Rationales for Discourse-based English Teaching and Connotation of Discourse Competence in Senior Middle Schools

Yi LUO

School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Ocean University, China

ABSTRACT: *Discourse-based teaching is an important approach to cultivate discourse competence, which is a vital component of key competencies of English subject. This paper examines the definitions of discourse, discourse knowledge and discourse competence. Then the paper explores the rationales for discourse-based teaching, and finally it discusses the connotation of discourse competence to provide theoretical bases for the implementation of discourse-basedEnglish teaching in senior middle schools in China.*
KEYWORDS: *Rationale, connotation, discourse competence, discourse-basedEnglish teaching.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse-based teaching has become a leading topic in the reform of English teaching in middle schools nowadays; therefore, many teachers are exploring and trying to carry out discourse-based teaching. However, the discourse-based Englishteaching in middle schools in China is probably still in its infancy, which could not be called the real discourse-based language teaching approach, only on the basis of the improvement of the traditional teaching model, not the reform (Cheng Xiaotang,2005), and its research scope is also mainly focused on the reform of the method of discourse-based teaching, lacking in-depth and systematic study of the discourse-based teaching rationale and connotation. In view of this, this paper tries to put forward the rationales of discourse-based English teaching and explain its connotation, so as to deeply understand the necessity of developing discourse-based English teaching in middle schools, promote the understanding of the connotation of discourse-based teaching, and finally improve the effectiveness of discourse-based English teaching.

II. Rationalesfor Discourse-basedEnglish Teaching

Discourse, also called text, is the language unit of expressing meaning, including oral discourse and written text, which is a common form of language use. Discourse knowledge is about how the discourse is constructed, how the discourse expresses meanings and how people use the discourse in the process of communication. Learning discourse knowledge is the basis for the development of language use ability (Ministry of Education of PRC,2018:26-27), which is the basis for the formation of discourse consciousness, the grasp of discourse structure, and the improvement of discourse interpretation and construction ability, that is, discourse ability. At present, discourse-based English teaching has become a teaching approach advocated and carried out by academic circles, which reveals the return of English teaching to science and inclusiveness. The implementation of discourse-based teaching has its full theoretical basis, including discourse theoretical motivation, systemic functional linguistic motivation , the view of "language as discourse", language competence frameworks and curriculum standards.

1. Rationale for discourse theory

Discourse theory discussed here is anumbrella termthat includes both discourse analysis and text linguistics. Discourse theory studies language in communication, which deals with the relationship between language and its use situation (i.e.context)(Huang Guowen,2001:6), which includes both the form and function of text and the process of generation and interpretation of texts (Liu Chendan,1999:8). In fact, from the beginning, discourse theory is closely related to applied linguistics, and an important field of applied linguistics research is language teaching. In the 1980s and 1990s, many works have discussed how to apply the research results of discourse analysis to language teaching. These works attempt to illustrate the following points to language teachers:(1) the basic unit of language is not a sentence or vocabulary, but a discourse;(2) language teaching should help students to understand language, learn language and use language from a discourse perspective; and (3) spoken and written languages are both common and different. Language teaching should pay equal attention to spoken and written language. Meanwhile,language education researchers (e.g.Hatch,1992) have realized that language teaching should not stay at phonetic, lexical and sentential levels, but should rise to the level of discourse (McCarthy &Carter,2004, Cheng Xiaotang guide:2-3). Liu Chendan (1999:274-278)

proposed a language teaching strategy based on "prediction, cloze filling, generalization, discussion and guidance rewriting" to highlight the text. It can be seen that discourse theory breaks through the limitation of sentences and studies the language in practical use from the perspective of discourse division, which provides theoretical support for the implementation of discourse level teaching.

2. Rationale for Systemic functional linguistics

Based on the analysis of how contextual factors affect the choice of language system, Halliday, founder of systemic functional linguistics, found the relationship between three contextual variables (field, tenor, mode) and three metafunctions (interpersonal function, ideational function, textual function). From the perspective of language use, he proposed that language has three functions: cognitive function, the function of establishing and maintaining human relationship and the function of linking thread. He believes that language is the system of expressing meaning, not the system that produces structures. He proposed that linguistics can analyze linguistic units abovesentences:discourse. Halliday looks at language as a social symbol, a resource that people purposefully use to express meanings in the context. "Regardinglanguage as socio-semiotics" means "interpreting language within the sociocultural context, while culture itself is explained by semiotic words. Language emphasizes both social structures and systems and makes them symbolic." Halliday's theories and approacheson the relationship between language and social culture not only involve system and function, but also include:context, discourse, register, language acquisition, cognition and applicable linguistics. Systemic functional linguist Hasan's theory of generic structure potential, as well as Martin's Appraisal Theory have great influence on language education (Hu Zhuanglin ,2008).

Obviously, systemic functional linguistics studies discourse systematically and deeply, and its research contents and paradigms have important theoretical value for the implementation of discourse-based teaching.

