The Teaching of English Reading in Senior High School Based on Discourse Analysis Theory

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Abstract: Reading plays an important role in foreign language learning. How to improve students’ reading comprehension is a particular concern of every educator. But nowadays, the teaching of reading is weak, especially in senior high schools. To solve this problem, scholars have proposed to apply discourse analysis theory to senior high school reading instruction. In order to promote its widespread application, this paper also tries to apply the discourse analysis theory to the teaching of English reading in senior high school by taking the travel journal Learn about a City that Has Diverse Cultures as an example.

Keywords: Reading, Reading comprehension, Discourse analysis theory, Senior high school reading instruction.

1. Introduction

In foreign language learning, the importance of reading is self-evident. Therefore, reading instruction is also highly valued. Reading instruction is an important part of language teaching, and its purpose is to improve students’ reading comprehension. However, we have to admit that reading instruction is still a weak part at present, especially in senior high school. Senior high school teachers still adopt traditional teaching methods, starting from the language form, emphasizing the language structure and paying too much attention to the teaching of language knowledge which refers to the method of focusing on identifying the meaning of words, analyzing the grammatical structure and explaining the surface structure of difficult sentences. This teaching model separates sentences from the whole text and treats them in isolation, making it difficult for high school students to understand the deep meaning of the article because they do not have enough language contexts, and it is impossible for them to really master and apply the vocabulary they have learned, which eventually results in the low reading comprehension of senior high school students.

In order to change the traditional teaching malpractice of “only seeing trees, not seeing forests” and with the deepening of people’s understanding of the reading process, the continuous updating of reading theory and the continuous development of reading teaching methods, scholars have proposed to apply discourse analysis theory to senior high school reading teaching, which is called discourse instruction. It not only pays attention to language form, but also to language function, and it involves relevant cultural background and other discourse knowledge. Discourse instruction provides a theoretical framework and practical approach for the teaching of English reading. In addition, it can also improve the effect of English reading teaching and students’ discourse reading ability. By giving full play to students’ subjectivity in the classroom, it can stimulate their enthusiasm and initiative in learning, so that they can get rid of their dependence on teachers. Therefore, it is very valuable to introduce the discourse analysis theory into reading instruction, which can make up for the deficiency of traditional reading.

In view of this, this paper discusses the teaching of English reading in senior high schools under the theory of discourse analysis, taking Unit 3 Diverse Cultures in the third volume of the English textbook for senior high schools published by the New People’s Education Press as an example.

2. An Overview of Discourse Analysis Theory

The so-called discourse refers to the language unit above the sentence, which is often composed of a series of words or sentences. Brown believes that discourse is “a series of related communicative functions that are constructed together in a certain way to achieve a certain overall rhetorical intention”[1]. Every discourse “must be grammatical and semantically coherent, including semantic and pragmatic coherence with the outside world, as well as linguistic coherence within the text”[7].

Discourse analysis is sometimes called utterance analysis or text analysis. Taking the discourse as the basic unit, it first analyzing and understands the text structure from the whole text, and then analyzes the cohesion between sentences and sentences, paragraphs and paragraphs, as well as the coherence of logical thinking. Through discourse analysis, students can scientifically and systematically analyze how the relative position of language materials in the text produces meaning, and identify the structural patterns in the text. The purpose of discourse analysis is to discover the rules of the structural patterns. After the structuralist Harris put forward the term “discourse analysis”, discourse analysis has gradually formed a special knowledge to study the use of language in communication[2].

Discourse analysis not only pays attention to language forms, but also to language functions, and also to cultural background knowledge and other related knowledge. So judging the success of a text through discourse analysis does not just depend on whether its language form is correct, but on the combination of three conditions, which contains the correct language form, appropriate cohesive devices, and the conformation to the cultural background at that time.

Discourse analysis can generally be divided into macro structure analysis and micro structure analysis. Among them,
Macro structure analysis focuses on the deep structure and organizational structure of discourse, including context, genre and so on. Micro structure analysis focuses on the study of the relationship between sentences, coherence and cohesive devices. Since then, more and more experts and scholars have started the research in this field. In these studies, we can conclude that discourse analysis has the remarkable characteristics as follows: (1) The object of discourse analysis is not a single sentence, but the whole language unit of the text. (2) The purpose of discourse analysis is to realize the thorough understanding of the text and reappear the author’s mental process of writing. (3) The main content of language analysis is context, genre, text pattern analysis, cohesion and coherence[5]. Discourse analysis is a teaching method to understand, analyze and evaluate an article from the perspective of the whole text. It takes the text as the basic unit and explains the text around the overall content of the text to summarize the central ideas and writing skills.

