

College English Reading Comprehension and the Teaching of Discourse and Vocabulary

Chunchen Yin

School of Languages and Cultures, Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, 201701, China

ABSTRACT

In college English reading, students directly engage with discourse and vocabulary. Therefore, understanding their composition and underlying patterns is of paramount importance for reading comprehension. How to implement discourse and vocabulary teaching practices to enhance students' reading comprehension abilities is one of the central research topics for college English teachers.

KEYWORDS

College English reading; Composition and patterns of discourse and vocabulary; Reading comprehension

1 Introduction

In language learning, particularly in college English learning, reading serves as an exceedingly crucial component, constituting the primary means through which students acquire information. During English reading, students directly encounter discourse and vocabulary; hence, an understanding of their composition and underlying patterns plays a pivotal role in reading comprehension. How to implement discourse and vocabulary teaching practices to enhance students' reading comprehension abilities is a topic of widespread concern among college English teachers.

What constitutes discourse? Discourse refers to the collective term for instances of language use, language that emerges from a single communicative act. It can encompass any length of linguistically coherent monologues, dialogues, group conversations, or other oral or written language units. Discourse teaching, approached from a macro perspective, takes discourse as the fundamental unit and bases itself on the overall text. It involves analyzing, summarizing, and comprehending the discourse. The author posits that when conducting discourse teaching, in addition to analyzing and explaining the grammar and vocabulary within the discourse, it is also essential to appropriately introduce relevant cultural background knowledge. Furthermore, a deeper analysis of the discourse's genre and textual structure, as well as guiding students to appreciate the rhetorical devices and word choices employed in the discourse, should be undertaken. This is because discourse teaching emphasizes not only the acquisition of basic linguistic knowledge but also the transmission of language functions, pragmatic knowledge, cognitive knowledge, and cultural background knowledge. The discourse teaching approach is conducive to cultivating students' ability to acquire comprehensive reading skills and integrate language application abilities.

2 Four aspects of implementing discourse teaching

2.1 Introduction of background knowledge

Background knowledge constitutes the external knowledge essential for understanding discourse. Numerous linguists have posited that background knowledge exerts a greater influence on discourse comprehension than linguistic knowledge. A lack of background knowledge can impede reading comprehension, while possessing relevant background knowledge without the ability to apply it can similarly hinder understanding. When reading, if students possess limited knowledge about the political, economic, cultural, religious, and customary aspects pertinent to the discourse, they may struggle to grasp the connotative meaning of the text and discern the author's true intentions, leading to comprehension barriers. Therefore, students should be cultivated to consciously utilize background knowledge to extract information conveyed by the discourse during reading.

In classroom teaching, it is crucial to identify appropriate entry points amidst a plethora of background knowledge and timely input relevant background knowledge related to the text content, providing a relatively systematic and detailed explanation. This approach not only enriches students' background knowledge and broadens their intellectual horizons but also significantly enhances their understanding of the author's intentions and the text's connotations. Moreover, introducing background knowledge can be achieved through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities, thereby simultaneously honing students' comprehensive language application skills.

For instance, in the textbook "21st Century College English," there are excellent entry points in texts such as "Winston Churchill---His Other Life" and "Conversational Ballgames" in Book One; "Why They Excel" and "Methods of Education: East

and West" in Book Two; and "The ABCs of the U.S.A.: American Seen With European Eyes" in Book Three. Teachers can leverage these texts to familiarize students with cultural content such as Western celebrities, conversational styles in different cultures, educational disparities between the East and the West, and American lifestyles.

Additionally, it is important to note that the number of explanation points for background knowledge in a single text should not be excessive. Teachers should select an appropriate quantity of explanation points based on factors such as students' English proficiency, knowledge structure, and the necessity for understanding the text. Otherwise, the lesson may devolve into a Western culture course rather than an English reading comprehension class.

