Text in Context & Action in Interaction: Genre-Based Pedagogical Practice in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in the U.S.

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Abstract*:* This paper investigates optimal practices for teaching Chinese as a foreign language, situated within the context of adult learning theories, with a specific focus on adopting Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective. The examination delves into the theory of genre and its role in constructing meaning within cultural and social contexts, exploring its impact on language acquisition. The paper underscores the pivotal role of learner-centered teaching and the potential efficacy of genre-based pedagogy in enhancing the Chinese language learning experience for adult learners, particularly those with limited linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a foreign language. Through this exploration, a contribution is made to the understanding of effective teaching strategies tailored to this distinct group of language learners.

Keywords: genre-based pedagogy, foreign language learning, instructional effectiveness

Genre-based pedagogy considers language a meaning-making resource and refers to how "the linguistic characteristics of specific genres serve this communicative goal" (Hermansson et al., 2019, p. 483). This paper aims to bring attention to adult learners with limited or no linguistic or cultural background in the Chinese language and difficulties they experience when learning Chinese as a foreign language. We investigate the application of genre-based pedagogy in language teaching, discuss related adult learning theory, and explore best practices. We focus on practices that display learners' significant role by incorporating existing knowledge to create an interactive and collaborative learning environment. Implementing best practices helps instructional designers create fresh, rewarding, and immersive learning experiences for adults.

Literature Review and Background

According to Modern Language Association (1991) statistics, Asian languages recorded high enrollment growth rates in U.S. colleges. Significantly, enrollment in Chinese language studies increased by 72 percent from 1980 to 1990. Despite increasing popularity of Chinese language study, "Chinese topped the U.S. Foreign Service Institute's list of the languages most difficult for anglophones to master" (Stevens, 2006, p. 99). Many factors, such as grammar, aural reception, words, oral production, pronunciation, and recall, cause challenges in learning Chinese (Hu, 2010).

Genre involves the continual construction of meanings, which embody cultural social practices (Rose, 2012). Scholars have characterized it as "a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity" (Martin, 1984, p.25). Each genre showcases a specific structure, stages, and grammatical forms. Genres intertwine texts with their application in social settings along with associated textual conventions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Rose & Martin, 2012).

Genre-based pedagogy views language as a resource for constructing meaning (Shum & Mickan, 2018; Traga Philippakos, 2020). It involves understanding how" the linguistic characteristics of specific genres serve this communicative goal" (Hermansson et al., 2019, p. 483). Effective communication in a specific language necessitates a comprehension of what, when, and why to use particular linguistic elements. Furthermore, one must be mindful of the intended audience and acknowledge that both the audience and the purpose of communication are subject to change.

Drawing inspiration from Halliday's (1994, 1978) systemic functional theory, the genre-based approach emerged in the mid-1980s. After its initial development in Austria, educators worldwide tested the effectiveness of genre-based pedagogy for teaching writing in both first and second-language education (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Hood, 2010; Rose & Martin, 2012; Rothery, 1996). Numerous studies have provided compelling evidence of the efficacy of genre-based pedagogy in enhancing students' proficiency in academic writing in English (Almacıoğlu & Okan, 2018; Ariyanfar & Mitchell, 2020; Burgos, 2017; Correa & Echeverri, 2016; Nagao, 2018; Ueasiriphan & Tangkiengsirisin, 2018; Uzun & Topkaya, 2018; Yang, 2016). Similarly, genre-based pedagogy has proven beneficial for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) (Aunurrahman et al., 2020; Dong & Lu, 2020; Emilia & Hamied, 2015; Gill & Janjua, 2020; Kessler, 2020; Mitsikopoulou, 2020; Wu, 2017). A substantial body of literature underscores the broad applicability of genre-based pedagogy in research related to teaching strategies (Hyon, 2018), the outcomes of genre-based instruction (Cheng, 2008; Yasuda, 2011), and the significance of metacognition (Negretti & McGrath, 2018). However, the investigation of applying the genre-based approach to teaching Chinese as a foreign language is a relatively recent development.

Approach to Practice

Genre-based pedagogy comprises a three-stage teaching and learning cycle, each encompassing a distinct type of interaction (Hyland, 2004). According to Dirgeyasa (2016), these stages include modeling, joint negotiation of text, and independent text construction. This instructional cycle underscores the social nature of learning and development, rooted in Lev Vygotsky's (1996) sociocultural theories and the concept of instructional scaffolding (Bruner, 1975a, 1975b). Social learning theory explains human behavior by emphasizing the ongoing reciprocal interplay between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors. According to Vygotsky (1996), cognitive development arises from socially guided learning interactions. Through scaffolded engagement, learners can attain higher levels of performance by initially collaborating and supporting each other, and subsequently working independently (Donato, 2000). Chinese learners at the beginner level heavily rely on rule-based structures for acquiring new skills (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005). Therefore, Vygotsky's sociocultural approach establishes the groundwork for examining and interpreting the teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language in adult education.

