

Analysis of ESP Course Design in College English Based on genre Theory

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Abstract: In the new term of College English reform recently, it is clearly addressed that ESP is an integral part of College English curriculum. Under this new situation, it is vital to make a sound ESP course design for promoting an overall practice of College English teaching. Since genre has been the focus of current ESP research, it is adopted as underlying theories to analyze ESP course design in College English from the aspects of needs analysis, teaching objectives and methods.

1. Introduction

ESP (English for Specific Purposes) is a branch of English Language Teaching. It refers to English teaching related to a specific occupation or subject, and is an English course offered according to the specific purposes and needs of learners, aiming at cultivating students' communicative ability to use English in a certain working environment (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

In our country, college English is a compulsory course for non-English major undergraduates. The College English Teaching Guide (2017) issued in the new term of College English reform clearly states that College English curriculum can be divided into three categories according to the teaching contents: General English, English for Specific Purposes and English of General Education. It is the first time in the official document for college English teaching to use the term "English for Specific Purposes." This definitely indicates that ESP is an indispensable part of college English teaching. Under such a new situation, how to scientifically design ESP courses is an important factor in promoting the overall development of college English teaching.

2. The Theoretical Basis of Designing ESP Courses Based on genre: Genre and ESP Research

After more than half a century of development, ESP has now entered the sixth phase -- genre research (Bhatia, V.K & Gotti, M.2006, cited from Chen Bing, 2014). Genre is an Abstract way of language application, commonly recognized by a community or a society. It is a kind of language communication activity that people want to achieve a communicative goal (Pang Jixian, 2009).

In the field of applied linguistics, there are generally three approaches to genre's research (Woodrow, 2018). The first is the systemic functional linguistics research method, commonly known as the Australian Sydney School. This method regards grammar as a source of generating meanings, and discourse as a result of a semantic choice in a social context, focusing on the study of language symbols and language functions (Pang Jixian, Ye Ning, 2011). The second method is the New Rhetoric School (known as the North American school). The school attaches great importance to the social and cultural context where genre's generation, circulation and acceptance occur, and focuses on genre's social context attributes (Chen Liping, 2009). The third method is just ESP method. Its main study objects are academic and professional passages and discourses, such as academic papers, academic courses and legal documents (Zhang Delu, 2002). The studies of genre in ESP are dynamic and multileveled. The classical CARS (Create a Research Space) model, for instance, proposed by Swales (1990) puts forward the concepts of move and step. It means that one genre's discourse is usually composed of several moves, and one move includes several steps. Hyon (2018) further explained that different genre types have different steps, which is similar to different dance types have different dance steps-that is known as "dance analogy". Meanwhile, the studies of genre in ESP is not linear and static. Recognized as a social activity, for example, genre types may

change according to different communication needs.

Genre's development in ESP research is divided into three phases (Hyon, 2018): (1) pre-genre study (1960s-1970s). The studies on this stage lied in analyzing texts from scientific and technology English (sci-tech English). The grammar items of texts, e.g., vocabulary and syntax or rhetorical purposes of grammar and discourse organization were emphasized. However, according to Hyon (2018) these studies were not strictly real genre research but a basis for future genre studies in ESP field.; (2) Early genre work (1980s-1990s). This stage, based on the genre theories proposed by Swales and Tarone, stressing on analyzing grammar in a particular genre text (e.g. passive voice in sci-tech English or present perfect tense in biochemical discourse) or analyzing genre organization and content as moves. This stage is regarded as the initial of genre studies in ESP; (3) Centrality of genre (1990s-present). It emphasizes extension of the early genre theory, such as the profound understanding of the complexity of communicative purposes, the relationship between genre and speech communities and the multiple metaphors of genre. At the same time, course design and textbook development based on genre have become the focus of this stage.

All in all, it can be seen that the relationship between genre and ESP is mutually reinforcing. ESP is a method and medium for genre study, and in turn genre study can have great impact in guiding ESP teaching.

