

## A Study of Sydney School's Genre-Based Pedagogy in Chinese College English Education

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Received 2 November 2015; accepted 8 January 2016

Published online 26 February 2016

### Abstract

To solve the dilemma faced by current college English education in China, as well as to reform and adapt to the call of the time in college English education, its future development is studied by drawing on Sydney School's genre-based pedagogy. The research finds that, in listening, guided by genre-based pedagogy students become familiar with a variety of language genres and their variants, and as a consequence they can successfully predict related information included in the language. In speaking, students led by the theory of potential genre structure could comprehend the changing principles of the three language variables, namely field, tenor, and mode. This helps students understand the overall structure of such genres in the discourse, so that they will be able to follow the general structure to open up their topics in sub-structures and sub-lines. In reading, employing genre analysis methods students master text characteristics in the general, and understand its structure and semantics in details, so as to effectively enhance their reading speed and reading quality. In writing, genre-based scaffolding pedagogy helps students achieve the purpose of "reading to learn". A systemic and effective guide is then realized through its scaffolding philosophy and carefully designed teaching steps. Ultimately, current issues concerning Chinese college English education can be comprehensively and systemically resolved by genre-based pedagogy, detailing in the four abilities, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing.

**Key words:** Chinese college English education; Systemic functional linguistics; Genre-based pedagogy

Yang, Y. L. (2016). A Study of Sydney School's Genre-Based Pedagogy in Chinese College English Education. *Studies in Sociology of Science*, 7(1), 32-38. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sss/article/view/8133> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8133>

### INTRODUCTION

In last 30 years since the Chinese reform and opening up, Chinese college English education has made remarkable progresses (Huang, 2014). But behind the prosperity and development of college English education, there still remain many problems, some being lingering long unresolved issues, some of them being the problems resulted from a lack of consensus on proper guiding theories. If these problems are not resolved in time, it would be difficult for college English education to make further breakthroughs. From different approaches, Chinese scholars have reviewed studies on college English education, covering abilities of listening (Cheng, 2009), speaking (Jiang & Li, 2009), reading (Fang, 2008), writing (Qin, 2009), and vocabulary (Xu & Li, 2007), and various other issues, such as learning strategies (Zhang & Duan, 2012), teacher development (Wen & Ren, 2010), independent study (Tang, 2013), computer-assisted language teaching (Cao, 2009), and so on. It can be said that current researches basically cover all aspects of college English education, but many problems and difficulties in college English still remains, and has not yet been effectively resolved. Therefore, the study proposes to introduce Sydney School's genre-based pedagogy, and, based an in-depth research, to seek an effective solution for Chinese college English education.

# 1. CHINESE COLLEGE ENGLISH EDUCATION

## 1.1 Research Overview

Ever since the reform and opening up, Chinese college English education has been experienced a development of over 30 years, it has been a long time that English courses in university attract largest investment, draw greatest attention, and cover largest population, and it has become a widespread concern in society (Huang, 2014). Over the past 30 years, college English education has gone through dramatic changes and achieved remarkable development, ranging from setting more appropriate syllabus and curriculum to other various aspects, such as innovating educational models, methods, content, and evaluation. At the same time, foreign language experts, scholars and teachers have actively been carrying out relevant studies, leading to numerous research results, and contributing to the practice of Chinese college English education.

However, because of some long unresolved issues, Chinese college English education still does not yield expected results (Yang, 2012). Since there is a general improvement in new college students' English ability, and human resource markets call for higher and more diverse English proficiencies, college English education need to be reexamined closely. Especially in the new century with the coming of rapid technology development and the information age, the importance of the "World English" becomes much more prominent, but Chinese college English education falls far behind for economic development and foreign exchange. The related issues, such as time-consuming and inefficient, high scores and low abilities, and dumb English, attract widespread concerns in Chinese society, resulting in a growing call for deepening English educational reform (Hong & Xu, 2011). College English educational reform has thus become a heated research topic.

