Suitability of Genre Approach in China: How effective is it in terms of SLA for Chinese University Students to Improve Their Listening Skills?

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ABSTRACT: *This paper primarily concerns the suitability of genre approach in helping Chinese undergraduates improve their listening skills. It begins with a definition and theoretical foundations of genre approach, and explores the feasibility of this pedagogy in China. It then outlines several implications for teachers within tertiary education. The findings indicate that the flexible adoption of genre approach can improve students' listening competence and allow teachers to gain better teaching results that are supportive of students' listening comprehension.*

KEYWORDS: *Genre Approach, English Listening, SLA, Chinese Tertiary Students*

I.   INTRODUCTION

In China, achieving listening proficiency is a necessity in the national curriculum for it benefits students' academic studies, real life challenges, and future work aspects (Ministry of Education, PRC. 2007).Over the decades, various second language approaches to teaching listening, including the grammar-translation approach, the direct way, the situational language teaching, the audio-lingual approach and the communicative approach, have been used on Chinese university students (Hu, 2005). Although it is generally recognized that listening is a significant aspect of language learning, Vandergrift indicates that 'listening comprehension remains a "young field" that merits greater research attention' (Vandergrift, 2003). Considering a world-wide ranging significance of genre approach at tertiary and graduate levels, this paper primarily concerns the suitability of genre approach in helping Chinese undergraduates improve their listening skills.

Defining genre to teaching listening

Since the mid-1980s, the genre approach to teaching English as a second language has been in popular within a world-wide range, and the definitions of genre vary in different situations and communities (Johns, Bawarshi, Coe, Hyland, Paltridge, Reiff, and Tardy, 2006). Swales (1990, p. 58) defines a genre as 'a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes'. Eggins (2004, p. 55) identified a genre as 'staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage in a culture.' Martin & Rose (2005) further explain that genres have different 'underling goals' while texts in various situations and culture. Hyon (1996, p.695) categorized genres into 'oral' and 'written' texts.

Within a second language comprehension perspective, these interpretations imply that a genre-based approach is supportive of understanding by relating language texts to particular contexts with specific communicative purposes rather than only focus on grammatical forms (Swales, 1990; Martin, 1984; Kay and Dudley-Evans, 1998). Other researchers further explain the features of genre in language teaching as follows: Kress and Knapp (1992, p.5) stress 'the social' and 'the cultural' features of genre approach.

Muncie (2002, p.182) focuses on 'the peculiarities of the particular type of text'. To add to this university context, genres play a fundamental significance in text comprehension. Kay & Dudley-Evans (1998) presented examples of genres, including note-taking, keeping a diary, keeping a rhetorical essay, applying for a job interview, as well as posting an invitation letter. In terms of university students developing its listening skills, note-taking with rhetorical typescripts is an example of a genre. It requires students to adopt a formal academic style in listening materials for the text aims to provide a statements, an interview, or to make a negotiation, an argument. A diary is another example of genre with its purpose of keeping a record of daily life, with private musings, in an informal style in both speaking and listening.

II.   THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF GENRE

Within a teaching listening perspective, the genre approach has taken place in different ways in the USA, Britain, and Australia (Paltridge, 2004). There are three dimensions of scholarship in the extensive field of genres, including 'the Sydney School', 'the English for Specific Purposes (ESP)', and 'The New Rhetoric theory group (NR)' (Hyon, 1996; cited in Johns, et al., 2008, p.234). In seeking the suitability of genre approach in enhancing teaching listening, the following section of this paper introduces the three practical applications of the genre approach to the teaching of this audio-visual skill.

III.   THE SYDNEY SCHOOL

The most famous exponent of the Sydney School of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is M.A.K. Holliday (Callaghan, Knapp, & Noble, 1993). He developed theories of teaching and learning that incorporated the social context of language and its associated meanings, with purposeful outcomes (Callaghan, Knapp, & Noble, 1993; Christie, 1991; Hammond, 1987; Joyce, 1992; Martin, 1989; Hyon, 1996). The SFL scholars extensively analyzed text-based genres to identify the structural components and lexico-grammatical elements which produce meaningful texts, which is particularly meaningful in analyzing listening, such as the typescript forms.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Staring in the 1960s, researches on ESP approaches to academic research have been popular (Hyon, 1996). ESP characterized itself with 'needs analysis' and 'autonomous texts holding intrinsic meanings' (Olson, 1994; cited in Bronson, 2001, p.1). According to Johns (2008 p.243), ESP pedagogy emphasises 'knowledge on the structure of the text more than the context'. This is the major point of difference. This approach is rooted in an asocial view of language which believes meaning is in the text (Rosenblatt, 1989; cited in Bronson, 2001). Hyon (1996) further explains the benefits of ESP to second language learners. He says that students advance their academic proficiency with ESP approach by analysis of the forms of target discourses and comparison with typical examples or an appreciation of models.

