The Construction of Controlled English Writing Based on Register Theory

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Abstract

It's believed that language is produced in the situation by systemic-functional linguists. Language varies with situations, which produce different registers. By analyzing different situations, register theory describes and interprets linguistic changes and varieties. As a significant output activity, English writing comprehensively reflects English proficiency of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, for it is not only associated with vocabulary, grammar and sentences, but also English thinking pattern and situations, etc. Register theory is of guiding significance for English writing. The paper puts forward the controlled English writing mode as both intelligent and feasible solutions from the perspectives of register theory, hoping to improve the efficiency of English writing.

Key words: Register; Register theory; English writing; Controlled English writing

INTRODUCTION

Writing is the procedure of using symbols to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form. It's also a method of representing language in visual or tactile form. Among the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing is usually the fourth one that we learn. With the exception of speaking, writing is the most common and popular method of creating connections among people and within communities. It serves as the flexible foundation for almost every type of communications media. English writing has been of great significance as globalization continues apace. As a compulsory course for English majors, English writing aims at developing students' basic English writing skills, then improving their ability to communicate with English writing. It reflects different fields and related social activities, and its contents include outline, abstract, essay, and practical writing for different purposes, etc.. In the process of English writing, there is strict requirement for thought and expression, capability of language application and writing norms. The writers should also give full consideration to the accurate understanding of the discourse, register, style and tone. Otherwise, there will be serious problems of one-sided emphasis on the correctness of language expression and ignorance of the appropriateness of style. There also commonly exists a phenomenon of negative transfer of Chinese in our students' English writing. All of these have perplexed English majors for a long time in China. By analyzing different situations, register theory focuses on linguistic changes and varieties, which will provide some enlightenment for English writing. Therefore, it's urgent for English majors to have a comprehensive grasp of the concept and features of register and the process of English writing. The register sense of students' English writing can be enhanced, and ultimately English writing quality will be improved. The paper proposes that the controlled English writing mode can be constructed to optimize English writing from the perspectives of register theory.

1. RELEVANCE OF REGISTER ANALYSIS TO ENGLISH WRITING

1.1 A General Review of Register Theory

The term "register" first came into general currency in the 1960s. Following Reid's initial use of it in 1956, Halliday

et al. (1964, p.77) describe it as "a variety according to use, in the sense that each speaker has a range of varieties and chooses between them at different times." That is, language varies according to the situation in which it is used. If we examine a text we can make a guess about the situation. If we are in a special situation we should make certain linguistic choices based on that situation. The language we use must be appropriate to the situation in which we use. Register theory aims to "uncover the general principles which govern the variation in situation types, so that we can begin to understand what situational factors determine what linguistic features" (Halliday, 1978, p.32). It has received popular application in discourse analysis and language teaching pedagogy.

Halliday (1978, p.64) defines the concept of register as "a useful abstraction linking variations of language to variations of social context" and suggests "that there are three aspects in any situation that have linguistic consequences: field, mode, and tenor" (Eggins, 1994, p.52). Field refers to "what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place," mode concerns "what it is that the participants of a transaction are expecting language to do for them in that situation,"

and tenor has to do with "who are taking part in the transaction as well as the nature of the participants, their status and roles" (Hasan & Halliday, 1985, p.12). In Halliday's term, the relationship between the language components (the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions) and three context variables (field, tenor and mode) is called "realisation". It means the way in which different types of field, tenor and mode condition ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings from the perspective of context. That is, differences in the field which are realised through both transitivity selection and lexical choices determine the ideational metafunction. In the same way, differences in tenor are realised through mood and subject, and modality plus appraisal choices which in turn construct the interpersonal metafunction. And finally, the register variable of mode manifests the textual metafunction. A change in any one of three variables will cause the change of communication meaning, which results in the change of language, creating different registers. Tabulated below is the relationship between context of situation and language systems in the Hallidayan mode adapted from Eggins and Martin (1997, p.242).

Table 1
Relationship Between Context, Strata, and Systems in the Systemic Functional Mode

Context register variable	Type of meaning	Language discourse-semantic patterns (cohesion)	Lexico-grammatical patterns
Field	Ideational	Lexical cohesion Conjunctive relations	Transitivity (case) Logical-semantic relations (taxis)
Tenor	Interpersonal	Speech function Exchange structure	Mood, modality, vocation, attitude
Mode	Textual	Reference (participant tracking)	Theme, Information structure Nominalisation

It shows the triadic relationships of the three register variables, the lexicogrammar, and three metafunctions of language use.