2.2 Genre analysis of discourse

The genre framework of discourse represents a highly abstracted textual pattern that elucidates the essential and defining characteristics of different discourse genres. Understanding discourse genres aids students in more accurately comprehending the meanings of specific texts and grasping their key points. Therefore, distinct teaching approaches should be adopted for different discourse genres. Below, an analysis is conducted using argumentative and narrative texts as examples.

When teaching argumentative texts, it is essential to guide students, based on the genre's characteristics, to identify the central thesis and sub-theses, clarify the factual or logical evidence presented in the article, and grasp the argumentative process and methods employed.

For instance, the "21st Century College English" textbook contains numerous argumentative texts, such as "Secrets of A Students" and "Easy Ways to Avoid An Argument" in Book One, and "Why They Excel" and "Turning Failure Into Success" in Book Two. These texts share a commonality: the author introduces their viewpoint at the beginning, establishing an authoritative central idea, followed by commentary or argumentation in the middle, and concludes by reiterating the theme, creating a cohesive structure. Moreover, they are well-organized, with each section or paragraph containing a topic sentence that is closely related to the central idea of the entire text. In teaching, teachers can design questions centered around the topic sentences of each paragraph, requiring students to read according to these questions. This enables students to quickly locate the topic sentences of each paragraph, thereby understanding the main content and genre of the text.

In contrast, the focus of analyzing narrative texts is to guide students in understanding the background of the story, identifying significant facts and plot developments, and discerning the underlying message of the article. The "21st Century College English" textbook also includes many narrative examples, such as "Stevie Wonder: Sunshine in the Shadow" and "The Washwoman" in Book One, and "Winston Churchill---His Other life" and "A Brief History of Stephen Hawking" in Book Two. These articles primarily focus on narrating stories and depicting characters. When teaching, it is crucial to seize the timeline as a clue and center on the characters. The general teaching method involves having students initially read the article to understand its genre, followed by posing a series of questions in chronological order of the events, enabling students to quickly find answers, clarify the story's onset, progression, and conclusion, understand the overall structure of the text, and comprehend the entire article.

2.3 Textual structure analysis

Analyzing the textual structure of discourse is a focal point in discourse teaching. During instruction, teachers should guide students in analyzing, understanding, and grasping the overall layout, central idea, and main points of each paragraph within the article. This helps students master the author's communicative techniques in discourse, better comprehend the discourse, and gradually enhance their ability to understand articles at the discourse level. Analyzing the textual structure of an article generally involves steps such as hierarchical division, summarizing the main idea of each paragraph, and concluding the central thesis, progressing from the superficial to the profound, from the minute to the significant.

Taking the analysis of "Why They Excel" from Unit 2, Book 2 of "21st Century College English" as an example, this is an argumentative essay. The overall textual structure of the article follows the pattern: phenomenon---causes---suggestions. The author introduces a social phenomenon by narrating the story of a Vietnamese student studying in the United States, namely, that Asian-American students generally excel academically in the U.S. The author then elaborates on the reasons behind this phenomenon, proposes suggestions, and expresses their own views, finally concluding the theme. The structure of the entire article is tightly interconnected, with each part building upon the previous one, and the beginning and end echoing each other.

When teaching such articles, teachers should start from the textual structure, guiding students in analysis and summarization, and finally concluding themselves. This approach not only allows students to capture the author's thought process in organizing the discourse but also serves as a practical exercise for teachers to train students in discourse organization skills.

Additionally, when conducting discourse analysis, teachers should explain the cohesive devices used in the article and assign relevant writing exercises to encourage students to imitate and use them in their writing. This flexible integration of reading and writing can stimulate students' interest in writing and improve their writing proficiency.

For instance, in "Why They Excel," the author employs a large number of signaling words, such as "for example," "for instance" (indicating examples), "by contrast," "instead," "whereas" (indicating comparison), "or," "and" (indicating coordination), "to start with," "second," "third" (indicating sequence), "the first of...", "another," "yet another" (indicating enumeration of reasons), "but," "although," "nevertheless," "then" (indicating concession and transition).

