

## **A Research Project**

### **1. Project title**

Teaching Genres within a Blended Teaching-Learning Circle in EFL Context in China

— An action research done with medical students in Zhuhai Campus,  
Zunyi Medical University

### **2. The aim of the project**

Action research aims to explore the correlation between teaching genres within a blended teaching-learning circle and the improvement of medical students' writing competence demonstrated in explanation, exposition, and discussion genres, which are often tested in College English Test Bands 4 & 6.

In order to fulfill this aim, four crucial issues are expected to be tackled. (1) What are the appropriate teaching materials informed by Genre theory and Systemic Functional Grammar to be employed to instill sufficient subject knowledge, schematic structure, and language features into students who are eager to write high-quality compositions? (2) What teaching plans accommodates teaching activities, teaching strategies, kinds of exercises into this blended teaching-learning circle to cultivate students' knowledge, skill and language? (3) What are the proper measuring instruments to assess students' writing competence in the above-mentioned genres? (4) What is done to bridge the gap raised from previous research that students are likely to produce monotonous and formulaic writing?

### **3. The rationale and main conceptual themes for investigation**

#### **3.1 A problem-oriented research**

In China, there are two important National College English tests (CET 4 & 6), and students are required to take part in to evaluate English Competence. According to the statistics released by the office of academic affairs in the campus where I work, the average percentage of students who has passed CET4 when they first take it is about 45%, and the average percentage of students who has passed CET6 when they first take it about 25%, which are near or reach the national passing rates, 50% and 30% respectively. However, these figures are unsatisfactory concerning medical students' learning abilities and their potentials. According to my observations, medical students

can have the potentials for a higher passing rate (80% for CET4 and 60% for CET6). In these two examinations, their scores for writing are lower than those of reading, translating, and listening, and according to my observation, their difficulties lie in exploiting the required composition patterns, elaborating their ideas and knowledge in appropriate language for lack of both knowledge and language resources, which might result from product-focused writing approach. Therefore, I plan to adopt a teaching-learning circle approach to improve their writing performance in explanation, exposition, and discussion genres, which are often tested in CET4 and CET 6 but within different fields or different contexts.

### **3.2 English writing research in China**

As a key constituent of English language skills, writing has had a mysterious force that keeps holding students, teachers, and researchers for ages. The project in question falls into the fourth stage of Writing research development in China, and it is believed that it will well integrate into the Writing research landscape here.

In Mainland China, CNKI has chronicled writing research spanning about 40 years, and these researches can be categorized into four stages in terms of the number of papers published: the emerging stage, the developing stage, the expanding stage, and the complex stage. According to Li (2020), who has analyzed 4512 papers concerning College English Writing published from January 1, 1987 to March 8, 2020, the number of papers published annually from 1987 to 1997, from 1998 to 2006, from 2007 to 2013, and from 2014 to 2020 is 6.9, 65.5, 302.7 and 246.7 respectively. Zhu (2011) has confirmed a similar trend in the development of writing research after analyzing 435 papers concerning English Writing published in ten core foreign language research periodicals during a period of 1980 - 2010, and the average number of papers published in the three-decade is 3.5, 7.6 and 31.5 respectively.

The themes of Writing research tend to be more diverse, broader, and deeper during its development from stage one to stage four, and all these themes can be classified into seven categories: writing environments, learners, Writing teaching, Writing results, reader feedback, Writing assessment, testing & scoring, and reviews & reflections on Writing, with each category being further classified. Qin Zhaoxia (2009) has sorted out seven subjects and calculated the average number of papers under different subjects after studying 136 papers concerning College English Writing published during 2000-2008 in eight core foreign language research periodicals.

Qin Zhaoxia (2009) also emphasizes that the abundant research in Writing teaching illustrates Chinese scholars' efforts to test the feasibility of imported SLA theories and linguistic theories to improve writing teaching, and then she notes an obvious diversification of Writing research since 2000, given the merging of theories from disciplines such as pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics and so on. Another researcher Qin Xiaoqi (2014), has grouped 218 papers concerning Writing published in eleven domestic key Foreign-Language periodicals during 2008-2012 into ten subjects. Qin Xiaoqi (2014) then confirms a further diversification of writing researches done after 2007, stimulated by theories such as corpus linguistics, English for Specific Purposes, and computer science, etc. She reminds a deficiency of writing researches on subjects such as learners' language development, their emotional needs, interpersonal interaction, psychological cognition, and construction of learning context, and improvement of coursebooks, and she also notices a lag behind writing research in America in terms of depth and width of genre writing, corpus, and psychological cognition.