1.2 Register-Based English Writing

Register theory analyzes different situations where language is used, and focuses on linguistic changes and varieties. It seems fair to say that the Hallidayan register models have become very popular and fruitful as a useful way of tackling the linguistic structure and meaning of a text. Starting with field, tenor, and mode, register analysis mainly discusses the relationship between language and context. It aims at developing language users' "meaning potential", thus enabling them to choose language appropriate for its context of situation within the "potential", which is also the main purpose of language teaching. It is helpful to identify the background of the special discourse, and also advantageous to make a reasonable inference about the internal sense of discourse, which would assist language users to analyze the appropriateness of discourse construction from the perspective of social situations. In

the practical use of language, appropriateness has more significance than correctness. All of these will provide some enlightenment for English writing.

Register "is the set of meanings, the configuration of semantic patterns, that is typically drawn upon under the specific conditions, along with the words and structures that are used in the realization of these meanings" (Halliday, 1978, p.23). As can be seen, registration is a particular selection of words and structures. It is the semantic preference people make in a given context. These semantic preference are embodied by grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, different registers have different grammatical and lexical structures. In English writing, it's necessary to have a full understanding of the relevant knowledge of register theory. English majors should not only pay attention to the correctness of the use of language, but also make the appropriate grammatical and lexical choice on the basis of the change of register, in order to ensure the appropriateness of the text. The flowing Figure1 demonstrates the process of English writing on the basis of register theory.
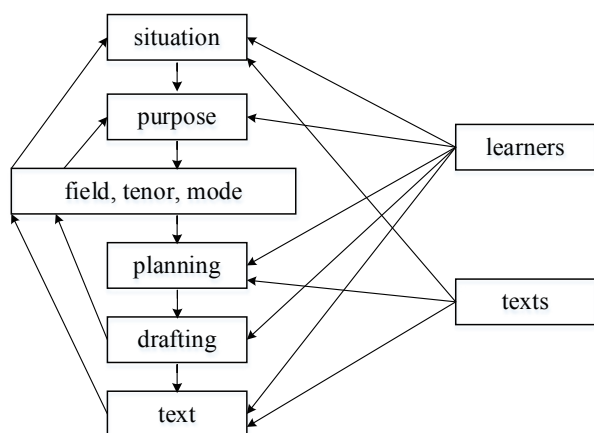
Figure 1
The Process of English Writing Based on Register Theory

English writing process is a purposeful and organized activity. Learners' control over different procedures of English writing will influence the writing effency. The three variables of register are in an important position of the English writing process, closely linking all procedures of writing together, and to a large extent, ensuring the standardization, appropriacy and accuracy of English writing.

2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONTROLLED ENGLISH WRITING ON THE BASIS OF REGISTER THEORY

2.1 The Current Problems of English Writing

English writing is one of the four basic language skills of English learning, which is an indispensable part in the process of English acquisition. As an important way of language output, it reflects students' English comprehensive ability so that it has attracted students' more attention. Therefore, the improvement of English writing ability can promote that of listening, speaking and reading ability. However, for most English majors, English writing is still their weak point which has plagued them for long time, though they have been learning English for years. Through years of writing teaching, a record of the problems that the English majors have exposed in their writing has been made. The problems have been summarized into the following categories:

2.1.1 Meaningless Point of View

Writing is a complex thinking process which should be expressed according to the given core idea. Unfortunately, the compositions written by some English majors in our country are sprinkled with meaningless point of view. That is to say, the content expressed in the students' compositions has nothing to do with the give topic or there is no value of discussion or writing. Therefore, the

problem of the digression of the topic and the like will become common. The composition will be worthless for it's far away from the given topic. For example, in the writing practice, the title "What can we get from movies?" is given to the students. What the movie can bring us or the existential significance of the movie is required to be discussed. However, some students write the following sentences in their compositions: (a) People watch movies in many ways, such as watching online and watching on TV. (b) Many people go to the cinema because they want to support their favorite actors. The first example discusses different ways of watching movies, and the second one discusses the reason why people choose to go to the cinema. Although both of the two perspectives are within the scope of the movie, they deviate from the focus of the theme. That is so called "the digression of the topic". Therefore, it belongs to the meaningless point of view.

2.1.2 Logical Confusion

If people want to think, the concept, the judgment, the inference and other forms of thinking will be used. These thought forms are not only the means of human beings to reflect the objective reality, but also the basic material of the text. English majors should master these forms of thinking and its related logical requirements. Only in this way, can they write a logical composition. However, there is the serious problem of logical confusion in English writing of English majors. Generally speaking, the logical confusion appears mainly in two situations: one is the students' unclear use of the transitional words, the other is non-significant correlation of the content. That the students lack of analytical thinking is the main reason that causes the problem of logical confusion in students' writing.

2.1.3 The Wrong Use of English Words and Grammar

If we are in a special situation we should make certain linguistic choices based on that situation. If not, the accuracy of English can not be ensured. The improper use of words and grammatical errors are mistakes that students make easily in writing, although English majors have been learning English for many years in our country. Many students don't grasp the words accurately, and often only remember one of the most obvious Chinese translation of a word, neglecting the true meaning of the word in the given context. According to years of English teaching, it is found that the grammatical errors of English writing mainly are the incomplete or improper use of sentence constituent, the wrong use of the subjunctive mood, cleft-sentence and inversion, etc. All of these problems make students' English writing inaccurate and can not be read.

