

# Genre Analysis and Advanced English Teaching

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**Abstract**—This paper intends to discuss advanced English teaching of English majors from the perspective of genre analysis. Based on the presentation and discussion of a sample lesson, with examples and detailed illustration, this study is aimed to explore how to improve advanced English teaching of English majors through surface-level description of language in use and deep-level explanation of communicative purposes and writing tactics of various discourses. The paper concludes that in advanced English teaching, the teacher's job is to lead students to the appreciation of different genres, as well as the understanding of the esthetic values achieved through writing styles.

**Index Terms**—genre analysis, advanced English teaching, English majors

## I. INTRODUCTION

Genre analysis is the study of how language is used within a particular setting, which is the product of multidisciplinary research covering stylistic analysis as well as discourse analysis. Since genre analysis focuses on the study of the regularities of structure that distinguish one type of text from another, it is particularly helpful in advanced English teaching for expanding the teaching of English beyond language knowledge and course book. Thus, this article aims to discuss advanced English teaching of English majors from the perspective of genre analysis.

In my university, *Advanced Reading* is an obligatory course for English major seniors. Besides helping students lay a solid foundation for language acquisition, one of the objectives of the course is to guide students to high-level reading and appreciation. The application of genre analysis to teaching practice is believed to be a good try and beneficial to students. It is well recognized that Advanced English teaching doesn't only include the explanation and description of the text, it also involves an interaction between teachers and students, an interaction between students and writers. Thus, during the teaching process, each text should be viewed as essentially interactive in nature, being created from the discussion to appreciation. In addition, the genre-based approach will direct students' attention to the socio-cultural, institutional and organizational constraints and expectations of a particular genre. In this way, students will learn to perceive different patterns and styles of various texts so as to understand how texts function in certain context and have an insightful understanding.

## II. THEORETICAL BASIS

Genre is generally defined as "a distinctive category of discourse of any type, spoken or written" (Swales, 1990, p.33) that serves as "responses by speakers or writers to the demands of a social context" (Johns, 2002, p.3). Or put it in another way, genres are how things get done and how language is used to achieve its purpose. Defining genre in this way, we can find that there are as many different genre types as there are recognizable social activity types in our culture. Therefore, various types of genre in language use can range from literary discourse, such as poems, dramas, novels, narratives, expositions, argumentations, fables, ballads, etc. to non-literary types, such as lectures, seminars, recipes, manuals, news report, emails, and etc. Thus, genre can embrace each of the linguistically realized activity types.

However, there are different definitions for genre and different approaches to genre study (Martin, 1985; Couture, 1986; Hyon, 1996; Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2002, 2003; Paltridge, 2001). Originally genre was defined as a staged goal-oriented social process, emphasizing a series of phases of meaning making that are designed to accomplish something through interactions with others. This notion of genre stresses the functional model of language, revealing the way in which a particular culture manages to coordinate different and recurrent language resources to construct particular meanings that are valued within the specific cultural context. Then the concept of genre has been expanded to include all purposeful uses of language. Although there are different theoretical trends and schools of genre studies, the consensus has been achieved by many researchers that genres are social practices that have developed to enable us to achieve our goals (Martin, 1985; Painter, 2001, as cited in Derewianka, 2003). One of these trends expresses major interests in such contexts as social, culture and history (Hyon, 1996; Flowerdew, 2002; Hyland, 2002; Johns, 2002). Some other researchers position themselves within the New Rhetorical School (Miller, 1984; Bazerman, 1994; Freedman & Medway, 1994), focusing their studies on the way genres either realize certain social cultural purposes or form particular frameworks through involvement into varied contexts. There is another group of researchers dealing with discourse analysis, focusing on pedagogical exploration on enhancing students' communicative competence in

their future professional and academic areas. In line with them are those who are doing English for Specific Purposes (Swales, 1990; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998), specifically, probing into varied genres in practical situation. Besides, the school of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) associates the social cultural context with specific linguistic features. The central concepts have greatly influenced the design of school curriculum and syllabus and have become the mostly probed area regarding genre study and genre-based English language teaching.

In recent years the concept of genre has been much discussed and has become one of the most important and influential factors in language education. Actually, increasing attention has been given to the notion of genre and its application in language teaching and learning. This interest has especially helped English teachers the world over because it has assisted to show how language is used in various contexts and how we can apply this knowledge in our classrooms.

The present study holds that genre analysis is the study of how language is used within a particular context. Thus, in the practice of genre analysis, the first step is to be clear what genre the text belongs to, and then to describe the discourse from the point of view of the particular situation in which it occurred. Further, the overall purpose and function of the text should be addressed. Following that, the schematic structure and discourse patterns as well as the generic potential of the discourse are to be discussed.