Research methods employed in writing research are easy to be recognized for the critical work done by Wen Qiufang. Wen Qiufang (2004) has specified terms such as empirical (quantitative, qualitative, and the combination of the two), non-empirical, and listed the canonical members (questionnaires, experiments) of quantitative research, and classical branches (case study, ethnography ) of qualitative research. According to Zhu (2011), the research methods used in 426 papers concerning EFL Writing published in ten major linguistic journals in China from 1980 to 2010 are non-empirical methods (56.81%) and empirical methods (43.19%) but with different trends of development. The period of 1980-1992 saw the only existence of non-empirical research, the period 1993-2006 witnessed a steady development and domination of non-empirical research, and a start of empirical research, and then in 2007, the two equalized. The last period of 2008-2010 saw a soaring of empirical research and plunging of non-empirical research, and in 2010, empirical research is about ten times the size of non-empirical research. Xiao Huazhi (2016) has studies 271 papers concerning college English writing published in 11 major linguistic journals in China from 2004 to 2013, showing a decrease of non-empirical and a faster-growing of empirical ones. Since 2005, the empirical has surpassed the non-empirical, and since 2000 the gap between the two has been widening, and in 2011 the empirical has been seven times the size of the non-empirical.

A 40-year period has witnessed the development of English Writing research and the shifting of writing themes. Although Researchers in 2017-2020 give more attention to readers and learners, Writing teaching is still one of the themes to be deeply explored. Writing approaches such as product approach, process approach, process-genre approach, writing after reading etc. have been adopted, adjusted, and tested, but there is one approach which deserves closer attention - Genre-based learning - teaching circle in Sydney School, being publicized in a book written by Rose and Martin (Rose & Martin, 2012, p. 57-59). Yang Yilong (2016) has emphasized that the application of Sydney school's genre-based pedagogy to College ESL Writing in China is helpful to address current problems there. Zhou (2017) has fully introduced Sydney school Genre pedagogy and suggested a combination of David Rose's "Reading to Learn" with Wang Chuming's "Writing to learn" in College English Writing in China. However, few empirical research has been done to adopt and adjust this pedagogy, which is the first gap this project is expected to bridge.

### **3.3 Different genre approaches in EFL writing instructions**

This part represents two genre approaches exploited in EFL writing classrooms.

The first approach is applications of Badge and White's Process-Genre model or its adapted version - a combination of Hasan's and Martin's genre configurations and Badge and White's process, and the second approach is writing instructions informed by genre theory and systemic functional theory, and teaching procedures developed from several educational projects done by scholars in Sydney School.

Three once-common writing approaches in EFL writing courses date back to the 1980s and 1990s, and they are named product, process, and genre, respectively (Badge & White, 2000). Due to the demerits of each method, another method synthesizing the three methods is proposed by Badge and White, which is genre-process writing method (Badge & White, 2000). Genre in this approach suggests what to teach and is defined as a group of texts constituting a category of communicative events with a shared set of communicative purposes (Swales, 1990, quoted in Swales, 2018, p. 21). Process means how to teach and is composed by situation reduplication, description of communicative purposes and other aspects of situation, writing procedures such as planing, drafting, and publishing, and finally a finished product (Badge & White, 2000). Some research has confirmed the effectiveness of this method on English writing teaching, for example,

Sun (Sun, 2014) investigates the effect of the Process-Genre approach on English Majors' writing skills in an experiment, and Sun concludes that this approach has greatly improved students' writing skills in terms of discourse content, discourse structure, and language use. Furthermore, Cai and Luo adopt this method in their Process-Genre Approach to English Writing project, teaching English majors 20 kinds of genres with a seven-step teaching mode, such as pre-writing, discussion in class, commenting sample, revising by oneself, group review, practice after class and self-evaluation, and teacher's evaluation (Cai & Luo, 2015, p. 96-102). The teaching practice done by Cai and Luo has achieved great success in terms of the improvement in students' writing abilities tested by Band 4 and Band 8 national English tests. Students also progress in comprehensive language abilities, and discourse awareness such as discourse purpose, discourse patterns, discourse content, and would-be readers (Cai & Luo, 2015, p. 167-169). However, not all research confirms the effectiveness of this approach. Alghizzi and Alshahrani apply Badge and White's writing model to teach EFL students with level 6 reaction essays, and they find that this approach does not significantly affect students' writing competence either fully or partially in terms of sentence complexity, vocabulary density and sophistication, and fluency, but it partially improves students' vocabulary variation and fluency in reaction essays (Alghizzi & Alshahrani, 2020).

