Academic Writing and Teaching: Prof. Fang Zhihui's Lectures in Guangzhou

Li Jing[1], Zeng Lei[2]

[1]School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China

[2]School of International Studies, Sun Yat-sen University, Zhuhai, China

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Abstract: This paper reviews the main ideas of Prof. Fang Zhihui's lectures in Guangzhou, who achieved tenure in the University of Florida. It covers the genre, steps, techniques and strategies, and assessment criteria of academic writing with a view to giving enlightenment to the teaching of academic writing in our country at the present stage.

1. Introduction

Guangzhou, in June, had already entered into a scorching summer, however, Prof. Fang zhihui's lectures in Guangzhou was like a wisp of cool breeze, which was refreshing and enlightened us.

From 2017 to 2018, Prof. Fang Zhihui lectured at School of Foreign Languages, School of International Studies and Xinhua College of Sun Yat-sen University, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, and Jinan University. In view of the dilemma faced by academic writing and teaching in domestic universities, Prof. Fang Zhihui analyzed the genre, steps, techniques and strategies, and assessment criteria of academic writing based on the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics in depth. Teachers and graduate students, from universities in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Zhuhai and mainland, participated in the workshop and highly praised Prof. Fang: "A learned scholar of great attainments, versed in both Chinese and Western learning," "Having an international perspective and understanding China's national conditions and culture, and is an indispensable and important pillar for the development of English teaching in China." The main points of Prof. Fang's Lectures are summarized as follows [1].

2. Academic Writing: Genres, Steps, Skills and Strategies

According to Prof. Fang, academic writing "is not a monolithic construct, but a continuum with many different varieties", including journal articles (for researchers or practitioners), grant proposals, technical reports and manuals, policy briefs, campus memos, conference presentations (ppt slides), commentaries, notes, and reflections. Prof. Fang extracted and compared several academic discourses in different disciplines and explained the linguistic features of academic writing through group discussions [2].

First, academic writing is argumentative. It has the features of logicality, well-supported argument, consistency, nominalization and high lexical density. From the linguistic point of view, nominalization and high lexical density are more prominent features [3]. According to Halliday and Martin (1993, cited in Fang, 2016), lexical density of general written texts is higher than that of spontaneous speeches and can be much higher than that of specialized texts in academic disciplines. Prof. Fang (2012) pointed out that although academic texts are usually lexis dense, their differences in vocabulary and grammar patterns contribute to this density, such as technical terms of scientific text, evaluative words of historical text and symbols of mathematical text [4]. Structural texts of these different disciplines develop the argument in a manner which is consistent with the norms and values accepted by particular social practices.

Second, academic writing is an interactive dialogue with readers. It should not only express the author's own views, but also present those ideas as a response to some other scholars or academic groups, conveying yes or no attitudes and forming an interactive dialogue between the author and the reader [5]. Academic writing requires consulting others rather than thinking alone, and using

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what others say as a sounding board for your own views with three main steps: introducing what others say, presenting your ideas and connecting every part.

When it comes to introducing what others say, four writing strategies - paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing and quoting, were introduced by Prof. Fang. Paraphrasing other people's points of view needs you to read and understand the text first, then to list the main points of view, then to change the structure of the text to rewrite the main ideas in complete sentences, and then to incorporate your notes into a piece of continuous writing [6]. Summarizing needs to focus on the aspects of the source text that are relevant to your writing purpose, and to express and simplify the source material accurately in the author's own language. In addition, when outlining other people's views, it is necessary not to use only ordinary signal verbs (e.g., say, state), but to pay special attention to the use of different, vivid, and precise signal verbs (e.g., complain, protest, argue, challenge, chastise, urge, advocate, admit and emphasize) [7]. In contrast to paraphrasing and summarizing, synthesizing is a more macro summary of the views of relevant academic scholars. Based on Prof. Fang's view, it is important to check the relevance and accuracy of the author's notes and source materials while synthesizing the views of others. Prof. Fang vividly employed the composition of sandwiches to explain the three components of quoting, as shown in Figure 1.