## 1.2 Current Issues

Specifically, related issues in Chinese college English education could be summarized as follows:

(a) Unclear teaching objectives. A first important issue for any syllabus to be defined is teaching objectives, as it is directly related to the choice of teaching content, teaching methods and evaluation. Throughout the past 20 years, though there are various versions of the English syllabus in all levels, their teaching objectives can be described as "erratic". Taking College English Syllabus for example, it has undergone through three revisions so far with totally different teaching objectives.

(b) Confusing educational criterions. Educational criterions are often confused with the examination requirement, which interferes with daily teaching and encourages exam-oriented education. Educational criterion is the language proficiency, defined by the

syllabus that students in different levels should have after the course; examination requirement is the description of the examination model, its content, and students' language abilities. Since the examination is based on a sample of data on students' English proficiency, so it is not often a comprehensive test for students' abilities and skills. However, in the English education teachers often confuse the two standards.

(c) Widening gap between College English courses and high school English courses. Chinese college English education is based on secondary school. With establishment of English curriculum standards in basic education (especially in high school), a more appropriate transition between the college and middle school English curriculums has been a heated issue for scholars. With more school graduates going to college and taking the new curriculum, this divergence becomes an increasingly serious problem. Additionally, there is a general improvement in high school English proficiency, leading the challenge much more critical. In some places, the vocabulary in the curriculum of high school graduates is a larger one than the one for first year college students.

(d) Over emphasize on English usage. There seems an increasingly emphasize on English use, whether in English education for English or non-English majors learning to use is stressed, emphasizing how to teach students to meet the requirements of the employers, resulting in a more practical and utilitarian tendency in English education. This pragmatic view is reflected in English teaching in ways that a lot of courses, such as diplomacy, trade, information, are included in students' schedules within their limited amount of time so that English courses are reduced. Language learning is not just to master a system of symbols, taking it as a communication method; it will also develop people's mind, improve cultural literacy, and promote the comprehensive development.

(e) Over emphasize on knowledge and ignoring students' language ability. College English syllabus emphasizes to develop students' English ability. The majority of teachers also recognize the importance of education, but in classroom teaching teachers just to impart language knowledge, limited the focus of foreign language teaching to grammar and vocabulary, ignoring to develop students' ability. The difference of English education between college and middle school seems to be one that language knowledge becomes much more complex and variant in the former. In classroom teaching, teachers put too much weight on "teaching students", but fail to help them learn how to study by themselves.

(f) Poor research and methodology in textbook editing. At present, college English textbooks are flourishing, creating a competitive market, which leads to more investment and man power from various presses to upgrade their textbooks and improve their quality. However, due to the poor research and methodology

in textbooks editing, most textbook writers and editors did not receive specialized training, making ideas and methodology behind those book unsatisfactory, contributing to the dramatic differences between the textbooks and their quality.

(g) Inadequate language pedagogical theories for foreign language teachers. The current English teachers in Chinese universities generally do not have the professional studies in foreign language pedagogical theories, making their teaching more experiential and out of theoretical guidance. On the other hand newly master's and doctoral graduates do not receive specialized teaching training, holding an inadequate understanding for pedagogical theories. Even those graduated from teachers' college also face an uneven training before work, making the problems and troubles in their classroom teaching prominent.

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## 2. GENRE-BASED PEDAGOGY

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### 2.1 Background

The term "genre" is derived from Latin, originally referred to the kinds of things and comes to be widely used in the study of different literary styles (Hood, 2011). Researches on genre have a long history in the West, dating back to the study of the ancient Greeks Plato and Aristotle's debate, poetry and drama. However, such research is usually focused on the study of literary genre. In modern times, Russian linguist Bakhtin is the first one to extend literary genre to the field of linguistics. What he referred as genre was "a relatively stable type of discourse", covering from the dialogue in everyday life to poetry, drama, academic works and all other types of discourse. Started from Bakhtin, the study of genre has attracted attention of scholars from different linguistic schools, including Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Hyon (1996) conducted a comprehensive review of the three genre theories in discourse studies: a) the New Rhetoric, which is mainly associated with the National Association of Scholars; b) ESP, represented by studies of Swales (2002) and Bhatia (2014); c) The Sydney school, which defines genre in the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Christie & Martin, 2005; Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2008).