3. The Application of Discourse Analysis Theory into the Teaching of English Reading in Senior High School

Hu Zhuanglin pointed out that teachers should apply discourse analysis theory to all aspects of classroom teaching, including reading comprehension[6]. Xu Fei also mentioned that discourse teaching should be adopted in the teaching of English reading in the Chinese context. At the same time, he also elaborated on how to apply discourse analysis theory to practical teaching[9]. It can be seen that teachers should use discourse teaching theory in the teaching process to guide students to make a macro analysis of discourse from the perspective of the whole discourse, and then make a micro analysis of discourse from the aspects of cohesive devices with the focus on the parts. This paper takes the travel journal Learn about a City that Has Diverse Cultures, a reading text in reading and thinking part in Unit 3 Diverse Cultures in the third volume of the English textbook for senior high schools published by the New People’s Education Press as an example to implement the teaching of reading under the discourse analysis theory.

3.1 Macro Analysis

The first stage of discourse teaching of reading is macro analysis. At this stage, teachers should start with the macro content such as the background knowledge and overall structure involved in the discourse, so that students can grasp the theme, central idea and structure of the article as a whole. This stage aims to enable students to have a preliminary understanding of the form and content of the article and lay a foundation for further understanding of the article in the future.

3.1.1 Introduction and activation of cultural background knowledge

Cultural background knowledge refers to the external world knowledge necessary for readers to understand a particular text, including the writing background, author’s background, cultural background and other related knowledge. Compared with language knowledge, background knowledge has a far-reaching impact on students’ understanding of the text. Qi Luxia and Wang Chuming pointed out that “background knowledge is the most important factor among the three factors of reading comprehension which includes background knowledge, context and language difficulty.”[8] Because students can better understand the central idea and emotion contained in the text and the author’s writing motivation by understanding the cultural background knowledge, and they can communicate with the author in spirit, which plays a vital role for students to correctly understand the text. Moreover, the teaching of the knowledge about the cultural background is conducive to cultivating students’ cultural awareness. There are many ways to introduce cultural background knowledge. Teachers can introduce the background knowledge in a focused and selective way according to specific situations, or let students find relevant background knowledge from reference books or the Internet. Once students have the relevant cultural background knowledge, teachers should help them fully activate the knowledge and consciously use them in reading activities. There are various ways of activation, including questions, discussions, multimedia display and lists and so on.

The above travel diary Learn about a City that Has Diverse Cultures is taken as an example to introduce and activate background knowledge. Before the class, the teacher can ask the students to investigate the background knowledge of this article in the form of homework, including the writing era, social background, the author’s life experience and his purpose of the trip to the United States, and the geographical environment of the United States and its surrounding areas. During the class, teachers can ask students questions to help them activate the background knowledge. For example, students are required to mark the following locations in the map of Activity 1 presented in this textbook, which are Mississippi River, Rocky Mountains, Pacific Ocean, Atlantic Ocean and other places. This would help them understand the geographical environment of the United States and its surrounding areas, and make them have strong reading expectations.

3.1.2 Analysis of the overall structure of the text

Because the communicative functions of various discourses are quite different and the styles of texts are different. As a result, the structures of discourses are also diverse. However, the discourse structures of different genres have regularity, which is reflected in the conventional structure of the articles. Only when students understand the structures of these discourses can they better grasp the connotation of the discourse, which has an important impact on students’ reading comprehension. In other words, the understanding of discourse structure affects students’ reading comprehension. Correctly mastering the knowledge of discourse structure can help them obtain information accurately and quickly. Some studies have shown that discourse reading ability is largely reflected in the cognition and evaluation of the macro meaning and structure of the text. Yang Li believes that Chinese learners’ knowledge and understanding of text structure in English reading materials are positively correlated with their overall level of English reading. That is to say that the richer of learners’ knowledge about the text structure, the higher their overall level of reading[10]. Therefore, teachers
should teach students some knowledge about discourse structure. For example, students should be taught that a paragraph often begins with a topic sentence which expresses the central idea of the paragraph, while subsequent sentences develop this central idea from all aspects. From this point, we can see that topic sentences are the core of a text, but the presentation of topic sentences in different genres is different. Thus, teachers should explain the characteristics of topic sentences in various genres before explaining the content of the text. By teaching students the knowledge of discourse, teachers enable them to grasp the context of the article from a macro perspective and solve the problem that students know every word but do not understanding the meaning of the discourse. The reason is that the discourse structure mode is the basic idea to express the content of the text. And without it, it is almost impossible for students to comprehend the discourse.