The New Rhetoric

The New Rhetoric (NR) School is largely American in origin. It is in many ways a more political and theoretical perspective, which although largely lacking in pedagogical resources, is of value to teachers, more so than to learners (Coe, 2001). In NR, the context is central to any understanding of genre, as language is always considered within its social context. Traditional rhetoric is one of the great arts of discourse and as an art that uses language to persuade, it has always been political. Rhetoric seeks to educate speakers and writers how to change history by moving people towards certain ends (Coe, 2001). And it is for this reason that for NR, we cannot separate the cognitive from the social. The conventions of a genre, such as what lexis or grammatical

tense is used, are only considered after the situation, in which the genre occurs, is analyzed, and related to the demands of the context (Johns, 2008). NR is credited with highlighting the complexity of language learning. It is not only an individual cognitive process as described by 'the Process Movement', but is more related to social aspects (Johns, 2008, p.203).

IV.   THE BENEFITS AND PROBLEMS OF THE GENRE APPROACH IN TEACHING LISTENING TO CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Several benefits and limitations of the genre approach in teaching listening in the Chinese context have been discussed based on the above three practical usages of the genre approach: the Sydney School, ESP, and the NR.

4.1 Models and examples bringing positive input, reducing anxiety, and motivating students in listening

Firstly, a genre approach is very beneficial to learners because it brings models of texts and joint construction, thus guiding students to what they need to do linguistically. With a given genre, students can get a clear understanding of how a written work, such as typescripts in listening materials, reflects its social context and its purpose. As Kim (2005, p.37) recommends, genre approach 'brings together formal and functional properties of a language in both oral and written instruction, and it acknowledges that there are strong associations between them'. In other words, genre is meaningful for teachers due to the various styles of language that can demonstrate to students how a particular linguistic convention is used with a different rhetorical effect. Through imitating and analyzing the rhetorical structure of the provided models, a genre approach allows students opportunities to identify and recognize particular patterns. As a result, these models or examples can form patterns and/or background knowledge that can be applied in future student text constructions in listening. To add to this function, after consolidation in the classroom, the pre-taught structures can be used in similar listening tasks.

Within a Chinese university context, the motivation of students practicing listening is partly due to test pressure. A model that targets genre seems to be positive in second language teaching in this context. This view is supported by Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) since he says that students at beginning levels need models of linguistic forms that they can rely on since lower proficiency learners need more exposure to the target language. In China, writing courses with listening comprehension are compulsory in College English teaching. At the end of a course, students need to pass a national examination, the College English Test (CET4 and CET6), in order to obtain their degree. Teaching listening is indispensible in second language teaching at Chinese tertiary and graduate-levels, because this communicating skill matches the needs of students, institutions and social development. There is no doubt that generic structure of the text and reinforced lexico-grammatical patterns can be demanding so it is necessary that beginners are able to refer to or consider models. Listening tasks using typescripts models help students to reduce anxiety when they are learning a new style of text.

A qualitative research study (Jackson, Meyer, and Parkinson, 2006) involving academic staff and undergraduate science students at a South African university found that designing an academic literacy course to introduce samples of laboratory reports is meaningful since these kinds of research articles are the most prominent and most frequently used genre in science. A two year survey of 60 undergraduates in (and from) Spain shows that giving examples and models to students is positive in teaching style of texts (Lirola and Cuevas, 2008). Another research study (Firkins, Forey, and Sengupta, 2007, p.3) introduces a learning-teaching cycle based on genre approach, namely 'modeling', 'joint construction', 'independent construction' of a text to an English Club at a Hong Kong school. The results show that concrete examples aid students in organizational

skills and help them to understand the nature of a text within its context.

