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Probing into Problems of Writing Approach of Argumentations for In-service Masters of Education: From the Angle of Process Genre Pedagogy

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Abstract

Based upon the three major problems that prevail in the argumentative writing of graduates, such as loose framework, Chinese thinking and poor coherence, the article perfects the four stages of Process Genre Pedagogy (PGP) put forward by Han Jinlong and brings forth anew the other five, namely, model paper analysis and demonstration, group discussion and imitation, individual imitation and writing, whole-class comment and modification, as well as final drafting and publication. The research indicates that the effectiveness is demonstrated in the following advantages, explicit discourse framework awareness, co-emphasis on both language and discourse, and the strengthening of cooperative learning, in the company of demerits like being prescriptive and timeconsuming. It is suggested finally that the efficacy of Process Genre Pedagogy in improving argumentative writing for In-service Masters of Education be maximized by means of optimizing information input, reinforcing technical training and constructing harmonious learning environment.

Key words: Process Genre Pedagogy (PGP); Inservice Masters of Education (M.E.); Effectiveness; Genre; Discourse

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1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Richard Badger and Goodith White from University of Stirling came up with the Process Genre Pedagogy in 2000, which initially won the worldwide attention of scholars and researchers since its emergence. The optimum advantage of this approach is that it has integrated the product approach, the process approach and the genre approach as a whole to its maximum, while evading from all the weaknesses. As a result, this innovation in the pedagogy has exerted the tremendous effects to all the concerning theories in terms of teaching.

In recent years, the language teachers and researchers at home have gradually progressed upon this brand new teaching method. Han (2001), the pioneer professor, has first introduced it into the teaching of English writing, who studied both the advantages and disadvantages of approaches, namely the product approach, the process approach and the genre approach. Meanwhile, he ushered in the possible and necessary integration of the above three, and finally summarized specific and operatable teaching steps for English writing. Later on, a couple of other researchers at home conducted the relevant researches successively. Yang Shuo (2004) argued the important role that the genre writing pedagogy plays in improving the students' writing; Xu Xiaoyan (2007) suggested to guide the college English writing through sample analysis, pre-writing, initiation as well as proof writing by contrasting and comparing the product approach, the process approach and the genre approach; Shen Yuru (2008) initially explored the fundamental basis of Process Genre Pedagogy and further analyzed the application as well as difficulties in the teaching of college English writing; He and Ji (2009) then conducted an experimental study on the feasibility of Process Genre Pedagogy employed in the teaching of college English writing. In addition, based upon the practical difficulties existing in application of PGP, Zhang Mang (2010) put

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forward that it is one of the best teaching methods that fits EFL writing teaching when combining the process approach and the genre approach to its best; plus, Zhao Xia (2010) probed into the research and application of trade-offs in the teaching of English writing in China, through analyzing the application mode and strengths as well as weaknesses of the PGP; Huang and Yao (2010) also pointed out that Process Genre Pedagogy does enlighten the teaching of English writing for English majors, such as the roles change between teacher and students, the strengthening of autonomy and the emphasis on the process.

Currently, all studies regarding Process Genre Pedagogy at home and abroad are concerned about the College English writing. And rarely the researches involve the English writing of graduates for English non-majors, to say nothing of the one on In-service Masters of Education (M.E.). Besides, there is hardly any corresponding research associated with the writing of argumentation, one of the four major writing types either at home or abroad. More importantly, there is also no relevant study dedicated to the function of PGP on whether it is able to guide the writing of argumentation or to play the active role in promoting the writing level of graduates. Thus, the paper aims to bring forward some powerful strategies on the improvement and progress of teaching, in accordance with the existing problems and status quo of argumentative writing for the In-service M.E., together with its practical experiences and weaknesses. The major research questions are:

a. Considering the objective problems that exist in the argumentative writing of In-service Masters of Education, is it beneficial to facilitate the improvement of writing when constructing the Process Genre Pedagogy?

b. Do the findings and results arising from the application of Process Genre Pedagogy in class bring about any enlightenment for the EFL teaching? If yes, what are they?