3. Enlightenment of Genre Study on ESP Course Design in College English

Course design is a complex concept, “there is no a commonly-recognized definition yet” (Sheng Shengjiang, 2012: 80). In the field of ESP research, many scholars at home and abroad have made descriptions on ESP courses design (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudlly, 1998; Lindy, 2018; Shan Shengjiang, 2012; Guo Jianjing, 2012; Yan Ling, 2011). Although these descriptions are different, it is generally believed that course design includes some basic elements such as needs analysis, teaching objectives, teaching content, teaching methods and teaching evaluation. The following hence would base on genre to analyze ESP course design stressing on need analysis, teaching objectives and teaching methods.

4. Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is the backbone of ESP teaching. Hence it is the first step in the design of an ESP course.

Needs analysis mainly includes three aspects: current needs, target needs and learning needs. “Current needs”, also known as current situational needs, refer to the current language level of learners and current conditions of course learning; “target needs” suggest the communication situations that learners may encounter in the future. They include the social and cultural environment, the working environment and the requirements of the specific environment for the learners and the specific psychological state that may be brought to the learners in the future work. For “learning needs”, they mean to analyze what skills and knowledge learners lack or need to learn first, and what learning methods they prefer, etc. Therefore, the purpose of ESP needs analysis is to find out what learners need in order to operate in the target communicative situation based on contrasting their current communicative ability with that in the future work (Shan Shengjiang, 2012)

The design of needs analysis is a complex process. It can be generally carried out through testing, questionnaire, interview and field survey (Zhang Li, 2016; Shu Dingfang, 2004). In genre-based needs analysis, the key is to identify and collect the typical genre text types that learners may encounter in the target communicative context. These texts may be written or spoken. Researchers can use different methods to collect data. For example, they can collect discourses from students, teachers and administrative personnel by designing questionnaires and interviews. By doing so, the researchers can assume and analyze in those discourses the language features that learners will face and the language skills that they need to master in the future working situation. At the same time, it is also necessary to investigate the groups that are using this particular genre text in real setting

when needs analysis is done. The people of this group have formed a specific genre communication community, and the genre texts obtained from this community are real and dynamic. These genre texts can be compared with those currently used by the learners, so as to find out the gaps in between and determine the learners' learning needs. By such needs analysis based on genre, researchers and teachers can help learners about languages and skills they need in the future working and finally achieve effective communication.

5. Underlying principle based on genre to determine ESP Course Categories and Teaching Objectives

Hyon (2018) suggests that "genre acquisition" and "genre awareness" should be considered when classification of ESP courses and teaching objectives are determined. Russell & Fisher (2009) distinguishes and defines the two concepts. The former involves learning a specific genre in order to recognize it and reproduce it according to its conventional forms and functions. While the latter, on the other hand, emphasizes more global knowledge about genre concerning general terms rather than skill in any one particular genre.

For ESP courses in College English, the Guide (2017) stipulates that the courses should include English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Vocational Purposes (EOP). EAP can be classified into English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). EAP, as the name suggest, aims at academic research, while EOP emphasizes to satisfy vocational needs with distinctive trait of job training. As for the two branches EGAP and ESAP, Jordon (1997) described that the former stresses on the commonality in ESP learning, that is, learning common knowledge and skills about various subjects, e.g. taking notes in English, listening to lectures, finding literature, writing papers, and attending international conferences; while the latter focuses on mastering English language skills required for a particular industry, e.g. Specific vocabulary and language structure for the industry, and also includes the industry culture.

Therefore, when developing ESP courses at a college, the categories of ESP, that is, EAP or EOP should be determined first and then the objectives of the courses would be determined. The recognition of genre acquisition and genre awareness may help for that. In other word, if the purpose of ESP learning is genre acquisition, EOP courses would be considered to open to learners. While if the purpose is to cultivate the genre awareness of the learners, EAP courses are more inclined to open. This thus provides a theoretical basis for choosing the categories of ESP courses and determining the objectives of an ESP course.