3. Rationale for the View of "Language as Language"

The view ofLanguage is the basic view of the whole language system. The view of language teaching is understanding, viewpoints and attitudes people have towards the essence, methods, patterns and other elements of educational activities, which finally forms the theory of language teaching (Zhang Zhifu ,2011:47-60). The view of language influences the view of language teaching, that is, a certain view of language leads tothe corresponding view of language teaching. M.McCarthy,&R.Carter (2004) put forward the view of language "language as discourse" in his book *Language as Discourse: Perspectives for Language Teaching* and mentioned" discourse-based language teaching approach "many times. From a new perspective, they explain language and language education, and think that language is discourse, and can not be regarded as a layer of language(McCarthy &Carter,2004：105) . The core idea of "language as discourse" is to research and describe the characteristics of language and linguistic patterns throughout the text, but it should not be confined to words, clauses, and sentences (ibid,1). Conversely, grammatical and lexical knowledge should include how they produce discourse in linguistic forms; in other words, linguistic competence can not be divorced from textual competence (ibid,174). This discourse-based view of language focuses on the complete spoken and written language, as well as the sociocultural context of language use. Based on the view of language of "language as discourse ", McCarthy &Carter put forward the view of language teaching of "discourse-based language teaching approach". The main point is that pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar are all integral parts of the discourse, and they all play an important role in organizing the discourse structure, but they are not parallel to the layer of discourse of language. Based on this idea, the reform of language teaching is not only to add the layer of discourse teaching on the basis of traditional models, but to teach language as a discourse to help learners realize how language elements such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar are related to each other, to organize and construct texts together. Although the authors did not explicitly propose some specific language teaching approach, they repeatedly used the term "discourse-based language teaching approach ". Cheng Xiaotang believes that discourse-based language teaching should be the basic principle of language teaching, which is applicable to the teaching of the first language and also to the teaching of the second language (ibid, Cheng Xiaotang Guide :3-4).

4. Rationale for Frameworks for language competence

The language competence framework, i.e. the language competence model or the language competence scale, is a language competence level defined by a country, a region, and even a continent for language learners and users. It describes the performance characteristics of each level of competence, provides standards for language assessment and the basis for curriculum standard formulation, textbook preparationand reference for language teaching and learning.

The language competence model by Bachman(1990:87) is divided into two types: grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. The former includes grammatical competence and discourse competence, and the latter includes practical competence and social linguistic competence. LikeBachman's

language competence model, *China's Standards of English Language Ability* issued by the Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission of P. R. China on February 12,2018 also classifies discourse knowledge and grammatical knowledge into structured knowledge, and points out that discourse knowledge includes rhetorical or conversational knowledge, and cohesive knowledge. The scale not only lists the specific requirements of use ability of discourse knowledge, rhetoric or conversational knowledge and cohesive knowledge from first to ninth level, but also lists learning strategiesof structured knowledge, which provides more operational reference norms for English teaching, learning and others. The framework of language competence, especially *China's Standards of English Language Ability*, is the standard of language competence issued by authoritative organizations, and is an important basis and reference for the development of curriculum standards, the compilation of teaching materials and the reform of teaching.

5. **Rationale for Curriculum Standards**

The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior Middle Schools (2017 Ed.)advocates the concept of English learning activities, which is to promote language knowledge learning, language skills development, cultural connotation understanding, multi-thinking development, value-oriented judgment and learning strategies based on thematic context, discourse types, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills and learning strategies, and teachers should study and analyze texts carefully in teaching (Ministry of Education ,2018:13-18). Unlike the 2003 edition, *The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior Middle Schools* no longer includes topics and functions in the category of language knowledge, but adds discourse knowledge and pragmatic knowledge (Ministry of Education ,2018:19). Pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar are linguistic ontology knowledge, discourse and pragmatic language use knowledge. Language ontology knowledge can only realize its meaning under the action of language application knowledge. That is to say, the interaction between language ontology knowledge and language operation knowledge has achieved discourse construction and language use (Mei Deming, Wang Qiang,2018:54). Moreover, *The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior Middle Schools* pays more attention to the development of language application ability based on discourse knowledge learning, and regards discourse competence as an important index to realize the key competencies of English subject. We can see the language proficiency requirementsfrom Appendix 1 " the Divisions of Levels of Key Competencies of English Subject"in"*The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior Middle Schools*" Taking the "third-level" as an example, it fully embodies the weight of discourse competence: "in the broader language situation,... Analyse the rationality of the discourse structure and the logical relationship between the main viewpoints and the facts of the text, critically examine the content, viewpoint, emotional attitude and stylistic features of the text, and appreciate the ideographic means of the wonderful passages in the text ..."(Ministry of Education ,2018:118). As a guiding document of education and teaching ,*The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior Middle Schools* is mandatory and binding on teaching, and its Discourse-based English Teaching Approach has become the most direct theoretical basis for its universal implementation.