Chen Jing represents researchers who are within the second category. Chen Jing teaches exposition and discussion genres to first-year non-English majors in Sun Yat-sen University with a scaffolding academic cycle to test the effectiveness of Genre-based approach to college students' EAP writing abilities, and she discovers that this approach has statistically improved college student's writing abilities, especially writing abilities of low-level students (Chen, 2016, p. 275-279). Another influential research was done in City University Hong Kong during two years from 2008 to 2010. It was action research, and in this research, both genre theory within SFL and teaching-learning circle instruction framework were exploited to improve undergraduates' English writing proficiency (Dreyfus et al., 2016, 1-12 ). This project elaborated on how genre literacy pedagogy was conducted online to scaffold students in a tertiary environment in terms of clarification of teaching procedures in each stage (Dreyfus et al., 2016, 226-279 ), on the establishment of a  $3 \times 3$  toolkit recontextualizing SFL language model for analytical work (Dreyfus et al., 2016, 108-141 ), and on how to feedback in each draft (Dreyfus et al., 2016,

267-279 ), which is believed to provide guidelines for future genre literacy research.

According to literature investigation, writing instructions guided by genre literacy pedagogy is an area under-explored, compared with process-genre approach, in terms of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, assessing measures, teaching procedures, and analyzing tools due to a short-term development of genre pedagogy. This is the second gap the present research is about to bridge, since it is believed to play its part in genre-based research agenda and shed new light on how to scaffold students to improve their writing competence in a tertiary context.

### **3.4 Theoretical frameworks underpinning the project**

This part presents essential concepts from SFL and SLA, which lay a solid theoretical foundation for the present research.

Theoretical frameworks underpinning the what-to-teach part of this project are vital concepts from Systemic Functional Linguistics, providing the project with Knowledge About Language, with which teachers and students in English writing classes can negotiate how language works. Some essential concepts are choice and system, stratification, metafunctions, register, and genre, but due to insufficient space here, only genre, register, and metafunctions are elaborated below.

Since language is evolved to satisfy the needs of people engaging in different social activities, it is interpreted as three functions/meanings to fulfill these social activities. The functions language assumes are to construe experience, to enact social relationships, and to weave the first two functions into coherent texts and are seen as bridges connecting levels of language with levels with context (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p.30). In writing courses, the three metafunctions are exploited to describe language features in language instances.

Language is used in context and affected by its context. The context is composed of two levels: register and genre. Register variables accommodate field, tenor, and mode, realizing genre and redounding with or being realized by ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. Therefore in writing courses, register variables are analyzed to see how they regulate language use, and reversely how language features realize register variables.

Genre is the most abstract level of patterning, seen as recurrent configurations of meaning (Martin & Rose, 2014, p. 16-17). To make genre more comprehensible, Martin defines genre as a staged, goal-oriented social process (Martin & Rose, 2014, p. 6 ). On the one hand, genre regulates register variables, and on the other hand, genre is realized by configurations of register variables.

Genre definition and genre features shed new light on writing instruction. Firstly, text patterns and text purposes are two significant advantages to be taken in writing procedures. Writing is made more or less easier when learners are familiar with text purposes and take text patterns as models. Secondly, both genres and registers regulate language use and are reflected in language features. The association of genre and register with language features or the association of language features with genre and register makes great difference to students involved in writing practice.

The teaching method exploited in this research embodies such critical concepts in second language acquisition as explicit instruction, comprehensible input (Ellis, 1994, p. 273-276), and Zone of Proximal Development (Luckin & du Boulay, 2015). Firstly, genre literacy pedagogy is developed to tackle the problems resulting from insufficient literacy instructions, which benefit only middle-class students (Rose & Martin, 2012, p. 2-3). Secondly, the deconstruction stage in the teaching-learning circle is to decode language meanings, which is believed to provide more comprehensible input. Thirdly, joint and independent construction stages develop students' potential by scaffolding and coordinating them in their ZPD.

### **3.5 Teaching-learning circle**

Teaching-Learning Circle instruction framework was formed and developed from several projects, "The Writing Project," "Language and Social Power Project," and "The Slate Project" for improving reading and writing abilities of disadvantaged students in and out of Australia (Rose & Martin, 2012, p. 56-67; Dreyfus et al., 2016, p. 1-12). Up to now, this circle has undergone four changes, and its fourth generation is presented below.

