and has also asks for students’ observation and imitation. With the language learning going further, there will be fewer teachers’ help, increased and strengthened students’ learning ability,

and ultimately enable students to learn independently.

#### *4.2 The Advantages of Genre-based Pedagogy in Teaching English Writing*

Sydney school's genre-based pedagogy has been put into practice in many areas in language education. Compared with traditional teaching methods, it has many advantages for college English learn/teaching in Chinese context, mainly as:

- 1). Learning linguistic knowledge while taking in social and cultural information. Cultural diversity is reflected in the features of writing, which has its special social purposes, and motivates target reader's expectations (Kaplan & Grabe, 2002). In China, as English is the second language there is the absence of English cultural context which becomes a great burden on learners. But guided by genre theory, English learners can build the social background of the target language based on its genre structure, which further be used to analyze, evaluate and study the language, and eventually learn the knowledge of society, culture, and ideology in target language.
- 2). Integrating writing both as a process and as a result. Under the framework of genre pedagogy, English writing is taken both as process and as result. Paying attention to language social-cultural background, genre is a high level of register that is composed of field, mode and field, and is realized by discourse, which is realized by lexical-grammatical resources, which are further realized by graphology (Martin & Rose, 2008). In such realization relationship, writing is a procedural and gradual realizing activity. Taking writing as result comes from the systemic functional linguists' traditional studies to enhance students and workers' literacy ability. This viewpoint emphasizes the selection in language system, i.e. writing is a process in which the author in rich linguistic resources has to make language choices that realize meaning.
- 3). Valuing learning interaction. In order to help learners to learn language genres, Sydney school's genre-based pedagogy hold that "learn through interaction under the shared experience" (Painter, 1986), making the pedagogy a visible and changeable one. Teachers play a "scaffold" role to assist students to complete difficult tasks in language learning. The teaching process is completed in the genre-based scaffolding learning/teaching cycle, which composed of teacher's preparation, students' learning tasks, and teacher's explanation. Writing teaching thus emphasizes teacher-student and student-students collaboration and mutual assistance.
- 4). Mutual promotion of reading and writing. In genre-based scaffolding learning/teaching cycle, there is a balanced development in listening, speaking, reading and writing (Rose, 2007). Sydney school's genre pedagogy integrates listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in language teaching. It focuses on the study of English for special purposes, because learners in this area carries the ultimate goal that conveys the real-world background, whose primary purpose is to convey professional knowledge in the field. Therefore this pedagogy values the overall language abilities and the reconstruction of register in target language.

#### *4.3 Issues to be Further Explored and Resolved*

Genre-based approach is of great value in many aspects in college English education in China, and, compared to other teaching theories, it has many advantages. However, there is still an in-depth study in the pedagogy before we can successfully implement it.

The first concern is students' poor ability in discourse comprehension and analysis. College English writing teaching in China tended to focus on words and syntactic decomposition, and often ignores the general analysis for discourse in a given genre, such as textual structure, textual features and the coherent. Students also have poor ability in recognizing grammatical and rhetorical structures. The deep-seated reason of students' poor discourse analysis is their deficient genre awareness, implying that students could not properly handle the standards and distinctions of different discourse in various genres, and leading to their inability to write.

The second problem is dissociating genre and its context. Genre-based pedagogy separates genre and its complex and dynamic social-cultural context. Thus, some scholars believe that even if the ESL learners learn a certain genre in target language, it is still unable to change the social power structure that builds the genre (Bazerman, 2009).

The third issue is that although the genre-based pedagogy is widely used, the empirical research in the field of second language writing is relatively scarce. Therefore, in Chinese context, introducing the pedagogy to support college English writing remains to be further studied in practice. The following questions need to be answer before we have a clear mind: what about the effects of genre-based approach in English writing; is any modification or adjustment needed for diversified students; what effects it may have for textbook and syllabus organization; how will it influence teachers and students.

## 5. Conclusion

Since the *College English Curriculum Requirements* was issued, Chinese college English education has undergone a series of reforms and researches under the principle of “teaching according to situation and students’ aptitude”. These efforts “creates student-oriented college English teaching, reflects ‘the students as the primary concern, teachers as the domination’, serves college educational objectives and department development, caters to students personal development, makes teaching and learning a ‘personalized’ orientation, and leads to a distinctive English education” (S. R. Wang & H. X. Wang, 2011). However, the research in this “personalization” in college English teaching is still in much defect, which calls for us, according to current conditions, to propose the improved theory and method based on advanced pedagogies from the west. Based on such idea, we hope to introduce Sydney school’s genre-based pedagogy, which effectively improves students’ writing ability, enhances their reading skill, promotes cultural knowledge in the target language, and, more importantly, contributes to students’ progress in all levels.

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