It is well accepted that different genres carry different structures and patterns, and produce a staged purposeful social process through which a culture is realized in language. The past decades have seen a significant growth in the field of genre-based language researches. Many of these researches focus on levels of discourse structure which have been variously referred to in the literature as the 'schematic structure', 'generic structure', and 'generic structural potential' for a particular genre. By schematic structure, we mean the staging organization, and the generic potential refers to all the linguistically-achieved activity types recognized as meaningful in a given culture, or the possible configurations of register variables allowed within a given culture at a given time.

Upon the understanding of the general knowledge of genre analysis, the attention of this article is specifically focused on the discussion of discourse patterns, which refer to the organization and structure of written discourses. It can't be denied that genres vary significantly along a number of different parameters, in terms of the mode or medium through which they are expressed; in the extent to which they are likely to exhibit language-specific tendencies, in terms of the field and topic of the discourse. However, for whatever genres, certain types of discourse patterns are frequently employed to deliver message and transfer ideas.

Discourse pattern refers to the logical arrangement of ideas, the development of texts. Since logical arrangement of ideas is cultural-bound, for English discourse, there are some patterns that are commonly recognized and accepted. Among other things, the most generally accepted patterns include *the problem-solution pattern*, *the general-particular pattern*, *the hypothetical-real pattern* and *the matching pattern*. It is not exaggerating to state that without perceiving the discourse pattern, one can't read nor write for comprehension. In addition to that, discourse pattern is tied to literacy skills, thus in advanced reading teaching for English majors, it is essential to call students awareness of discourse pattern and the arrangement of discourse ideas.

### III. SAMPLE LESSON PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION

In order to show how to carry out genre-based approach to English language teaching, this paper intends to discuss the topic through the following sample lesson. The teaching material is from the text book widely used in China for English major seniors. The text that is chosen as the sample lesson is Lesson Seven "*The Virtues of Ambition*", written by Joseph Epstein. Joseph Epstein is an American essayist, short story writer and editor. From 1974 to 1998, he was the editor of *the Phi Beta Kappa Society's The American Scholar* magazine. From 1974 to 2002, Joseph Epstein was a lecturer at Northwestern University. As a long-time contributor of essays and short stories to *The New Criterion* and *Commentary*, he is also a contributing editor at *The Weekly Standard*. In 2003, he was awarded a National Humanities Medal by the National Endowment for the Humanities. "*The Virtues of Ambition*" is taken from *Ambition: The Secret Passion* published in 1980.

'*The Virtues of Ambition*' is an argumentation, aiming to argue for ambition. To achieve the aim of the argumentative writing, the article is developed through various ways, such as examples, definition, classification, comparison and contrast, logical analysis, cause and effect, analogy, and etc. The author holds that "We decide what is important and what is trivial in life. We decide that what makes us significant is either what we do or what refuse to do. ... We decide. We choose. And as we decide and choose, so are our lives formed." (Joseph Epstein, *The Virtues of Ambition*, in *Advanced English*, 1996, p.232) Very effectively the author succeeds in convincing the readers the virtues of ambition.

But how does the author develop the discourse specifically so as to achieve the purpose of the argumentation? What discourse patterns are specifically applied in the development of the article? How can we guide the students to comprehend and then appreciate the text? These are the tasks to be fulfilled by this lesson. The following presents the design and process of the sample lesson.

#### A. Aim

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. acquaint themselves with the general knowledge of discourse patterns in genre analysis,

2. get to know various discourse patterns for different genres,
3. be clear about the structure of the hypothetical-real pattern and the matching pattern,
4. appreciate the stylistic features of the text,
5. perceive the communicative message and the theme of the article,
6. be able to define various discourse patterns in reading.

**B. Materials: The Following Materials Are Needed**

1. text book: *Advanced English* (Wu Yiyun & Huang Guanfu, 1996)
2. slide providing general knowledge of genre analysis
3. handout of after-class activities (see **Appendix**)

**C. Procedure**

**Pre-task**

**1. Show the slide to the students and illustrate the general knowledge of discourse patterns in genre analysis.**

According to Johnson and Johnson, “Genres are types of spoken and written discourse recognized by a discourse community” (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, p.140). In other words, genre analysis is the study of how language is used within a particular setting. Thus, it tries to focus on the study of discourse types and styles, whether they are lectures, conversations, speeches, notices, advertisements, research papers, letters, news, novels, poems, dramas, short stories, essays, and whether they are narrating, expository, argumentative or descriptive. It is clearly the case that each genre has its typical features: linguistic features (grammatical or lexical choices), paralinguistic features (print size, gestures) or contextual and pragmatic features (setting, purpose). Genres, however, vary significantly along quite a number of different parameters. They vary according to complexity of rhetorical purpose; in terms of the mode or medium through which they are expressed; in the degree to which exemplars of the genre are prepared or constructed in advance of their communicative instantiation, as well as in the extent to which they are likely to exhibit universal or language-specific tendencies. Nevertheless, no matter what genre the text belongs to, certain discourse patterns are applied to develop the text so as to achieve its communicative purposes. Accordingly, different genres have different preference for certain kinds of discourse patterns. Here are some of the discourse patterns that are generally accepted and most frequently used: the problem-solution pattern, the general-particular pattern, the hypothetical-real pattern and the matching pattern.