The fourth generation of Teaching-Learning Circle aims to control skills, knowledge, and language (Dreyfus et al., 2016, p. 9). Just as the first and the third generations, the fourth generation circle has three stages: deconstructing text, constructing texts jointly and independently; field building and context setting are two focuses in each cycle (Dreyfus et al., 2016, p. 8-9). Deconstructing means explicating genre's social purposes and decoding its stages and language features. Negotiating jointly takes the following steps: establishing a field for a new text on a different but relevant topic with the same genre, and then constructing the text jointly, with students composing the text and the teacher negotiating with students, confirming them, giving suggestions and elaborations before writing the text down on the board in front of the class. Constructing a text independently - the creation of another new text with the same genre, also

takes several steps: building up another new field, writing a text, submitting it to negotiate with a teacher, editing it , and finally competing it (Rose & Martin, 2012, p. 56-67 ).

All in all, the development of the teaching-learning circle lies not only in the changing and fixing of its main stages and its goals, but also in the changing of learning and teaching activities in sub-stages when this model is applied in different contexts. In this project, the teaching-learning cycle is to be applied in the English writing teaching sessions in the course of College English Reading and Writing under a blended learning environment, so one of its aims is to examine how appropriate scaffolding teaching and learning can be provided online.

#### **4. A description of evidence to be collected**

The methodologies used in the present research are action research, teaching experiment, questionnaires, classroom observations, and accordingly both quantitative and qualitative data are expected to be collected. Grades from students' writings and numbers from questionnaires, seen as interval variables, fall into quantitative data, while discourses and transcripts from classroom observations and interviews are grouped into qualitative data.

#### **5. The methods used to collect evidence**

The research methodology featuring prominently in this research is action research. According to Wen (2011), Action research is briefly defined as action-oriented research during which teachers take actions to tackle problems encountered in their teaching or innovate their current teaching approaches. Action research involves burning questions, actions with purpose, motivation, monitor and reflection, teachers as participants, authentic teaching and researching environments, and spiraling research cycles (Wen, 2011). In each cycle, Burns proposed four steps: making plans, taking actions, making observation and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 11-14, quoted in Burn, 2011, p. 9). Wen modified the four steps proposed by Burns and renamed them as focalizing problems, proposing a research project to tackle problems, implementing the project, assessing the research and making reflection (Wen, 2011).

The second research methodology exploited in the present research is an experiment (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 272-296). In this experiment, two groups - experiment group and control group, participate the experiment with the experiment group to be administered a new teaching approach, but control group serving as baseline, taught by a traditional approach. Pretest and post-tests are carried out before and after the experiment. The independent variable is genre

teaching within the teaching-learning instruction model, and the dependent variable is students' writing competence; the aim of the research is to investigate a causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

A Questionnaires is the third method to be conducted before and after the experiments, and it is beneficial to collect survey information (Wilson & McLean, 1994, quoted in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p.317). Questionnaires are in the form of written instruments, providing interviewees questions and statements to which they ought to respond by answering questions or choosing appropriate answers (Brown, 2001, p.6, quoted in Dornyei & Taguchi, 2011, p.4), and they excel in collecting factual, behavioral and attitudinal questions (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2011, p.5). In this research, questionnaires are used to survey students' attitudes and perceptions on college English writing.

Lastly, minor research methodologies such as classroom observations and interviews are expected to supplement the significant research methodologies.

## **6. The settings where evidence to be collected**

The teaching experiment, the third step of the first cycle in action research, is expected to be administered in Zhuhai Campus, located in Zhuhai, Guangdong province, South China, affiliated to Zunyi Medical University, a typical undergraduate university situated in Guizhou province, Southwest China. Each year, the Zhuhai campus enrolls about 1000 students, half of them majoring in Clinical Medicine, and the rest majoring in Nursing, Medical Imaging, Pharmacy, Bioengineering, and Stomatology, probably represent undergraduates with a medium English competence level in China. Within them, their English competence varies greatly. Students from provinces such as Shangdong and Hubei are likely to have a good command of English, while students from Guizhou province tend to have poor English competence, who have difficulty in 4 skills of English language, esp. writing skill. In order to help students improve and develop their English skills, teachers are encouraged to put forward English teaching reform projects, and the current project is proposed under these circumstances. The conduct of this project is expected to improve students' writing competencies, resonating with its effectiveness conformed in previous researches.