Similarly, the above article Learn about a City that Has Diverse Cultures is taken as an example to analyze the overall structure of the text. First of all, the teacher can list several text types which are travel journal, news report, letter, personal profile, travel guide and let the students judge which kind this text belongs to. Students can quickly judge from the format of the article that the article is a travel journal. Then, the teacher should explain the knowledge of the topic sentence of the narrative text. That is, the topic sentence of the narrative text generally involves time, place, person, event, cause, process and result, and then guide the students to find out the topic sentence of each paragraph. For example, the topic sentence in the first paragraph: “Today was my first day back in San Francisco after camping in the redwood forest and visiting the wine country of Napa valley.” Finally, students are guided to summarize the contents of each paragraph. Students can conclude that the structure of this article is clear. The author recorded his one-day trip in San Francisco in chronological order. The first paragraph introduced the author’s first impression of San Francisco. The second to fifth paragraph respectively depicted the author’s activities and what he saw and heard in San Francisco in the morning, afternoon and evening, as well as the arrangement of the next day. Among them, the main line running through the travel diary was the multiculturalism of San Francisco. The author realized that multiculturalism was reflected in all aspects of the city during his one-day trip. By sorting out the overall structure of the article, students would have a clearer and deeper impression on the structure and content of the whole article.

3.2 Micro Analysis

The second stage of discourse teaching of reading is micro analysis. At this stage, teachers should direct students to examine the cohesive devices of discourse. This session aims to help students find the logical link of information transmission, analyze the cohesion between sentences and sentences, paragraphs and paragraphs, understand the theme of paragraphs, and deepen their understanding of the text.

A text is a semantic whole realized by sentences. The sentences that make up a text connect with each other structurally and semantically. What kind of semantic content determines what kind of cohesive means. Cohesion, as the main means of grouping sentences into discourses, is an important feature of a text. It is reflected in the surface structure of a text. It is a tangible network of a discourse and plays a crucial role in the semantic coherence of the whole text. Halliday pointed out that cohesion is “a certain semantic relationship between language entities”. It is through this relationship that the speaker or author can connect all the sentences of the text to form a coherent whole and achieve the purpose of communication[3]. He and his wife Hason classified cohesive devices into five types which involves reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion[4]. The cohesive devices used in different genres of discourse are also different. “Reference” is often used in narrative texts, “substitution” and “ellipsis” are often used in daily dialogues, “conjunction” is mostly used in expository texts and argumentative papers, and “lexical cohesion” is mostly used in scientific literature.

Similarly, the above travel diary Learn about a City that Has Diverse Cultures is taken as an example to analyze the cohesive devices. Although this article is a narrative, it is not limited to the use of references and uses a variety of cohesive devices. The teacher’s task at this stage is to lead students to identify the cohesive devices of each paragraph.

This article is developed in chronological order, so the teacher should first help the students to come up with the expressions related to time in the text, so the students quickly listed the expressions such as “today”, “my first day back”, “a few hours”, “in the afternoon”, “this evening” and “tomorrow evening”. Secondly, the teacher makes the students circle all the referential words, including pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, definite articles, and expressions like “such as”, and then, asks the students to write down what these referential words refer to. It is easy to find about the words like “this”, “it”, “the”, “that” and so on. Then, the students are demanded to find all conjunctions and lexical cohesive words. The former includes coordinate conjunctions, subordinate conjunctions and some expressions like adverbials. The expressions, such as “after”, “and”, “but”, “in fact”, “when”, can be found in the text. The latter includes repetition, synonym substitution and superordinate substitution. They, like “San Francisco”, “Chinatown”, “California” can be sought out in the text for many times. Finally, the teacher can let the students summarize the places the author has visited and what he has seen and heard at each specific point in time with a table sheet, so that they can clearly comprehend the author’s one-day trip, and help the students structure and systematize the fragmented information.

4. Conclusion

Reading is an important part of language input, a vital carrier of language learning, and a crucial means for language learners to obtain information. But reading comprehension is a complex process of interaction between language and thinking. Only discourse instruction based on discourse analysis theory can help students understand articles from both macro and micro aspects and improve their reading comprehension ability. Discourse analysis theory is an important foundation of language teaching research. It provides a novel method for reading instruction, especially for the high school reading which has complicated articles. Therefore, in the process of teaching of English reading in
senior high school, teachers should guide students from simple vocabulary, sentence and grammar learning to comprehensive discourse analysis based on discourse analysis theory, so as to improve the quality of teaching. In order to promote the widespread application of discourse analysis theory in English reading, this paper also tries to apply discourse analysis theory to the teaching of English reading in senior high school, hoping to serve as a modest spur to induce someone to come forward with his valuable contributions.

References


Author Profile

Huanhuan Sun has received the B.A degree in public management from South China Agricultural University in Guangdong, 2018. She has worked in a school and an educational institution for almost 3 years. Now she is going to get the M.A degree in English education from Guangzhou University in Guang Dong.