These words organically connect sentences and paragraphs throughout the article, unifying its structure, ensuring smooth flow, and facilitating natural transitions. When analyzing the textual structure of this article, teachers should remind students to pay attention to the usage of these signaling words and assign relevant writing exercises to enable students to learn the method of enumeration in writing and become accustomed to using sequential transition words. By integrating reading and writing in this manner, students' comprehensive language application abilities can be enhanced.

2.4 Appreciation of discourse features

After grasping the genre of the discourse and analyzing its textual structure, teachers should further guide students to dissect the article at the level of writing techniques, enabling them to understand and appreciate the author's mastery in rhetorical devices, word choice, sentence construction, and discourse organization. This process facilitates a deeper comprehension of the author's intentions, thought processes, and writing style. It not only aids students in deepening their understanding of the article's theme but also assists them in mastering fundamental techniques of linguistic communication. By appreciating the article as a work of art, students' ability to appreciate literary works can be cultivated, achieving a higher level of teaching.

Taking "The Washwoman" from Unit 4, Book One as an example, during instruction, teachers can guide students to appreciate the portrayal of the washwoman, thereby enabling them to gain a profounder understanding and empathy towards this character. On one hand, the author spares no effort in depicting the washwoman's frail and sickly appearance (old and wrinkled, sickly and weak, small and thin). On the other hand, the author repeatedly emphasizes her carrying a large bundle of clothes on her back (stagger out with the big bundle, followed by a huge bundle). Here, it is evident that the bundles of clothes symbolize more than just laundry; they represent the heavy burden of life weighing upon her shoulders—"burden." She does not wish to become a burden to others, so she shoulders the weight of life alone. "The old woman did not want to become a burden, and so she bore her burden." This exemplifies the author's use of contrast and symbolism to enhance the artistic effect. Additionally, the author pays meticulous attention to employing specific words for description. For instance, instead of using a general term like "walk unsteadily" to describe her gait, the author uses "stagger" and "totter." Similarly, when depicting her speech, the author employs "mumble" and "mutter." These vivid and specific descriptions bring the character of the washwoman to life on the page.

3 The importance of expanding and enforcing the command of the English vocabulary and the valid and effective method of achieving it

It is exceedingly important both to study the English language and to expand and strengthen one's English vocabulary. Beneath the superficialities of language is its culture and characteristic mode of thinking, and words are the instruments by which contemplation and exploration of the world is effected. The mastery of a foreign language would substantially expand the dimensions of a man's understanding and insight, and the command of a large vocabulary is the prerequisite of that salutary and edifying mastery.

Research conducted in the United States has proven, with unambiguous evidence, the paramount significance of possessing a large vocabulary to professional success. The only shared feature of the successful persons of the sundry and various professions of that country, concludes a research of great credit, is that they have "an unusual grasp of the meanings of words." This by no means implies that such a grasp of words would make professional success a "foregone conclusion," but at least it effectively sentences almost all those who is deficient in that ability to social mediocrity or imbecility.

The reason behind this certain relation between the command of words and professional distinction is plain and simple. On the one hand, we employ language to construct our understanding of the world, which is particularly true in our contemplation of abstract notions. When pondering upon quotidian objects and actions, which are by nature solid and substantial, we could well rely upon "our mind's eye," as it would conceive as well as discern the ideas in the form of mental images without the assistance of words, which are, in their most rudimentary forms and significations, but the mere symbols of things.

But when we delve deep into the recesses of the human mind, to consider more convoluted and recondite questions, and debate within ourselves, like Milton's fallen angels, "of providence, foreknowledge, will and fate, fixed fate, free will,

foreknowledge absolute," we shall at once recognize what "yeoman's service" a capacious command of words shall render us. In the latter case, we could no longer expect to conduct our thought by clear and concrete images, but must thread the dark intellectual maze under the leading strings and dim light of words.