2.2 The Construction of Controlled English Writing Based on Register Theory

As a method of teaching writing, controlled writing emphasizes the accuracy of syntax, grammar and writing.

It stresses the importance of helping students develop the habit of writing the target language accurately through the "drill". The researchers believe that the degree of control in the whole process of writing is gradually reduced. That is, the initial control is for the ultimate non-control, and finally enables students to achieve the purpose of free writing. In *Techniques in Teaching Writing* (1983), Ann Raimes believes that the controlled writing method can not only be applied to the teaching of writing at the primary stage, but also can be used in the advanced stage. Although the controlled writing is traditional, it's also practical to improve students' practical writing ability on the basis of the current situation of English writing for English majors.

According to the characteristics of register theory and controlled writing, a tentative construction of controlled English writing on the basis of register theory is made, that is "Text localization -Text control-Text output" mode. According to certain requirements and norms, controlled English writing gives full play to students' initiative and creativity with the help of the teachers. It promotes students in a certain support to determine the style of language, form words, select sentence patterns and construct discourse, ultimately improving the efficiency of English writing and students' English writing ability. The controlled English writing can not only stimulate students' intrinsic interest in learning, internalize their linguistic knowledge structure, but also initiate fully students' enthusiasm. The controlled English writing mode is shown below in Figure 2.
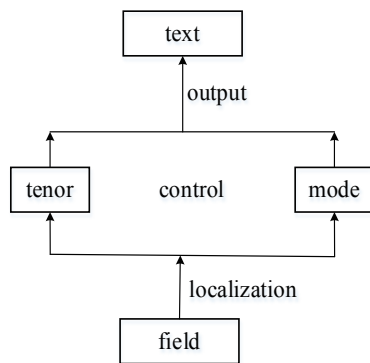

Figure 2
The Controlled English Writing Mode Based on Register Theory

2.2.1 The Standardization of English Writing Under the Guidance of the Field Variable
The standardization of English writing refers to conform to the standards and norms of native English speaking countries, and English expression habits. It is not only reflected in the vocabulary and grammar, but also in the accurate grasp of the theme of the discourse, the occasion, and the purpose. The accurate grasp of the theme of the discourse, the occasion, and the purpose makes a full display of the textual features of the text, which requires students to make sure about the theme and the purpose of writing firstly. For example, the practical English writing and research papers are different. In the writing process, students should constantly establish and strengthen the knowledge of the field, and familiarize themselves with the standardization of English writing under different fields. This is the best way to solve the problem of meaningless point of view in English majors' English writing.

2.2.2 The Appropriacy of English Writing Under the Guidance of the Tenor Variable
The social status of language users and the role of each other determine different tones of writing, and the intention of the author to use a particular style of writing. The tenor features of the text can be realized by different lexical and syntactic means. For example, simple syntactic structure, dialect and slang are usually used to reflect a more casual and intimate relationship, but the use of complex sentences and professional terms is usually expressed as a solemn and formal relationship. In order to ensure the appropriacy of writing, students should be properly controlled in terms of vocabulary, syntax and discourse. In this stage, the control of writing is primarily concerned with wording, sentence-making and paragraph, etc.. The degree of control in the process of writing is gradually reduced, ultimately aiming at promoting students to construct the right wording consciously, and explore rich sentence patterns to convey information and express feelings.

2.2.3 The Accuracy of English Writing Under the Guidance of the Mode Variable
The mode is the best way of expression that communicators hope to use according to the specific communication object and the realistic context. As a written language, the choice of language in English writing should be consistent with the topic type and the communicative roles, which are a necessary condition to ensure the coherence and accuracy of text. In the process of writing, students should make sure about language characteristics and writing norms of different styles, including rhetorical methods and the characteristics and functions of different grammatical structures. If they can't accurately understand them then use casually, it will result in severe language ambiguity and can't reach the requirements of accuracy for English writing. Therefore, only if students improve the accuracy of English use, can the output efficiency of English writing be effectively promoted.

SUMMARY

Texts arise in specific social situations and they are constructed with specific purposes by one or more speakers or writers. Register theory and the controlled English writing provide great enlightenment for English

writing. By strengthening the students' awareness of register, the controlled English writing mode on the basis of register theory helps English majors to understand different styles and features of the text, then form good writing habits, and ultimately construct macro mode of discourse. There is no doubt, however, that the initial control is for the ultimate non-control. So, in the process of English writing, students can use accumulated knowledge comprehensively to form their own unique, relatively template text mode. It will make English writing become a rule-based and controlled learning experience so as to improve students' English writing ability and confidence.

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