2. PROBLEMS ANALYSIS OF ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING FOR INSERVICE M.E.

As a degree with a special background of vocational education, the program of Master of Education (M.E.) aims to cultivate those who are engaged in fundamental education and management. In-service M.E. and the current full-time Master of Education remain on the same level but with different specifications and different emphasis. The distinctions lie in the following: the former is the professional degree, while the latter is the academic degree. In-service M.E.s mostly come from the front line of education, who are usually the leading teachers and managerial staffs in their respective primary or middle schools. They are required to attend the national unified

exam and then admitted to apply for in-service degree. When graduating, they would obtain the degree of Master in Education but without certificate, so they are usually labeled as In-service Masters of Education. The major courses for In-service Master of Education depend on the orientation of disciplines, that is to say, the respective research directions (non-lingual), such as Chinese, Maths, Music, Management, Chemistry and Physics. And English, among other things, is just one of the required courses. These In-service M.E.s have never taken any formal or systematic training in English writing, nor have they had any idea of genre, structure, technique and other writinglinked concepts. And apart from the limited time, these postgraduates are weak in both writing knowledge and writing capabilities. What comes next is a questionnaire surveyed on 156 In-service M.E.s in September 2011 in Shaanxi Normal University (See Table 1).

Table 1 Problem Analysis of Argumentative Writing for Inservice Masters of Education

n=156	Quite Clear		Clear		Ambiguous		Quite Ambiguous	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Logic Framework	5	3.20	7	4.49	78	50	66	42.31
Thinking Mode	12	7.69	15	9.62	84	53.85	45	28.85
Cohesive Devices	16	10.26	19	12.18	69	44.23	52	33.33

2.1 Loose Framework

Argumentation by definition is one of the writing styles to analyze, comment, and present attitude and understanding towards the objective things or events, which is usually made up of arguments, evidence and demonstration. Table 1 shows clearly that, 144 subjects out of 156 (nearly 92.31%) fail to distinguish the concepts among arguments, evidence and demonstration, who do not have the clear understanding of the common structures for argumentation (such as merits-demerits type, problemsolution type and opinion-presentation type), and don't even know what structure to follow or where to start with writing. Even though there is the percentage of 7.69 who are clear-minded, they fail to unyieldingly adhere to the structure pattern, in other words, to follow the structure of problem-raising (introduction), problem-analyzing (body) and problem-solving (conclusion). Furthermore, these subjects improperly employ the exemplification or contrast argumentation, in that they write on their hunch. As a consequence, the framework as a whole must be loose with week argumentation and poor logic.

2.2 Chinese Thinking Mode

Another outstanding problem that exists in argumentative writing for In-service M.E.s is their Chinese thinking mode which does impose negatively on the structure framework and writing logic. It is obviously seen from Table 1 that 129 (82.1%) out of 156 hardly or completely fail to get rid of the Chinese thinking mode, in that English language follows the linear logic while Chinese adhere to the spiral type. Take the case of argumentation as an example. It is supposed to touch upon the topic from the very start in English writing, and the following part must be guided by this thesis until the end. Furthermore, each paragraph is better to begin with a topic sentence and to be fully demonstrated with persuasive evidences by means of induction, deduction, exemplification, contrast and comparison and so on. On the contrary, Chinese writing would attach more importance to cohesion and transition within paragraphs and between paragraphs. In other words, all paragraphs would progress in terms of spiral pattern, usually starting from going around the bush gradually to the main theme, which occurs step by step naturally. Therefore, all the viewpoints must be offered at the ending integrative part. To sum up, Chinese thinking pattern is more indirect, while English is more direct. Plus, authors always prefer to quote some classics or anecdotes in Chinese writing, while English writing usually begins small by employing some statistics or cases of average people even if it thinks big. Based upon the abovementioned, it is suggested to abide by the English thinking mode to get to the point directly in English argumentative writing so that a well-defined and neatly-organized paper may come into being.