Drawing upon the characteristics of adult learners at the beginner level in Chinese language acquisition, such as their limited or absent linguistic and cultural background, and considering the distinct attributes of adult learners, including their self-directed and life-oriented nature, we

formulate the following two approaches to steer our practice in teaching and learning the Chinese language:

Unveiling Language in Context

In this section, the term "text" encompasses an array of instructional materials and learning content. Following the principles of genre-based pedagogy, language choices are profoundly influenced by cultural and situational contexts. Each distinct genre establishes a unique environment, interwoven with culture-specific interactions. This prompts the development of purposefully tailored language learning activities. These activities are designed to assist learners in comprehending the specific genre they are engaging with, understanding their target audience, and grasping the prevailing context. Consequently, this approach encourages educators to curate learning materials that not only highlight the functional aspects of the language but also illuminate its contextual application.

Fostering Interactive Engagement

Interaction holds significant importance in fostering proficient language acquisition (Jia & Aaronson, 2003). Within the framework of genre-based learning, action indicates engaging activities that actively involve students. Scholars such as Crandall (1999) has contended that group interaction empowers learners to negotiate for more coherent input and adapt their output to enhance its comprehensibility for others. Central to this approach is the emphasis on interaction, prompting learners at every stage of the genre-based teaching-learning cycle to delve into the cultural and social context of the text, the textual content and structure, and the distinctive linguistic attributes characterizing the text (Hyland, 2004).

Best Practices

The genre-based pedagogy framework empowers individuals to orient themselves toward and interpret communication events. Familiarity with genre-based pedagogy assists teachers in making strategic decisions regarding what and how to teach (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2012). The implications of genre-based pedagogy for teaching and learning Chinese can be outlined as follows:

Organizing Learning through Genres

Using genre systematically as an organizational tool facilitates the provision of comprehensible input. Genre serves as a mechanism to construct language chunks and associations. For instance, when introducing new vocabulary, an effective approach is to group similar words together, aiding students in grasping the genre by forming connections among words. Instead of presenting a mix of words from various topics initially, educators commonly collect related words such as fruits, activities, animals, and transportation. This method helps students gradually comprehend one genre (category) at a time during the initial stages of learning. The categorization process can take various forms and is enjoyable for both teachers and students. As learners accumulate a collection of words, they can develop personalized genres. Employing diverse combinations of words showcases students' cognitive processing and their utilization of acquired knowledge in different ways. Teachers tailor their instructional choices according to learners' age, interests, capabilities, and requirements. Furthermore, educators deliberately select authentic texts and

culturally enriched resources to facilitate cognitively stimulating activities that arouse curiosity and promote inquiry.

Engaging in Authentic Tasks within Genres
Numerous factors influence a genre, including the sociocultural context of its creation, the interpretation of the text, and its intended audience. Mastery of socially influential language forms empowers learners to navigate real-life scenarios effectively (Bardovi-Harlig & Rebecca, 2003). By incorporating the target language into real-world tasks, instructors encourage students to immerse themselves in the practices and perspectives of the target culture, thereby broadening their self-awareness and global outlook.

For instance, role-playing serves as a straightforward and enjoyable method to cultivate an immersive learning experience. After acquiring relevant vocabulary and sentence structures, students can engage in role-play activities, simulating shopping scenarios while practicing the target language. Teachers can add an element of challenge by assigning a specific budget and encouraging students to buy the most items within those constraints. Students can even bring price-labeled items like snacks into the classroom and engage in genuine shopping exchanges with their peers. Through purposeful interactions, students progressively develop an understanding of contextual nuances and focus their conscious attention on genre conventions within the framework of specific situations (Cheng, 2011). By applying the target language within a situational context, learners directly experience the relationship between distinct genres and actions, fostering a deeper comprehension of the interconnections among various genres (Johns et al., 2006; Swales, 2004).

Discussion

Language acquisition culminates with the attainment of meaningful output. As proposed by Houle (1996), adult educators "should involve learners in as many aspects of their education as possible and in the creation of a climate in which they can most fruitfully learn" (p. 30). Identifying instructional approaches that align with the learner's preferred learning style can significantly enhance overall learning effectiveness (Dornyei, 2006).

By examining my Chinese language teaching practice, I aimed to explore foreign language learning strategies within diverse learning contexts. The objective was to gain a deeper understanding of adult learners' requirements, their language learning behaviors, and the motivations driving their pursuit of foreign language proficiency. In truth, there exists a need for formal research that investigates the Chinese language learning experience of adults using genre-based pedagogy. Such research will extend beyond the realm of experiential sharing, enabling the dissemination of empirical insights to a wider audience.

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