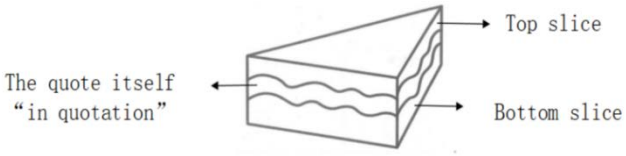

Figure 1 Quotation sandwich

Fig.1. Quotation sandwich

As Figure 1 shows, the first part of quoting is the top slice of a sandwich, i.e. lead-in of the quote statement; the second part is the main interlayer of the sandwich, i.e. the quote itself; the third part is the bottom slice of the sandwich, i.e. explanation of the importance and purpose of the quote chosen by the author. In addition, it is necessary to avoid monotonous quote expression, which is stated by Prof. Fang, and to introduce flexible use of a variety of different quoted expression patterns, such as:

According to Banks (2011),

Paradis (1987) reported

Similar claims were made by Shapin (1984)

Secondly, in regards to expressing the author's own views, Prof. Fang pointed out that there are four components: responding to what others say, distinguishing your ideas from others' ideas, planting a "naysayer", and saying why it matters, as shown in Figure 2.

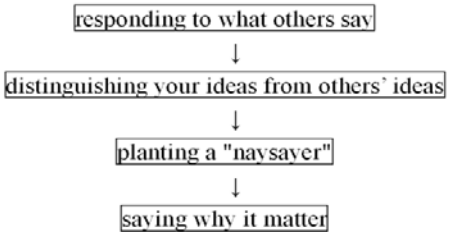

Fig.2. Expressing the author's own views

Responding to others' views is divided into approval and opposition. On the one hand, do more than simply echo views you agree with. It is necessary to present something new and fresh. There are usually several moves for agreeing: (1) Pointing out some unnoticed evidence or line of reasoning that supports "they say" that the author has not mentioned; (2) Citing some corroborating personal experience or a situation not mentioned in "they say"; (3) Providing a more comprehensible version of "they say" to help readers better understand "they say"; (4) Interpreting what needs to be better understood; (5) Pointing out inconspicuous implications of "they say". On the other hand, find something you disagree with through analysis, interpretation, explanation,

reasoning, and examples. You can state that what “They Say”: (1) Does not take relevant factors into account; (2) Is based on imperfect or incomplete evidence; (3) Rests on suspicious assumptions; (4) Uses deficient logic; (5) Is paradoxical; (6) Ignores the real issue; (7) Is not news worthy (the “duh” move); (8) Actually supports what “I Say” (the “twist” move).

After the author has made some of his or her own arguments and begins to imagine possible objections to them, a “naysayer” appears. Embracing the “naysayer” increases (does not undermines) the author's credibility. It is suggested to stay with a naysayer’s discussion for a few sentences or a full paragraph in order to treat that point of view fairly and to answer them persuasively; then, to present the author's argument, explain why it is important, point out who has a stake in the argument; and finally to elucidate what the larger consequences and real-world applications of this argument are [8].

And the last point comes to connecting issues. Academic writing is not a matter of piling up information or observation, but about building a sustained argument. The best writing establishes a sense of momentum and direction by making explicit connections among their different parts so that what is said in one sentence (or paragraph) both sets up what is to come and is clearly informed by what has already been said.

In addition, Prof. Fang outlined five common strategies for connecting parts: using transitional terms, adding pointing words, developing a set of key terms and phrases (including synonyms and antonyms), repeating yourself (but with a difference), and using punctuation. He stressed the need to avoid overusing transitions, so you need to take the time to read drafts carefully and eliminate unnecessary transitions. Seasoned authors sometimes omit explicit transitions, but only because they rely heavily on other types of cohesive devices, such as nouns, verbs, prepositions, and clauses. You can also repeat the same thing you have just said, but in a slightly different way that avoids sounding monotonous [9]. Do not shy away from repeating your point of view. Instead, you have to repeat yourself in a varied and interesting enough ways so that you can advance your argument without tedious. To this end, Prof. Fang also proposed the “meta-commentary” method, which can be used in the following situations:

(1) To ward off potential misunderstandings
- My point is not …, but …
- X is concerned less with … than with …
(2) To elaborate on previous ideas
- To put it another way, …
- What X really means is …
(3) To move from a general claim to a specific example
- For example, …
- X, for instance, demonstrates …
(4) To indicate that a claim is more, less or equally important
- Even more important, …
- But above all, …. Finally, …
- This chapter starts with … It then presents… Finally, it weighs the evidence …
(6) To explain a claim when you anticipate objections
- Although some readers may object that …, I would answer that …
(7) To guide readers to your most general point
- Ultimately, then, my goal is to demonstrate that …
- In sum, then, …