6. Choice of Teaching Methods

The choice of teaching methods has always been the focus in ESP research. Since ESP is a branch of ELT, many teaching methods of ELT have an impact on ESP teaching, e.g. grammar-translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, situational method and communicative language teaching approach, even including more esoteric methods such as The Silent way, Suggestopedia and Total Physical Response(TPR) (Yan Ling, 2011; Anthony, 2018). As genre has become the focus of current ESP research, the methods of genre for ESP teaching are bound to stand out of other methods. Sunny (2018) believes there are four genre-based approaches to ESP classroom teaching. They are genre-focused, theme-focused, project-focused and site-focused

6.1 Genre-focused

This method suggests that an ESP course is organized explicitly around specific genres, e.g. Nurse English. The goal of classroom teaching is to enable students to learn various skills about the genre texts. Also, teachers can design classroom activities and exercises accordingly. For example, applying Swale's CARS model to analyze the genre texts so that students can familiarize the main features of the genre texts of this type, and reproduce and use them in future working situations.

6.2 Theme-focused

Theme-focused approach, unlike the genre-specific approach which emphasizes specific genre texts, would organize each course unit revolving around a particular topic. This allows teachers the freedom to choose different types of genre texts but within a topic. Therefore, students can reach out to the broader genre texts to enhance their genre acquisition for one hand and cultivate their genre awareness for the other hand.

6.3 Project-focused

As the name implies, such a teaching method is to set up a project as a teaching task. Students can complete the task individually, in small groups or as a whole class. This design is not exclusive with genre-focused or theme-focused approaches. The difference is that in this project-focused course, the genre work and thematic content should always serve the overarching project. In other words, students should consciously create corresponding genre texts around a project and finally complete it and show results.

6.4 Site-focused

This approach suggests that an ESP course can be built around real world sites outside of the course itself. The transfer can be an integration of one ESP course with another, which can be either a professional course or a general English course. This method is called “linked courses”. In such a merge, the other course serves as a site that can motivate much of the work in the ESP. Moreover, because this teaching method requires teachers of ESP and the other course to cooperate with each other, it can also promote the professional development of teachers.

Second, the transfer of a “site” may also be “off-campus”. In other words, students can leave the school and go to some of government and business, or community organizations to reflect on how their service experience relates to the course. It means that the students can be highly motivated because they are in a real context where they can promote their genre learning by producing texts of various kinds for the sites. However, such a learning method may be time and energy consuming for it requires coordination of various departments. It also involves the problems such as transportation and funding. Therefore, this “service learning” method can also be achieved through the computerized Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). In a VLE system, although students are in a simulated work scene, they need to work according to the rules of the real world. Take a virtual business company as an example. When students enter the system, they need to go to work on time and receive real tasks every day, such as sending and receiving e-mails, convening regular meetings, writing commercial papers, designing advertisement for customers, etc. This method is called “site simulation”.

It can be seen that genre teaching method has various forms. The core is to make students realize the characteristics of different genre texts and learn to apply genre norms for re-creation. Besides, the practice of genre-based teaching method in ESP course can help students understand genre study is not only a language construction but a social construction. For ESP course in College English, the theme-focused and project-focused methods are more in line with the characteristics of EGAP courses. If an ESP course is offered, the genre-focused approach will be more practical. For EOP courses, the service-learning and site-simulation teaching methods of site-focused approach are undoubtedly a good choice, while the linked-course method is more suitable for EAP. Of course, we should be aware that there is no absolute distinction between these methods, and it should be based on the type of ESP courses offered and the specific training objectives. The teaching methods should be selected flexibly according to the hardware and software condition of the course. As Anthony (2018:113) puts it, “the choice of ESP teaching methods should be eclectic.”

7. Conclusion

As the focus of current ESP research, genre has many implications for the design of College English ESP courses. In the current situation of College English teaching, genre can be applied as

the underlying theories to guide ESP course design with respects of needs analysis, teaching objectives and teaching methods, in order to promote the overall development of college English teaching.

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