## **7. The ethical issues to be considered**

Throughout action research, researchers promise to follow both the ethical guidelines

established by British Education Research Association in UK and education research ethical codes in China. Ethical issues are non-minor issues, but due to insufficient space provided, only several ethical issues are briefly presented below. Be responsible for the participants. Researchers should be sensitive and attentive to participants, fully taking their rights and interests into consideration, treating them fairly, considering appropriate ways to inform participants about research consequences. Secondly, get consent from the participant before research. Make sure participants fully understand that it is their rights that they can withdraw their consents anytime, even without any reason, and the matters involved in the research such as what the research is about, why it is necessary for them to take participation, what they are asked to do in it and when, where, how, to whom the information collected from the research is used. Thirdly, regulate transparency codes. Treat participants openly and honestly, and respect their rights; they can withdraw at any time and without any reason. Fourthly, follow privacy and safety regulations. Treat participants confidentially and anonymously throughout the research, and keep research data safeguarded. Use incentives appropriately. Be mindful of the harms raised by the use of incentives. Lastly, get permission from universities where the research is conducted.

When doing experiments, administering questionnaires, observations, and interviews in cycles of action research, follow specific ethical regulations.

### **8.Methods to be used when analyzing evidence**

Experiments are the key steps in the action research cycles, so before and after teaching experiments, writing tasks are assigned to collect pretest and post-test writings for examination and evaluation. Two rating measures are to be used to grade students' writings, one is the grading principles and standards for CET4 writing, and the other is academic writing assessment criteria designed by David Rose (Rose et al., 2008, quoted in Chen, 2016, p. 159). During the data-processing, the one-way ANOVA tests and the Paired-samples T-Tests will be run to determine the statistically significant literacy proficiency differences at the significance level of .05 (Xu, 2013, p. 26-50).

### **9. Research arrangements**

This action research is made up of two cycles, and it covers nearly a two-year period. The research arrangements are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Project Schedule

| Time                     | Stages                                            | Tasks                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Jan.,2022<br>-Feb.,2022  | Before<br><br>Experiment in<br>the first cycle    | 1.Work out the timetable for the writing course.<br><br>Prepare teaching materials to be used in the three stages of the teaching-learning circle.<br><br>2.Work out the timetable for the research.<br><br>Prepare the questionnaires and grading principles used to grade students' compositions.<br><br>Choose control class and experiment class from Grade 2021.                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Mar.,2022<br>-Jun.,2022  | While<br><br>Experiment in<br>the first cycle     | 1.Pretest their English writing competence in explanation genres. Collect questionnaires from them.<br><br>2.Implement the experiment: Explanation genre is taught during the period of Mar.,2022-June.,2022.<br><br>3.After the teaching of a explanation genre, a post-test is conducted to assess the improvement in the language use in their compositions.<br><br>4.Interviews and classroom observations are carried out during the whole period, and do questionnaires after the genre teaching is completed.                                                 |
| Jul.,2022<br>-Aug.,2022  | After<br><br>experiment in<br>the first cycle     | Do statistics and calculations to see the co-relation between the teaching of the explanation genre and the improvements in students' language use in Explanation genres.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Sept.,2022<br>-Feb.,2023 | While<br><br>Experiment<br>in the second<br>cycle | 1.Pretest their English writing competence in expository and discussion genres, respectively. Collect questionnaires from them.<br><br>2.Implement the experiment: expository and discussion genres are taught during the period of Sept.,2022-Feb.,2023.<br><br>3. After the teaching of Expository and Discussion, post-tests are conducted to assess the improvement in language use in their compositions.<br><br>4. Interviews and classroom observations are carried out during the whole period, and do questionnaires after the genre teaching is completed. |

|            |               |                                                                                      |
|------------|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mar.,2023  | After         | Do statistics and calculations to see the correlation between the teaching of        |
| Jun., 2023 | experiment    | Expository and Discussion genres and the improvements in students' language use in   |
|            | in the second | Expository and Discussion genres.                                                    |
|            | cycle         |                                                                                      |
| Jul.,2023  | complete      | 1.Synthesize and re-examine the teaching materials, teaching and learning stages and |
| -Oct.,2023 | action        | sub-stages.                                                                          |
|            | research      | 2.Synthesize and re-examine the data from the experiments, questionnaires,           |
|            | report        | interviews and classroom observations.                                               |
|            |               | 3.Answer the four questions put forward at the beginning of the research and         |
|            |               | complete action research report.                                                     |

## 10.Significance of the project

Theoretically, on the one hand, the successful application of language model put forward in Systemic Functional Linguistics expands the areas where linguistic theories can be employed. On the other hand, the application of SFL in other disciplines will perfect itself.

Methodologically, most researches guided by SFL are done in the field of linguistics, which is dominantly qualitative. However, the project adopts both quantitative and qualitative research methods, which will boost more and better future researches.

Practically, the effectiveness of genre literacy and teaching-learning circle in English Writing teaching will diversify the teaching approaches to be used in the teaching of Writing in the tertiary EFL context in China, which is a boon for writing teaching in China, benefiting both teachers and students.

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