2.3 Poor Coherence

From the linguistic perspective, another prevailing barrier for the In-service M.E.s in argumentative writing is the poor coherence and logic spreading over in sentences as well as passages. Table 1 also indicates that only 35 students, taking up 22.44% of the total, have the clear awareness and get familiar with a number of cohesive devices in English, such as therefore, hence, however, thus, consequently, as a result, since, in that case, and so. Besides, they may seldom use the following structures or sentence patterns in their writings, such as Even if / though...; It is true ..., but ...; It follows that ...; If ..., we may conclude that ...; If you admit ..., then However, it is shocking that about 77.56% of the surveyed subjects know little or nothing about the differences in view of cohesive devices that exist between Chinese and English. For instance, Chinese writing, typical of paratactic style, is scrambled in appearance but well-knit in spirit; on contrast, English writing is special of hypotaxis, which must maintain the logic relations through connectives. In this sense, argumentative writing in English must employ plenty of transitional words or connectives to make certain of logic and order of reasoning. To conclude, it is suggested to consciously strengthen the training on cohesive devices used in argumentative writing, ranging from sentence, paragraph finally to the whole composition, and realizing the natural and coherent effects to its maximum.

3. THE CONSTRUCTION OF PROCESS GENRE PEDAGOGY

The author takes full consideration of the three major problems shared by the In-service M.E.s in their argumentative wring, and brings forth anew 5 stages of writing mode to offer guidance for the writing of argumentation, namely, model paper analysis and demonstration, group discussion and imitation, individual imitation and writing, whole-class comment and modification, as well as final drafting and publication, based upon the four stages of PGP put forward by Han Jinlong, as can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2
The Construction of Process Genre Pedagogy

Teaching Steps	Teaching Content
Phase 1	Model paper analysis and demonstration
Phase 2	Group discussion and imitation
Phase 3	Individual imitation and writing,
Phase 4	Whole-class comment and modification
Phase 5	Final drafting and publication

3.1 Model Paper Analysis and Demonstration

The first phase of model paper analysis and demonstration is akin to the pre-writing stage, which takes the top-down method to aid the students to think big while starting small and standard. The corresponding features of the model paper regarding a certain topic including genre, discourse structure, communicative purpose, linguistic features, cohesive devices, argumentative process must be well understood by the students, so that they would have the rules and regulations to abide by. For example, the teacher may provide the students with two highly qualified sample papers with distinctive themes but similar in genre, and then help them analyze the shared discourse structure, guide them to read on their own, and further aid them to have a good understanding of some aspects, such as language, cohesion and argumentation process. It is also suggested to highlight and demonstrate those powerful persuasions, well-defined expressions or any impressive parts.

3.2 Group Discussion and Imitation

The second phase focuses on *group discussion and imitation*, different from the teacher-dominated phase 1. Take the case of a writing task entitled Opportunity and Success as an example. In phase 1, the teacher takes

the responsibility to demonstrate the model paper with the elaborate explanation and specifications. And the students are informed that the title would indicate it is a writing mode of self-elaboration. Later on, the students are grouped into teams of 3 to 5 and join the discussion of theme, style, organization, expression, grammar and so on. During this process, students are asked to air their views guided by the checklist offered by the teacher. And meanwhile, other members of the group are allowed to make up some missing information or come up with their rebuttal. Phase 2 does not definitely ask all the members of the group to reach the consensus, but all members must digest and master the core mentioned by the teacher. Likewise, the group members may also discuss the following contents, such as how they would start with the framework if they meet with the same topic, how they conduct their argumentation process, how they internalize structures, languages and the like into their own knowledge structure. 15 minutes discussion would maximize the students' ability of digesting the sample paper, and thereby become more confident when starting to model the sample paper in the next phase.