4.2 Socially, genre approach encouraging students to participate in the world around them

A genre approach allows students to become more flexible in listening as 'key academic genres' relate to 'text, purpose, context domain, and language', and provide target language with its 'central purposes, social locations, register, and stages' (Johns, 2008, p.245). This quote highlights how genre is more than just models and examples. Coe (1994) argues that awareness of social contexts, audiences and purposes that shape the texts is crucial to the second language learners. In terms of teaching listening, it relates to a variety of contexts and offers particular conventions to a speaker's communicative purposes (Swales1990, Martin, 2002, and Eggins 2004). From beginner to advanced learners, genre is widely applicable to many subject areas and explains the wide interest in styles from diverse disciplines. For the advanced learner, it provides similar processes to learning that makes the ways in which academic discourse is formulated. After all, it is a 'purpose' of the academic assignment to get a good grade, and to do this, the student needs to operate within the established paradigms. As Bakhtin (1986) points out, the reason why a genre is established is that each genre incorporates some typical styles, discourse features and some specific communicative purposes. Taking into account the nature of language learning, the genre approach offers a possibility for learners to be exposed to the variety of genres in a short time so as to communicate successfully. Additionally, by being successful and building on that success, the advanced learner is also more likely to be motivated. Moreover, the genre approach encourages students to participate in the real life setting, to realize how speakers manage content to promote logical organization, and finally to learn how language is emerged in a variety of social contexts. The view is supported by a research (Cheng, 2006) on genre-based writing class for international graduate students. The research reports a genre approach helps the learners to gradually emerges genre, language and culture emerges in discipline-specific speaking tasks rather than blind acceptance of existing "expert" linguistic knowledge and analytic frameworks. Another survey at the University of Hong Kong (Legg, 2007) proves that the genre approach benefits undergraduates to master the construction process and schema of texts, and to increase their flexibility after they are acquainted with texts, moreover, which show a comparatively stable genre connected within social situation.

4.3 Problems of the genre approach to teaching listening in China

Genre approach plays a beneficial role in boosting learners' confidence to conduct their language work, but some negative points have been put forward by Byram (2004), and Badge & White (2000). They deem that genre approach cannot properly measure the skills required to weave content and it neglects learners' self-sufficiency. Indeed, the genre approach attaches too much importance to conventions and genre features as well as hinders students to catch the real intention in texts to some extent. In this sense, it is very possible for learners to passively participate in classroom activities if class periods are spent in explaining how language is structured for some specific purposes and limited readers. Bawarshi (2000) holds the similar opinion that the genre approach, at its worst, interferes with the learners' creativity. These scholars' insight shows that they are concerned students may regard genre listening practice as only an action to play the parrot.

Moreover, in China, the prescription of some genres may lead to teaching activities' prescriptivism, and/or limiting teachers' instantaneous performance. For example, in teaching lisrening, once students encounter speakers whose genres are unfamiliar, their learning efficiency will be greatly influenced. Secondly, due to the diversity of genres, there needs to be further study about how to select and edit relative teaching materials in order to better satisfy the requirements of teaching and learning. Therefore, how to effectively apply the genre

approach to listening in China's EFL teaching is a subject waiting for further study and experiment.

Implications for Teaching

Due to the strengths and weaknesses of the genre approach noted above, H. Nguyen (2006) believes that teaching in the genre approach should include a final step in which students are encouraged to break the style of the existing genre and let it evolve. It is easier for the learners to be confronted with limited genre, since English learning environment in China is teacher-centred, and grammar translation methods (Pica, 2000. Lee, 2002, Gao, 2006). There are limited opportunities for both students and teachers exposing themselves to every day English usage. Therefore, if teachers themselves are lack of embracement of a profound understanding about the nature of genres and the genre approach, teaching in this way can still greatly deduct teaching effectiveness. Some application combined a genre approach methods with other teaching methods and the reaching results are promising. One example is a collaborative research combined a genre-based with an activity-based approach in language teaching. The findings support that this pedagogy is particularly suitable to low proficiency foreign language learners. Another example is on an experiment by Badger and White (2000) which is by combing the genre and process approaches together, called the process-genre approach. Their experiment results show that this combined approach can have a satisfactory improvement if the language comprehension starts with models, description of the key linguistic features, discussion of the social environment where it occurs, and analysis of the suggested rhetorical patterns of each genre.

V. CONCLUSION

Discussing some key researches, I have addressed the question of whether genre approach is an effective approach in teaching listening to Chinese university students. The findings of the literature review indicate that this method seems to fit well the teaching of listening in the Chinese context and matches the requirements of the national curriculum. This is because currently Chinese students need input of English genres, and yet, once introduced to models and examples of listening materials they are usually successful at following the given structures, and thus contribute to amplifying their listening potential. The genre approach is supportive in helping Chinese students to learn the organizational structure and linguistic features of both oral and written tasks, for the principles of genre focuses on the structural, social and linguistic features of a particular situation as reflected in a text. But there is no guarantee that a single method can fully address practical needs of teachers, learners and social development. Teachers in the context of Chinese universities are capable of determining, developing and creating classroom techniques appropriate to their conditions.

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