**2. Discuss the features of the hypothetical-real pattern and the matching pattern.**

The hypothetical-real pattern is usually composed of two parts, a supposition (or a claim), and the justification for the writer’s viewpoint (support or counterclaim). The second part is supposed to be the main body of the text where the author would try his best to make his points clear, whether he is for or against the claims above mentioned. Before we get down to the second part we know nothing about the writer’s stand, we therefore call the first part “hypothesis”, the second part is regarded as the “true”, “real” part, because it is in this part that we can get to know the writer’s attitude and point of view. The pattern is frequently used in political journalism, argumentative writings and so on.

The matching pattern often carries the aim to make comparisons between things, so as to find out the similarities and differences between them. In a discourse, this pattern is commonly embedded with other patterns. The pattern is not only often present in exposition, argumentation, letter writing, but also in narration, poetry and any other genres.

**While task**

**1. Ask students to read through the text “The Virtues of Ambition” by Joseph Epstein (from *Advanced English* Wu Yiyun & Huang Guanfu, 1996)**

**2. Get students to talk about the theme of the text.**

Through various means, the author argues for ambition very effectively. Joseph Epstein (1996) holds that although it could be defined differently, ambition is morally a two-sided street, it is essential to one’s life, it forms one’s destiny and shapes one’s life.

**3. Get students to discuss the writing style of the text.**

This is an essay of argumentation, with the aim of arguing for the virtues of ambition. The author begins the article by the definition of “ambition”, which sounds quite disapproval. Then, by listing all the negative things about and attacks on ambition, the author, however, succeeds in proving the statement “Ambition is morally a two-sided street”. Very effectively, the author argues for ambition through comparison and contrast, cause and effect, logical analysis, paradox and examples. Thus, readers are convinced that although the outcome of our dreams and ambition might be unpredictable, it is essential to our life. The essay is proved to be persuading, convincing and appealing.

**4. Ask students to discuss the following two paragraphs from the text in detail and pay special attention to their generic structure and discourse pattern.**

(1) “There is a strong view that holds that success is a myth, and ambition therefore a sham. Does this mean that success does not really exist? That achievement is at bottom empty? That the efforts of men and women are of no significance alongside the force of movements and events? Now not all success, obviously, is worth esteeming, nor all ambition worth cultivating. Which are and which are not is something one soon enough learns on one's own. But even the most cynical secretly admit that success exists; that achievement counts for a great deal; and that the true myth is that the actions of men and women are useless. To believe otherwise is to take on a point of view that is likely to be deranging. It is, in its implications, to remove all motives for competence, interest in attainment, and regard for

posterity.” (Joseph Epstein, *The Virtues of Ambition*, in *Advanced English*, 1996, p.231-232)

The first sentence is a hypothesis\_\_ success is a myth and ambition is a sham. Then, three questions are immediately followed, exciting great attention and at the same time, showing a strong emotion\_\_ the author seems overwhelmed with indignation. The fifth sentence serves to pave the ground for the author's arguments, and the following sentences express the author's attitude, counterclaim and reasoning \_\_ success does exist and achievement is of great importance. Therefore, the discourse pattern of this paragraph is the hypothetical-real pattern.

By the hypothetical-real pattern, the author succeeds in convincing the readers the importance of ambition. Rather than stating the views subjectively, the author presents the idea tactfully.

(2) Many people are naturally distrustful of ambition, feeling that it represents something intractable in human nature. Thus John Dean entitled his book about his involvement in the Watergate affair during the Nixon administration *Blind Ambition*, as if ambition were to blame for his ignoble actions, and not the constellation of qualities that make up his rather shabby character. Ambition, it must once again be underscored, is morally a two-sided street. Place next to John Dean Andrew Carnegie, who among other philanthropic acts, bought the library of Lord Acton, at a time when Acton was in financial distress, and assigned its custodianship to Acton, who never was told who his benefactor was. Need much more be said on the subject than that, important though ambition is there are some things that one must not sacrifice to it? (Joseph Epstein, *The Virtues of Ambition*, in *Advanced English*, 1996, p.229-230)

The hypothetical-real pattern and matching pattern are embedded with each other here. Hypothesis is given in the first sentence and then followed by an example, offering a kind of illustration. It seems that John Dean attributes his involvement in the Watergate affair to his “Blind Ambition”. The author's position on the topic is clarified in the third sentence \_\_ ambition is morally a two-sided street. That is to say there is nothing wrong with ambition and the point is how to manage it, how to realize it. In the rest of the text, another example is provided, producing great contrast to the first example and presenting justifications for the counterarguments as well. What Andrew Carnegie has done shows his ambition, which illustrates clearly what is great ambition. The last sentence is a rhetoric question, a question with no need for an answer. By now, everything is evident, ambition is important to everybody, but we can never sacrifice morality, conscience and our principles for it. Thus, the text is highly patterned and by comparison and contrast, the author voices his opinion in an effective and impressive way.