3.3 Individual Imitation and Writing

Phase 3, individual imitation and writing, is the independent part in which the students are required to conduct the practical writing on the given topic within 30 minutes. This phase asks the students to put the theory into practice, specifically, to apply the genre structure and linguistic features that they have learned from phase 2 into practice. Still take case of the writing entitled Opportunity and Success as an example. To begin with, the students should work out an outline in light of genre structure to establish the overall framework, for example, to point out first that the opportunity does not return for whatever reasons thereby people must cherish the opportunities. The direct touch upon the topic in this first part would serve as an impressive opening statement. Secondly, the body may take various means of argumentation to present that opportunity is not bound to success and success can only be achieved by hard work and sufficient preparation. For example, exemplification can be employed to quote a case in point, in which a person makes best use of the opportunity in front of him and eventually succeeds with his own efforts. Or contrastive analysis can be used to explore the differences that exist between the people who succeed and those who fail, thus adding the power of grasping the opportunity. At last, the composition ends with summary and restatement by emphasizing that success relies on the correct attitude and success is only for those who are well prepared and highly qualified. Considering the cohesive devices, it is suggested to make use of a number of connectives or phases such as otherwise, in contrast, on the one hand, on the other hand, and as a result.

3.4 Whole-Class Comment and Modification

As is shown in Table 2, phase 4 is whole-class comment and modification. Another period of class is needed in that the teachers must correct and organize all the collected papers first before they bring them to class for appreciation and modification. Two sample papers would be sorted out at last, in which one is excellent model while the other is a poor job. In class, the teacher comments and revises the paper together with the students. Aided by multi-media projector, the teacher conducts the classroom teaching based on these two sample papers. And there are usually two ways to follow. One is done by students on their own within groups, and the teacher just walks around acting the role of helper, facilitator or commentator. The other way is done with the concerted efforts of both the teacher and students. For the excellent composition, the teacher is better to mention the author's name and further analyze the strong points in terms of structure, rhetoric and cohesion, so that the students' enthusiasm and interest in English writing would be brought into full play. Meanwhile, the teacher takes the function of modification and annotation via Microsoft Word to conduct in-time correction and comment, so that the students would clearly know the first-hand information as to the aspects they are not for sure. On the other hand, as to the poor written composition, the teacher is recommended to ignore the students' name, for taking the affective factors into account. Similarly, the above-mentioned aspects may also be focused on for comment and revision. If necessary, the teacher is able to demand the students to rewrite his composition. In this phase, the comment and modification upon the students' writing are helpful to compare and contrast between the students' writing and sample writing, link the theory with practice, thereby maximizing the students' understanding about argumentative writing.

3.5 Final Drafting and Publication

After the in-class feedback and modification by the teacher, and the students' revision on their writing after class, they may enter the last phase, namely *final drafting and publication*. This phase is not simply the one of final draft done, but a corresponding result based upon the previous stages, namely, *model paper analysis and demonstration*, *group discussion and imitation*, *individual imitation and writing*, and *whole-class comment and modification*. During the whole process, both the teacher and students take part in the teaching steps playing the active and reflective role, thus truly implementing the process genre writing approach in reality and having the students fully comprehend the meaning of writing in essence.

4. THE ASSESSMENT OF PROCESS GENRE PEDAGOGY

During the 4 months' implantation of genre process pedagogy since September 2011, the author brings the integration of the pedagogy itself and the reality of Inservice M.E.s' writing into full play, and optimizes the PGP in guiding the students' writing process, achieving tremendous benefits as a result. 25 participants have been randomly interviewed on the issues of whether and how PGP guided them in their argumentative writing. At the same time, all the participants' writing papers have been collected and deeply studied in order to explore the efficacy and problems deriving from Process Genre Pedagogy. The findings are as follows in Table 3:

Table 3
The Assessment of Efficacy on Process Genre Pedagogy

	· ·		
	Explicit discourse structure awareness		
Effectiveness	Co-emphasis on discourse and language		
	Strengthening of cooperative learning		
Problems	Prescriptive		
rroblems	Time-consuming		