In the late 20th century, Australia was a small developing country, and like other countries were on the verge of revolution, reflected in: a) Australia was then a country of immigrants. Immigrants were mainly British criminals and early settlers brought by agricultural trade development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. b) As an industrialized country after World War II, Australia urgently needed expansion of its infrastructures, attracting the floods of workers from Europe and the Middle East. Until the 1880s, more than a third of Australians were born overseas, many of whom came from non-English speaking countries, and many

of them were rural population, basically without a basic education in school. These factors lead to the fact that there were then only half the Australian receiving middle school education, only 7% of the population covered by university education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994). Before long, primary education in Australia had undergone a series of changes. One reason was the rapid population growth had been asking for more demand for education, and on the other hand the rapid development of the industrial economy had called for an increased educated population.

Based on the above background, in 1979 Martin and his colleagues initiated *Genre-based Literacy Program* or the so called *genre-based pedagogy*, aiming to resolve the writing problems in primary schools. It was originally used to carry out action research *Disadvantaged Schools Program* in Sydney. Genre-based writing was a new language teaching methodology, achieved amazing results at the very beginning of implementation, effective not only for students in disadvantaged schools, but also those in other schools. Genre-based pedagogy thus spread fast in each primary and secondary school in South Wales, and was written in public elementary curriculum in 1994. The success of genre-based pedagogy in primary schools promoted its development at the secondary stages, implemented as *Write it Right Program* in middle school in 1991-1995. Incorporated with linguistic research and educational methodology and University of Canberra's reading strategies, genre-based pedagogy was carried out in *Reading to Learn Program*, aiming to address Australian aboriginal students' literacy education (Gray, Rose, & Cowey, 1998). Eventually, genre-based pedagogy became a full range of teaching methods in primary and secondary education, and was applied to teacher training programs in all stages (Rose, 2009, 2011).

### 2.2 Development

Sydney school's genre-based pedagogy is short for *Genre-based Literacy Pedagogy*. It is firstly advocated by Sydney school and prevalent in the Australia, designed to cultivate primary and middle school students and office staffs writing and reading abilities. The goal of this pedagogy is to respond to students' different social stratus, different family backgrounds, which cause the differences in their reading and writing abilities and school performances. It aims to improve students' reading and writing skills, enhance their social mobility, and realize educational equality and social justice. To achieve these purposes, Sydney school takes three variants into consideration, i.e. educational content, teaching methodologies and educational assessment, bases their study on genre theory and SFL theories, and gradually develops and improves genre-based pedagogy through a series of teaching and research activities. Started in 1979, Sydney school's genre-based pedagogy has gone through three stages of development in the past 30 years, which is

a progressive and gradual process. The 1980s was the first stage, focusing on writing genres in primary school; the 1990s being the second stage, the focus was the genres in different subjects in secondary school; the 20<sup>th</sup> century opened the third stage, shifted the research focus from writing to reading, aimed at designing a set of reading and writing strategies, which are applicable for all levels of students and involves indigenous children, immigrants and foreigners' language learning.

