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A Meta-Analysis of Studies on Genre-Based Approach in Teaching in Chinese Academia

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Abstract Genre theory has been introduced to mainland China since 1990s; since then, there have been many researchers in Chinese academia working on this area. This meta-analysis reviews journal papers published on core journals indexed by CNKI (the biggest China Academic Journals Online Database) from 1998 to 2018, with searching keywords include Genre and English language teaching. Research results show that Chinese scholars have touched upon English skills including writing, reading and listening. This study also finds out that empirical studies on the implementation of genre-based approach to teaching are rare; most of the articles only proposed teaching models or processes, without applying them in the real classroom teaching. Hence, this review calls for more experimental research to be conducted in future to explore an appropriate way to apply genre-based approach in English language teaching in Chinese context.

Keywords: Genre-based approach (GBA), Meta-analysis, English language teaching (ELT)

1 Introduction

English language teaching in the world has experienced ~~the~~ transformation from Grammar-Translation Approach to Audio-Lingual and to Communicative language teaching. Liu (2007) demonstrates that grammar-translation approach to English language teaching is primarily focused on the teaching of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary; Audio-Lingual approach stresses on the learning of language elements and rules so that students can make grammatically correct sentences; Communicative language teaching which ~~was~~ originated from modern applied linguists represented by MAK Halliday emphasizes ~~on~~ the social functional of grammar and communicative purpose of language. Hence language learning is not about “construction of language”, rather it is about “construction of meaning”.

English education in China undergoes similar transformation. Teachers are more aware of the form of language, such as grammar, vocabulary, syntax, than the context and communicative purpose of language. The purpose of teaching is to make students know how to make grammatically correct sentences. So after several years of learning, Chinese students still lack knowledge on content, text organization, and they have no awareness of read-writer relationship in English writing (Sang, 2017) Many scholars blamed this situation on problematic teaching methodology, so they started to look for better ways of teaching students English language.

Genre-Based Approach (GBA) has been introduced to China since 30 years ago. This approach emphasizes ~~on~~ the social function and meaning making purpose of language and it links texts with surrounding contexts, and social purposes. There have been many scholars working on genre theory and GBA in Chinese context. It is the intent of this review to know how much scholars have done on this topic in the Chinese context.

2 Objectives

The objectives of this research is to know how much the Chinese scholars have looked into the application of GBA to language teaching. This paper intends to find out the answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent GBA to ELT has been studied in mainland Chinese context?
2. Has GBA being reported effective in improving students English language competency?

3 Methodology

There are three steps for collecting data needed for this paper. Step One: full-text journal articles published on the core journals indexed by CNKI were collected using combination of searching keywords: “Genre + English” and “Genre analysis” + English respectively. In this stage, 97 articles were selected; Step Two: All these articles were examined closely to identify those on the application of genre pedagogy in English language teaching. In this stage, 35 articles were selected. Step Three: the 35 chosen articles were categorised according to the context of study, language skills investigated, empirical study with control-experimental group, empirical study without control-experimental group and teaching models or processes applied to find out to what extent GBA has been studied.

4 Results

Research Question1: To what extent GBA to ELT has been studied in mainland Chinese context?

The development of GBA in teaching can be divided into two periods of time. In the first period, from 1999 to 2011, researchers mainly focused on the application of GBA in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) genres such as business English, scientific papers and other general genres like expository essays. In the second period, from 2011 to the present, researchers have started to apply GBA to teaching academic genres, including the writing of English abstract, literature review and research articles (P. Han & Hou, 2012; Wu & Cui, 2016; Xu, 2011) This research trend incidentally coincides with the transition from general English teaching to English for specific purpose teaching in mainland China.

As for the skills discussed in the articles, most of them only focus on teaching English writing skills. Chen (1999) analysed undergraduate business trade majors’ written works on business letters, finding out majority of students did not grasp the schematic structures of this genre and lacked the knowledge on how to realize particular purposes in a set social context through language. He argued genre-based approach could familiarize students with recurrent linguistic patterns accepted by particular discourse communities, and suggested teachers should help students to understand how moves are realized through particular lexico-grammatical patterns and macro text organization. Wu and Cui (2016) adopted genre-based approach in teaching literature review writing, revealing that students grasped some of the moves obligatory to this genre. Ji (2004) illustrated how genre-based and rhetoric contrastive approach can be implemented in classroom teaching and believed this approach could familiarize students with the differences between English and Chinese language in composing particular genre, so that students can improve English writing performance. Some other articles discussed the development of overall English skills through genre-based teaching approach (J. L. Han, 2001; Yin, 2008; Z. Zhang & Li, 2008). Some articles discussed the development of English reading skills through genre-based approach (Li, 2002; L. J. Liu, 2009; Y. Liu, 2014). And only one article discussed the cultivation of English listening skills (You, 2017). However, there is no research on speaking skills development.

In terms of research methodology adopted, among 35 articles collected, only 10 articles are empirical studies on the effectiveness of genre-based approach in teaching English with 9 of them adopting one group pre-post-test approach.

RQ2: Has GBA being reported effective in improving students English language competency?

Generally speaking, GBA is effective in improving students’ genre knowledge on particular genres taught in classroom setting and they obtained positive attitude towards this teaching approach. Huang (2014) tested the effectiveness of Sydney School’s genre approach to teaching job application letter and curriculum vitae among 50 English majors, finding that this approach increased students’ awareness on reader-writer relationship, purpose of writing and recurrent lexico-grammatical patterns of these two genres. Similarly, Zhang & Xu (2011) used a writing test which include questions on rhetoric patterns, genre knowledge, and two genre writing tasks to test the effectiveness of genre analysis approach to writing teaching, and results showed that this approach improved students’ overall performance, skills on text organization, content, strategy. Interview data collected from participants proved this approach guided students to grasp the macro-level of text organization; they start to be aware of target readers and explore how language were organized to realize its functions. Research conducted by Yang (2001) also uncovered that if implemented appropriately, genre approach can enhance students’ genre awareness. Among all of these articles, there is only one of them employing control and experimental groups. Liang and Kang (2010) compared the effectiveness of product approach with genre approach using control experiment groups; students’ scores before and after the intervention showed that students in genre approach improved more than those in product approach; besides, written texts wrote by students in the two groups after the intervention revealed that student in experimental group exceed in using abstractive nouns, noun phrases, vocabulary.

Most of the studies only use one group pre-post-test approach to test the effectiveness of genre-approach to writing teaching (Huang, 2014; Ren & Zhang, 2014; Wang & Sun, 2010; Wu & Cui, 2016; Yang, 2001).

Moreover, some of the researches did not mention the details of research methodology adopted and instrument for data collection, so the reliability of the study decreased.

5 Conclusion

Researches on genre-based approach to teaching English language skills in Chinese context proved to be vibrant. There are many scholars who researched the application of GBA in different contexts. However, most of the researches merely elaborated the feasibility and advantages of GBA in the development of English skills from theoretical illustration. Moreover, these researches were conducted in tertiary level education, especially in the field of English writing teaching; besides, most of the empirical studies adopted one group pre-post-test approach, so the effectiveness of GBA compared with traditional product approach in the development of English skills cannot be concluded from these researches. Hence this study suggests that more researches in this field need to be done in the future to explore the development of students' English skills through GBA.

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