4.1 Effectiveness

4.1.1 Explicit Discourse Structure Awareness

In the process of implementing PGP in argumentative writing, the dramatic change and efficacy is that 144 out of 156 subjects have converted from the ambiguous awareness about discourse structure to the explicit understanding of the overall framework. 25 randomly surveyed participants hold the following understanding towards genres of all kinds, specifically argumentation of all sorts: any type of argumentation must consist of introduction (lead-in), argumentative process (development) and conclusion (ending); introductory part must bring forth the theme and sum the thesis statement; argumentative process must focus on the topic by listing a series of arguments through details and facts, and conclusion part must restate the theme and major points in different linguistic expressions. Besides, it has been found from the observation of inclass teaching and students' writing training that the thinking pattern of In-service M.E.s has undergone the transition from spiral type to the linear one in terms of discourse structure, or from the indirect way to the direct one, from the inductive way to the deductive one so to speak. In a word, In-service M.E.s have constructed the comparatively clear and accurate understanding towards the discourse structure of argumentations of all sorts: for instance, as for the argumentation of merits-demerits, it is better to post the question, then to analyze its advantages and disadvantages, and finally to present the individual viewpoints; for the argumentation of problem-solving, it is suggested to line up the problem, then to analyze the cause, and finally to resolve the problem.

4.1.2 Co-Emphasis on Discourse and Language

The author found that lack of cohesive devices, improper use or omission of connectives, and monotonous or repetitive use of connectives have grown better at the end of the semester, based upon the 132 writing samples from the students. The interviewees admit that their abilities on both language and discourse have been improved and strengthened in the phase of model paper analysis and demonstration. They further point out that they have not only had the thorough and penetrating understanding towards the structure of argumentative writing, but also had a good command of linguistic knowledge, pragmatic knowledge as well as some writing techniques. They also mention that they have been benefited immensely from the teacher who emphasized the writing features of English argumentations in the stages of both *model paper* analysis and demonstration and individual imitation and writing. It is the up-to-point elaboration of how to apply cohesive devices that helped them learn to correlate (such as personal reference and demonstrative reference), to replace from repetition, to emphasize the cohesion and logic between paragraphs and within paragraphs, and to unfold the superficial logic relations among sentences and paragraphs. In addition, the surveyed subjects claim that they have come to know how the application of cohesive devises helped to promote the coherence and cohesion of the discourse, to further demonstrate the well-defined theme, thus their corresponding awareness has been initiated to the greatest extent. It is worthwhile to mention that the In-service M.E.s have perceived the more explicit awareness upon a couple of cohesive devices, which in particular stand for reinforcing, concession, reasonresult along with time, for instance, the connectives like however, thus, therefore, in addition, as a result, by contrast so on and so forth. They are always reminded of not putting the connectives or conjunction at the beginning of the sentence each time. The dramatic progress on both discourse ability and language level of the surveyed is also reflected obviously in their respective sample papers.

4.1.3 Strengthening of Cooperative Learning

Through the process of collaborative comment between students, group discussion, teacher's feedback and joint revision, the students' cooperative learning ability has been strengthened to its maximum. In the latter phase of implementation of PGP particularly, the author found that the class is full of vigor and energy from time to time, and the whole class gets completely involved in the mutual learning and mutual help. It is clearly seen that the teacher does not afford the only resource for the students, but students learn from each other and gain the message or feedback they desire mutually thereby promoting their affective communication. Simultaneously, the discussion and comment that occur between students would be helpful to enlighten on their own, which turns out to be more effective than solely depending on the comment of the teacher, and also more impressive than the teacher's conclusive remarks. Under such circumstances, the pattern of collaboration between teacher and students, and between students and students would be precisely true of the teaching concept of learning through teaching and teaching through learning, in which teacher plays the leading role while students play the active part.

4.2 Problems

However, we may also find that the application of Process Genre Pedagogy in English argumentative writing for Inservice M.E.s leads to the next 2 problems that are worthy to be discussed:

4.2.1 Prescriptive

The students are well informed of the mastery of schematic structure and construction of structure for argumentative writing in English through model paper analysis and demonstration in terms of discourse structure and language style. Yet, this prescriptiveness may probably lead to prescriptivism of in-class teaching activities (Hyland, 2003). This study confirmed the belief in the way that the students have only had a familiarity and command of the argumentative types that the teacher presented, but not fully mastered others which failed to be demonstrated by the teacher in class. The subjects just had the perception of comparatively monotonous discourse structure or language phenomenon, but failed to work out some other creative and innovative writings. As a consequence, the potential danger shared by the Process Genre Pedagogy is that the students' papers are more likely to be the same and their creation can certainly not be fully exerted.