In 1979, Halliday organized *Language in Education* seminar in Sydney, opened a prelude of research on genre-based pedagogy. Before long, Martin and Rothery started *Writing Project* (1980-1985). They applied the SFL theories to analyze primary school students' essays, which were divided into different genres and deconstructed into phases (Martin & Rothery, 1980, 1981). In 1986, Martin and Rothery joined *Disadvantaged Schools Program* held by Department of Education in New South Wales, researching literacy education reform for indigenous, immigrant and working-class primary and pre-school children. The research later developed into the *Language and Social Power Project* (1986-1990), whose main task was to introduce and apply a variety of genres to the teachers and students, providing an equal opportunity for students with different family backgrounds to know and use language resources so that to realize educational and social equality. In this third stage, in addition to use of SFL theories Sydney school also drew on Vygotsky (1978) learning theory and Bernstein (2000) educational sociology theory.

In 1991, as a subproject of *Disadvantaged Schools Program*, Martin started the *Write it Right* (1991-1995) research, designed to "explore the language abilities that are required for staffs within the same department and across different industries and industrial sectors to communicate, and figure out its essential character and apply research results in high school literacy education in related subjects" (Veel, 2006, p.67). The results showed an overall interrelation between literacy education in secondary school and language proficiency in the workplace, but this correlation in middle school language education was still not clear. According to such discovery, Martin and his colleagues designed a corresponding pedagogy based on genre theory, the so-called genre-based reading/writing cycle (Rose & Martin, 2012).

In the late 20th century, Rose, together with Gray, designed *Reading to Learn Pedagogy*, based their work on a large amount of accumulated experience on teaching indigenous students reading, shifted the focus of genre-based pedagogy from writing to reading. Their approach is an extension to education cycle of genre-based pedagogy. In late 2007, Sydney school recognized problems in City University of Hong Kong's *Language Companion Course*, namely: improving writing skills by modifying errors was time-consuming and a futile effort; reviewers evaluated students' writing in a micro perspective, leading students'

ignorance in the overall structure of the essay. On the basis of *Reading to Learn*, Sydney school then initiated a specific study, *Scaffolding Literacy in Academic and Tertiary Education*.

At this point, genre-based pedagogy already has a comprehensive theoretical system. It can be summarized as follows: a new teaching philosophy, namely the interactive teaching on the basis of shared knowledge; two research priorities, namely how to use knowledge about language in language education and what kind of knowledge should be applied; three theoretical origins, namely SFL theories (Halliday's language development theory and Martin's genre theory), Vygotsky's learning theory, Bernstein's educational sociology; four developing stages related to the educational reform projects, namely *Writing Research*, *Language And Social Power*, *Write It Right*, *Reading To Learn*, and *Scaffolding Literacy In Academic And Tertiary Education*; five teaching levels, namely primary education, history, geography and science education in secondary school, tertiary education, indigenous literacy education, and adult education.

According to the Mail & Guardian Online report, genre-based pedagogy is effective for reading and writing education in all levels and various subjects, ranging from primary to university and adult education; it improves students' literary ability on the one hand, and bridges their gap in the same class at the same time (Dell, 2011). Evidences have repeatedly shown that genre-based pedagogy speeds students' reading and writing efficiency to 2-4 times, much beyond expectation (Culican, 2006, p.6; Rose & Martin, 2012, p.13).

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### 3. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

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Since the 1980s, more and more studies show that genre-based language and literacy education meets various social and learner's educational demands, and effectively help students improve academic accomplishment and all aspects of comprehensive abilities (Swales & Feak, 2004, pp.99-240). In order to solve the current issues in Chinese college English education, I draw on genre-based pedagogy, and propose appropriate strategies and measures in four skills, English listening, speaking, reading and writing respectively.