#### **Post task (see Appendix)**

1. Distribute copies of passages to students and let them work in pairs.
2. Get students to read the essays and identify the discourse patterns.
3. Get students to discuss the language styles and generic structures.
4. Ask students to write an essay entitled “My Ambition”, with both hypothetical-real pattern and matching pattern involved.

Through teaching practice, it is evident that the application of genre analysis to classroom teaching is beneficial and meaningful. Firstly, genre analysis shows a true interest in the use of language to achieve communicative purposes. Secondly, genre analysis provides a dynamic explanation of language use and it combines the advantage of a sociolinguistics perspective with those of a cognitive perspective. Thirdly, motivated by applied linguistic concerns, it can be well applied to language teaching at various levels. Fourthly, genre analysis is wide in vision, while taking specific differentiation in various language applications into consideration.

#### IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article is aimed to explore how to apply the genre-based approach to advanced English teaching of English majors through various stages: by surface-level description of language in use; by deep-level explanation of communicative purposes and writing tactics of various genres; by genre analysis of discourse patterns of different texts and by stylistic appreciation of high-level organization and structures of various genres. In advanced English teaching, the teacher's job is to lead students to the perception and appreciation of different genres, the understanding of the esthetic values achieved through writing styles. Hopefully the study can provide insights into improving advanced English teaching of English majors elsewhere.

The author of this article has been trying to manage her *Advanced Reading* class from the perspective of genre analysis, which proves quite helpful in improving students' ability of reading and appreciation. Since in advanced English teaching, the teacher's job is not only to explain and let students have a comprehension of the text, but also to lead students to the appreciation of different genres, the understanding of the esthetic values achieved through writing styles. The sample lesson presents the actual practice of English reading class. In the teaching process, a considerable amount of interaction is involved among the teacher and the students, and among the students themselves as well. Besides, from the post task they can get knowledge, deep understanding, practice and fun. Thus, it is a great way to convert a supposedly boring aspect of language learning into one that students look forward to with anticipation and ambition!

#### APPENDIX. READING ACTIVITIES FOR POST WORK

**Directions: Read the following passages and do the activities in pairs and groups:**

- 1) Discuss what text pattern is the dominant one in each of the passages.
- 2) Talk about the discourse styles and tell by what means the author tries to achieve his communicative purpose.

### Passage 1

Every other critic has said that *On Food and Cooking* is brilliant, a revelation, and a unique combination of scientific insight and literacy which sweeps aside all myth and jargon as none have done before. McGee's book is indeed well written, is full of good things and is good to have on the shelves as a continuing source of reference and quotes. But it also has its fair share of mistakes, omissions and misalignments of emphasis.

(C. Tudge, Review of H. McGee 1986 *On Food and Cooking*, London: Allen & Unwin, in *New Scientist* 6 November 1986, 112 (1533), p.56)

### Passage 2

It is interesting to note that iconic models only represent certain features of that portion of the real world they simulate. For example, a map will only contain those features which are of interest to the person using the map. Similarly, architects' models will be limited to include those features which are of interest to the person considering employing the architect.

(Hoey, 1983, p.113)

### Passage 3

If there be any one on whose ear my frequent praise of practical activities has a harsh and unpleasing sound because he is wholly devoted to contemplative philosophy, let me assure him that he is the enemy of his own desires. In natural philosophy practical results are not only means to improve human well-being. They are also the guarantee of truth. There is a true rule in religion, that a man must show his faith by his works. The same rule holds good in philosophy. Science too must be known by its works. It is by the witness of works rather by logic or even observation that truth is revealed and established. It follows from this that the improvement of man's lot and improvement of man's mind are one and the same thing.

(Francis Bacon)

### Passage 4

Sir,

William Mann, in his review (January 30) of a concert from Manchester wrote that I had the singer Ella Lee in mind when composing my Third Symphony. I gather he heard this announced during the radio prologue to the broadcast.

May I beg the courtesy of your columns to set the record straight? The announcement was incorrect. Indeed, rarely, if ever, have I had a particular performer in mind when composing a major work.

Yours,  
Michael Tippett  
(Hoey, 1983, p.128)

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