A sophisticated grasp of the vocabulary lays the foundation of our ability to think profoundly and circumspectly upon abstract problems such as human nature and philosophy, the penetration into which is what most remarkably distinguishes the successful from the mediocre and the blockhead. The mere abilities to discriminate beef from mutton, and to cook the former into an edible form, would only procure for a man his subsistence; it is his sophistication in the ways of man and the world that could bring him success. The boundary of our vocabulary is therefore the boundary of our cogitative faculty, and whoso is incompetent in that aspect would find it hard to proceed upwards in life.

On the other hand, if one is to attain what is described as "an unusual grasp of the meaning of words," he must needs pore over volumes of literature and social science. Solely resorting to the obnoxious method of rote, and perusing only lexicons and other word books would ill achieve this end, for it could only acquire for the student a superficial, unsteady, inaccurate, without-context understanding of words, which is almost good for nothing, for words thus obtained could not at all be appositely used in their process of thinking.

Only by reading largely works of literature and social science could we convert the extraneous stuff into what is intrinsically ours, so that we could not only accurately understand it, but also apply it with dexterity in our contemplation. The perusal of such books would give us voluminous and valuable knowledge concerning man and society, for they would not fail to exhibit to our view their diverse aspects. Our chance of success shall enhance along with the augmentation of our understanding in these aspects.

The study of the English language is, indeed, exceedingly beneficial to the college students even without referring to the great amusement and edification the literary and philosophical works of such illustrious writers as Shakespeare, Bacon, Milton, Locke and Hume bring. The mere accomplishment of composing in English with skill and proficiency is sufficient to exalt the intellect of a college student into a loftier sphere, and therefore add to his competence in society.

The time-honored and picturesque English language wants logic when compared with other languages, and in the process of acquiring sophistication in English composition, particularly in acquiring the ability to compose long and complex sentences, which requires the writer's mind to be completely clear concerning the intricate relations between the sundry elements of the sentence, his logical faculty shall receive a considerable boost.

Those who could write in English not only with accuracy, but also with a certain degree of complexity, are always in better command of their reason than those who could only use their native language. Such a superiority is manifest not just in their English writings, but would also reverberate unto his Chinese writings.

For those who yearn for intellectual improvement and social competence, the mastery of the English language would be of much assistance to their ambition; in order to attain that mastery, one must needs truly grasp the signification and the use of copious English words; and to obtain this latter aim, it is requisite that he reads a large quantity of English books of literature and social science.

4 Conclusion

Discourse and lexical knowledge constitute the shared knowledge base between authors and readers. Only by mastering discourse knowledge proficiently and enhancing and enriching vocabulary proficiency and application can reading efficiency be improved. Therefore, discourse and vocabulary teaching are integral components of college English reading instruction. Introducing background knowledge, exploring discourse genres, analyzing textual structures, and appreciating discourse features within the context of discourse and vocabulary teaching, with a focus on enhancing students' reading comprehension abilities, can help avoid the pitfall of "missing the forest for the trees." This approach organically integrates the imparting of pragmatic knowledge with the cultivation of reading skills, fostering improvements in students' abilities across listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains. Ultimately, it aims to achieve the goal of enabling students to communicate effectively in English, which also represents the developmental trend in college English reading instruction.

References

- [1] Cook G. 1989. *Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Brown G., & Yule G. 1987. *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Huang, Guowen. 1988. *An Outline of Discourse Analysis* (in Chinese). Changsha: Hunan Education Press.
- [4] Wang, Chuming. 1998. "The Role of Background Knowledge and Linguistic Difficulty in English Reading Comprehension." *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (in Chinese), Issue 2.
- [5] Cai, Jigang. 2000. *A Guide to 21st Century College English* (in Chinese). Shanghai: Fudan University Press.