3. Beyond rubrics: Using Functional Language Analysis to Evaluate Student Writing

Prof. Fang pointed out that there are two main problems in the commonly used assessment criteria of academic writing at home and abroad: First, it is neither exact nor objective, that is, it does not specify what ‘high degree of craftsmanship’ entails, nor does it elaborate on what it means to be ‘innovative’, ‘effective’, ‘attractive’, ‘expressive’, ‘persuasive’ and ‘creative’. In fact, many teachers, lacking training, often focus on more obvious lexicogrammatical errors in writing, such as

spelling, capitalization, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, tense, and idiomatic expressions (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Martin, 1996; Schleppegrell, 2004; Fang & Wang, 2009). Second, it ignores grammatical functions. For example, the rubric calls for sentence variations, but does not elaborate on which variant is appropriate for which type of text. Researchers (e.g., Martin, 1989; Schleppegrell, 2004; Fang & Wang, 2009) have demonstrated that diverse lexicalgrammatical features are utilized in different genres and registers to enable a text to express its meaning in a specific context.

For this reason, Prof. Fang, based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), proposed the approach - Functional Language Analysis (FLA) (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008, 2010). The metalanguage in SFL, a language for talking about language, offers an array of analytical tools for evaluating texts and their effectiveness in meaning making, which makes visible the varied ways language constructs texts in different genres and registers. After outlining the theoretical basis of FLA, Prof. Fang expounded the effects of this approach in evaluating students' writing and in guiding the teaching of writing.

According to the SFL (See Halliday, 1985, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, 2014), every use of language involves the four meanings: experiential, logical, interpersonal and textual. It is the grammatical systems of language that enable the text to mean what it does. Because of the realization relationship between meanings and grammar, functional analysis of language grammar in a text can reveal how meaning is constructed in the text. Table 1 shows the strategies of FLA, which are appropriate for evaluating the three key areas of writing - content, organization, and style - that are often the focus of writing assessment and teaching

Table 1 Writing components, evaluation questions, and functional language analysis strategies(Fang & Wang, 2009)

Writing Components	Evaluation Questions	Functional Language Analysis Strategies
Content	* What is going on in this text? * What does the author tell us?	* Analyse transitivity patterns (e.g., participants, processes, circumstances)
Organisation	* How does the author organise this text? * Is the text well organised? * By what logic is the text produced?	* Analyse Themes/Rheme patterns * Analyse cohesion patterns * Analyse clause types and clause combining strategies
Style/Tone/Voice	* How does the author of this text interact with the reader? * What is the author's perspective? * What is the tone of the text?	* Analyse mood * Analyse modality * Analyse word choices and other appraisal resources

As Table 1 shows, if teachers want to understand the content of the text, which concerns the experiential meaning, they can analyze the transitivity patterns in the text. If teachers are concerned with evaluating the way a text is organized, which involves both textual and logical meanings, they can examine the Theme/Rheme structure and cohesion patterns, as well as clause types and clause combining strategies in the text. If teachers are interested in the style of writing (e.g., how authors interact with readers), which is part of the interpersonal meaning, they can analyze mood, modality, word choices, and other appraisal resources.

In short, FLA enables teachers to examine the advantages and disadvantages of students' writing, and to design effective interventions to meet students' needs. This approach overcomes the ambiguity and subjectivity of the commonly used assessment tools, enabling teachers to identify the special language requirements of students in academic writing. Teachers need to fully understand the linguistic features of different genres and registers in order to effectively use FLA for evaluation and instruction.

4. Conclusion

In sum, Prof. Fang Zhihui from the University of Florida has brought students and teachers a splendid academic feast with simple but profound content and easy-to-understand language, integrating theory with practice. His lectures expound the strategies and assessment criteria of academic writing, which has an enlightening effect on the teaching of academic writing in our

country.

Acknowledgement

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Course Textbooks:

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2) Swales, J.M. & Feak, C.B. (2018). Academic writing for graduate students: Essential skills and tasks (3rd ed.). Ann Arbor, MIL University of Michigan Press.

3) Jalongo, R. & Saracho, O. (2016). Writing for publication: Transitions ans tools that support scholars' success. New York: Springer.

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