#### 3.1 Listening

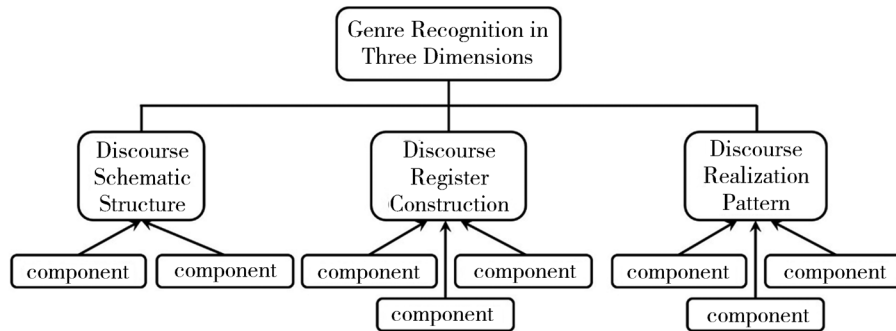
A questionnaire survey of over 600 colleges students and graduates shows that among four English skills listening is at least as important as reading, followed by speaking and writing in that order. However, in fact listening comprehension brings students great pressure, especially for language learners outside the target environment.

Genre is a step-by-step and communication-oriented process of social interaction. The purpose of communication defines genre, making certain types of discourse have substantially similar schematic structure,



which affects the choices of content in discourse and language style (Martin, 1984). In short, the genre is predictable and recurring discourse of everyday life. Prediction is an important component of language ability. In listening, if the listener can predict what to come, then he is very likely to have a better comprehension. Therefore, as long as the learner becomes familiar with the various genres and their variants, the corresponding language features such as vocabulary, grammar, structure and other information can be successfully predicted, greatly lowering listening difficulties. Genres could be

identified in three aspects (see Figure 1) (Egins, 2004). Furthermore, the realization of the different genres in discourse is different. Each genre has its own unique linguistic characteristics and genre structure (i.e. internal structure), and it is because genres are different ways of using language, and in order to achieve different communicative purposes, the speaker will choose different vocabularies, grammars and expressions. For example, when one hears “Once upon a time ...” or “Have you heard the two elephants”, he will predict that what follows will be a fairy tale or a story (Bakhtin, 1986).



**Figure 1**  
**Genre Recognition in Three Dimensions**

### 3.2 Speaking

Halliday and Hasan classify the genre into “closed” and “open” ones, and in between is a continuum. Closed genres have a small number with relatively simple configuration, such as weather reports and stock quotes reports; open genres cover a large number of a much more flexible configuration, such as daily conversation (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). College oral English education focuses more on “open genre”. Therefore, apart from guiding students to understand the changes of three language variables field, tenor and mode, according to potential genre structure teachers should also help students understand the discourse structure of the genre, which could further work to be the outline and the main source to understand discourse structure and composition to open a conversation (Sun, 2011). Taking telephone booking service genre for example. The main function of this genre is to ask for providing goods or services, including a typical configuration of six parts: Greeting, speaker confirmation, call the subject confirmation, asking for the service, contacting the service, and farewell. In teaching this genre, teachers first guide students to be familiar with this type structure of telephone booking service, and then keep them practicing, so that students can transform the potential language abilities into practical ones. In classroom education teachers can design a role-play for students, and repeat the practice with a different language field (e.g. booking air tickets), so that students can be inspired and master a certain type of genre. In oral communication, familiarity with and following

certain language genres help to enhance the abilities to construct discourse structure. This requires students to have a genre consciousness during oral training, rather than simply taking isolated words into consideration.

### 3.3 Reading

Reading plays an important role for college students that the other three language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, and writing), therefore college English teachers have long been concerned about and discussing issues relating to how to train students to understand the discourse quickly and accurately. Introducing genre analysis to reading education enables students, on the one hand, to comprehend macro textual structures, i.e. cultural context and situational context, and, on the other hand, to help them understand discourse structure and semantics in details, inspiring students and dramatically speeding and improving their reading. Currently there are three main approaches in college English reading education. The one is to focus only on teaching grammar and vocabulary, while ignoring cultural context and situational context of the text. Another concerns cultural context and situational context, but failing to educate specific language knowledge. A third way is to strike a balance of the both approaches above, but often fails due to the teachers’ limited linguistic knowledge.