4.2.2 Time-consuming

Another major problem in the teaching practice is that the implementation of PGP is such a time-consuming and energy-consuming process. The completion of the task for practicing a whole teaching process as to PGP takes 3 to 4 periods of classes, in contrast to all-together 40 periods of teaching schedule in each semester. About 3 to 4 periods are sufficient for the students to maximize their acquisition and master learning objects. If time deducted, it would be certain that the teaching goes into failure in that the students just have a scratch about everything. What's more, the teacher's preparation stage lasts longer than usual because they are supposed to collect a vast number of corresponding model papers and carry out the further specific analysis before class. In class, they must lead the students to discuss and imitate; while after class, they must correct and classify the papers and select the sample paper to comment in class. Therefore, the application of PGP does bring forward a higher standard and forceful challenge for both directions, teacher and students to be specific.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based upon the effective analysis and the corresponding findings deriving form the applied use of Process Genre Pedagogy in English argumentative writing for In-service M.E.s, the author advances some enlightenments and suggestions for EFL teaching, specifically, to invest more information input, to reinforce technical training and to construct harmonious learning environment.

5.1 To Invest More Information Input

In order to evade from the prescriptive color of teaching process, the teacher may invest more in-class and after-class information input by demonstrating more outstanding model papers, profound thoughts and contents, and excellent language expressions for the students, so as to make sure that the students are able to optimize their intake and output. The multi-media facilities, computers and online resources can be possibly employed to expand the flow of information, increase the communicative channel and enhance the time, space and efficiency of classroom teaching, so that the writing teaching is more inclined to be scientific, systematic and humane. It is recommended to build the corpus of model papers and students' sample writing, and to classify them into categories, so that the students and teacher enjoy more opportunities and take part in communication and paper revision. In the future teaching practice, the practice of Process Genre Pedagogy in writing can be collaborated with the teaching of listening, speaking, reading and translation as a whole, so that the all-round ability of the students in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation can be well-balanced to its maximum.

5.2 To Reinforce Technical Training

It is suggested to strengthen some technical training and language training in order to avoid the prescriptiveness of writing structure or the monotony of language. For example, the teacher may design some proper exercises to help the students increase their awareness towards discourse structure and promote cohesive ability of discourses. When training the students in writing, the teacher may refer to the logic items of IELTS, asking the students to reorganize a paragraph or a article from the messy one in according with the certain logic relations; the teacher can also train students to fill the blanks with appropriate connectives or phrases in order to make sure that logic within sentences or paragraphs is reasonable and close; or the students are asked to conduct the autonomous discussion, explore the mistakes mutually from the angle of discourse or to actively correct some poorly expressed, ambiguously elaborated sentences, paragraphs or articles with weak logic or wrong cohesion.

5.3 To Construct Harmonious Learning Environment

The practice of PGP must be implemented in the relaxing and harmonious learning environment so that students and students, or teacher and students would appreciate the cooperative learning. The teacher plays the leading part to conduct classroom teaching and motivate the students' enthusiasm by acting as the facilitator, supervisor and coordinator; on the other hand, the students, as the participants and learners play the active roles in acquiring the knowledge and achieving the optimal results in the pleasant and relaxing learning environment.

In conclusion, Process Genre Pedagogy facilitates the argumentative writing for In-service M.E.s in improving the students' awareness of genre, discourse structure, linguistic cohesion and enhancing the students' writing ability as a result. However, as the writing is a gradual process, whether it is still beneficial for the long-term writing ability cultivation and the writing teaching remains unclear. Furthermore, this article just probes into one genre, namely argumentative writing, taking the Inservice M.E.s as the subject group. It demands further study on whether the findings from this research would still adapt to other genres of writing, other group of subjects, or the teaching of other subjects.

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