It can be seen that the sufficient reasons of discourse-based teaching reflect the recognition of the mainstream views of scholars at home and abroad on the connotation of language competence, and highlight the new trend of language research in the field of linguistics today.

III.   THE CONNOTATION OF DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

It can be seen from the different concepts of discourse competence that scholars give different meanings to discourse competence based on their own research needs. As far as high school students are concerned, their discourse competence includes at least the following aspects:

Constructing cohesive, coherent spoken and written language

Constructing cohesive, coherent spoken and written discourse is the basic element of discourse competence. It refers to the use of cohesive devices such as reference, connectives, theme-description structure, etc. to achieve textual coherence.

Mastering the language characteristics of spoken and written language

Besides, we should not only understand that spoken language is often casual, written language is formal, but also understand that according to the different objects of communication, there are also "casual" and "formal" in spoken language; in addition, we should pay special attention to the simple form of words often used in spoken language, fillers, common words, short sentences, simple sentences, broken sentences, especially to learn to use the skills of intonation change, word rotation, starting, maintaining and endinga conversation to achieve communicative purpose.

Achieving appropriate diction and the structure basedon the register

The choice of words depends not only on the style of their use (spoken or written), but also on their register, that is, certain words or structures are often used in a particular situation of language use. These words and syntactic structures are closely related to their register and are essential language elements for the effective realization of specific topic functions.

Distinguishing the views and facts of a text

A discourse often has a general point of view and sub points of view. The former is the center of discourse, often reflected by the thesis statement; the latter are the paragraph themes, usually reflected by the paragraph topic sentence, which serve the theme of the text, both of them constituting the iconic structural features of English discourse. Facts are explanations of subject sentences, usually supported by examples. Clarifying the differences between viewpoints and facts is helpful to understand the author's attitude and intention correctly.

Achieving stylistic appropriateness

In oral and written language communication, we can choose the appropriate expression according to the social status, close relationship and cultural customs of the two sides of the communication.

Selecting the corresponding semantic structure

English discourses with different communicative intention havetheir specific semantic structures, and their essential components and orders are the identity marks that distinguish the genre from others. Therefore, mastering the semantic structures of different genres is beneficial to the interpretation and construction of discourse in accordance with English schema and to the effective realization of communicative purposes.

Understanding discourse developing patterns

The discourse developing pattern is the organizational form and logical structure of a discourse. English discourse of different languages/genres has its stable development pattern. According to the genre, using the corresponding discourse development pattern is beneficial to enhance the logic and rigor of discourse argumentation.

Using discourse knowledge to analyze discourses

Discourse competence also includes the ability to use discourse knowledge to analyze discourses, that is, discourse analysis ability. Having a certain discourse analysis ability is conducive to the deep interpretation of the discourse, such as the understanding of the interpersonal meaning of the discourse, but also through the examination and study of the structural characteristics of different discourses, improve people's appreciation ability, aesthetic taste and humanistic literacy, and finally achieve the ability to analyze and solve problems.

It can be seen that discourse competence involves many aspects of language competence and is an organic part of language competence. Without the participation of discourse competence, the content of language competence will be unscientific and incomplete

IV.   CONCLUSION

Sufficient theoretical basis and rich substantive connotation of discourse-based teaching provide solid theoretical support and diversified content selection for senior middle schools to carry out discourse-based English teaching, which is of great significance to reform English teaching and cultivate students' key competenciesof English subjects. However, the design of discourse-based teaching is difficult, and it is not necessary to make every text involve the allaspects of the connotation discourse-based teaching. In fact, the content of discourse analysis will vary according to teachers' different understanding of the text or their respective teaching styles. Therefore, teachers should increase discourse awareness and flexibly implement discourse-based English teaching according to different genres of the texts to increase students' discourse competence.

REFERENCES

[1].   Cheng, X. T. (2005). A Discourse-based Approach to Language Teaching. Foreign Language Teaching Abroad, (1).
[2].   Ministry of Education of PRC(2018). *The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior Middle Schools (2017 Edition)*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
[3].   Huang, G. W (2001). *Theory and Practice of Discourse analysis: a Study in advertising Discourse*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[4].   Liu, C.D. (1999). *Text Linguistics for teachers*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
[5].   McCarthy, M. & Carter, R (2004). *Language as Discourse: Perspectives for Language* Teaching.Beijing: Peking University Press.
[6].   Hu, Z.L(2000). The relation of Systematic Functional Linguistics to Sociolinguistics in Terms of its Origin and Development.Journal of University of Science and Technology Beijing, (2).
[7].   Zhang,Z. F (2011).*Knowledge of English Subject and Teaching Ability*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.

[8].   Bachman, L.F (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[9].   Liu, Z., Han, B. C.& Yan, T (2012).The Framework of Communicative Language Competence and Ideology of Foreign Language Teaching in Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:Learning, Teaching, Assessment.Foreign Language Teaching and Research,(4).
[10].   Mei, D. M.& Wang, Q (2018). *Interpretation* of *The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior Middle Schools*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.