SFL’s genre-based pedagogy in college English reading education is based on the text genre analysis. The entire teaching process lays the focus on understanding the cultural context and situational context of the text, knowing discourse function in social communication,

and recognizing textual meaning, interpersonal meaning and conceptual meaning of the text (Zhang, 2010). On such basis, language knowledge such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar is instructed. Researches on defining genre and genre analysis provide a reference to text-based college English reading instruction, that is to say, college English reading education must take into account various factors of genre analysis.

### 3.4 Writing

Genre-based scaffolding writing pedagogy is an important application of the theory of SFL discourse analysis, with the core being the creation and implementation of writing cycle. In the 30 years of its development, there are different versions of genre-based writing cycle, highlighted by the one designed by Rothery (1994), which is the most prominent (see Figure 2), including deconstruction, joint construction and independent construction. In the writing cycles, teachers and students work independently in deconstruction and independent construction, and create an interactive teaching and learning step in joint construction, which determines the success or the failure of genre-base writing education. The key idea of the writing cycle is that teachers help students learn to write a specific genre in a particular field, and help them have particular language patterns in target context, through constructing certain language field and context by teachers (Martin, 1999, pp.123-155). Certain language patterns instructed in deconstruction process could be applied to rewrite exercise in joint construction through interaction between teachers and students, and the results of these two processes can be extended to students' independent construction (Martin, 1999).

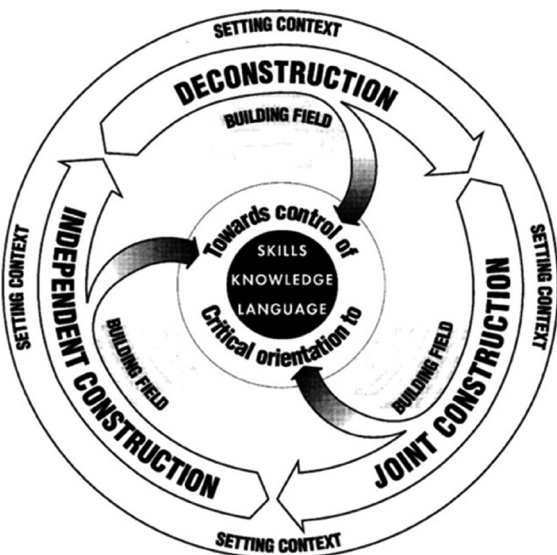


Figure 2  
 Genre-Based Writing Cycle

Genre-based pedagogy has been constantly renovated in practice. Drawing on New Vygotsky School's "scaffold"

theory, it incorporates reading with writing, and develops into scaffolding academic literacy pedagogy. Its main purpose is to promote college students' academic English proficiency, and later extended to cover English education for non-native students (Rose, 2007). This pedagogy is a further innovation and development of Rothery's genre-based teaching/learning cycle, but instead of being an entirely replaces it is an effective parallel with Rothery's version. Compared with the genre-based teaching/learning cycle, genre-based scaffolding academic literacy pedagogy treats reading education as a basic step to improve both students reading and writing skills, that is "to improve writing through reading"; it emphasizes the role of "scaffolding", running through interactions between teachers and students in education; the well-designed teaching/learning steps provide a systematic and effective guidance for reading and writing study.

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics and drawing on theories of context and potential genre structures, the paper is intended to elaborate the relationship between the genre structures and language patterns and extends its application in Chinese college English education in trying to improve English proficiency of college students in all levels. After its decades of application and renovation, genre-based pedagogy has come into being a complete and comprehensive theoretical system, and proved to have powerful applications and broad coverage. Therefore, I advocate to introduce genre-based pedagogy into Chinese college English education. Meanwhile, Chinese college students have their specific characteristics, such as uneven English abilities, huge regional differences, imbalanced teacher distributions, and diverse students' backgrounds and so on. These issues create a special context for Chinese college students, so while being introduced to the pedagogy should be further explored, practiced and improved so that it can be adjusted to Chinese specific conditions.

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