

Research of Applying Text Linguistics to College English Reading Teaching

Peng Guo

Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, Liaoning, China

Abstract

On the basis of relevant theoretical foundations of text linguistics including key contributions from Harris, Halliday, Beaugrande and Dresler, this paper systematically explores the application of text linguistics in college English reading teaching and discusses the necessity and advantages of text-oriented reading teaching approaches. By applying specific text case, the article proposes practical teaching strategies including reconstructing text structure, analyzing cohesive devices, interpreting coherence and understanding register. Research concludes that text linguistics effectively enhances college English reading teaching quality and college students' reading comprehension competence.

Keywords

Text Linguistics; College English; Reading Teaching.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of College English teaching in higher education, applying text linguistics to college English reading teaching marks a quite important change from the traditional sentence-centered teaching mode to a discourse-oriented learning approach. As an influential linguistic branch, text linguistics pays more attention to cohesion, coherence, clause, context, and register and offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how meaning is constructed at the sentence level and even text level.[1] This research paper reviews the theoretical developments in text linguistics, examines its necessity and advantages in the context of college English reading teaching and proposes practical teaching strategies, including analyzing macrostructures, identifying cohesion, reconstructing coherence and cultivating of register awareness. With the help of these effective and efficient methods adopted in text linguistics, college English teachers are able to effectively enhance teaching quality and students' reading comprehension competence.

2. Theoretical Basis of Text Linguistics

Well-acknowledged as a branch of linguistics, text linguistics mainly puts emphasis on language at levels beyond the sentence level. Being different from traditional linguistics that mainly focuses its research on phonology, morphology, syntax, and isolated sentence structures, text linguistics puts analysis on how sentences are organized into cohesive and meaningful texts especially within actual communicative contexts and the core concern of text linguistics lies in how texts are constructed, interpreted and made use of in written or oral communication.

In the development of text linguistics, as a pivotal pioneer, Zellig Harris was widely known as the first scholar who coined the term "discourse analysis" in his paper *Discourse Analysis* released in 1952. It was Zellig Harris who stressed the necessity to study language within coherent texts and laid the early theoretical foundation for this research field at that time when linguistic research mainly focused on isolated sentences. In the fields of text linguistics,

one of the most significant scholars must be M.A.K. Halliday. He was not only the founder of systemic functional linguistics, but also shifted linguistic research from isolated sentences to language as a resource for conveying meaning within context. Halliday maintained that language simultaneously achieved three metaprocesses: the conceptual function, the interpersonal function and the discourse function. According to his theory, the conceptual function demonstrates experiences and logical relationships. The interpersonal function represents social relations and attitudes. The discourse function organizes language into coherent and coherent texts or discourses.[2] In his well-known work *Coherence in English* (1976) with Ruqaiya Hasan, Halliday provided a systematic study of cohesion by identifying cohesive devices such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion as explanations for how texts achieve surface-level unity. He also analyzed coherence from different perspectives of field, tenor, and mode, which provided a theoretical framework for understanding why different types of discourse exhibit distinct linguistic characteristics. With the development of text linguistics, Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler published their influential work *Introduction to Text Linguistics* in 1981 and made significant contributions to this branch of linguistics. They proposed seven standards to define how a discourse acquires communicative meaning including cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality. These abundant research findings from linguists provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing language as meaningful text rather than isolated sentences and lay a solid foundation for text analysis and language teaching.

3. Necessity and Advantages of Adopting Text Linguistics in Guiding College English Reading

With the constant advancement of English teaching reforms among colleges and universities in China, the teaching focus has changed gradually from imparting language knowledge to equally emphasizing competency development and discourse learning. More and more college English teachers have realized that traditional reading teaching focuses only on vocabulary, sentence structure, grammatical phenomenon and translation skills and fails to improve college students' overall reading proficiency. Therefore, it is both necessary and practical to introduce text linguistics into college English reading teaching.[3]

In the practice of college English teaching, college English teachers are often aware of the phenomenon that a large number of students can understand individual words or sentences, but they are unable to have an overall understanding of a text. If we guide students to analyze various cohesive devices, interpret coherence and understand register, we can help them develop a comprehensive understanding of a text and also can strengthen their reading comprehension competence because text linguistics focuses on a text as a whole and examines how meaning is constructed through cohesion and coherence. Additionally, if we adopt text linguistics as teaching method, we can transform college English teaching from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one. Student-centered teaching advocates interactive learning and encourages students to find out different types of cohesive clues and construct coherent meaning, which avoids a sentence-by-sentence explanation teaching approach. Thus, teachers play the role as a guide in awakening students' awareness of independent thinking. It is worthwhile noting that learning text linguistics promotes college students' critical thinking. When college students apply theories of text linguistics while reading texts, they are able to grasp the author's writing stance, writing techniques and writing purpose, thereby developing their deep-thinking skills. It should be noted that in College English Test, reading tasks usually require college students to master various reading skills such as grasping main ideas, indicating implied meanings, judging writer's attitude,

deducing the meaning of a word or analyzing text structure. If college students understand text linguistics, they can acquire analytical tools for these types of reading tasks and improve their exam scores. Thus, we can find out that text linguistics not only supports teachers' requirements for English teaching but also addresses students' needs for English learning.

4. Putting Text Linguistics Theories into College English Reading Teaching Practice

Based on the above analysis, we have concluded that integrating text linguistics theories into college English reading enables students to understand the deeper meaning, text structure, and communicative intentions of the writer. Then, how can college English teachers analyze and teach reading texts based on the theories of text linguistics? As a matter of fact, teachers can make use of several key approaches to analyze and teach texts from textbooks.

4.1. Reconstructing Text Structure

It is widely accepted that text linguistics highlights the overall organization of a text and encompasses the theme, the progression of topics, and the overall structure of a text. Before in-depth reading, teachers can first assist students to identify the text type such as narration, argumentation, exposition or description and infer structural pattern of the text. During the teaching process, teachers need to guide students to identify the topic sentence of each paragraph, recognize the function of each paragraph and summarize the main idea of each paragraph. This text structure analysis helps students grasp the author's writing intentions and the logical structure of the text

In this paper, the author adopts *The Essence of China's Landscape Painting* from *New Generation College English Integrated Course 1 (Advanced Level)* as specific example of text analysis. Generally speaking, the chosen text is an expository essay that elucidates the philosophical principles and aesthetic principles of China's landscape painting. The text first puts forward the definition of Chinese landscape painting and Chinese landscape painters' ideas on nature. Then it focuses on Guo Xi's ideas on landscape painting from general principles to specific techniques. In the end, it reiterates of the essence of landscape painting and its significance. Readers should understand that China's landscape painting does not aim to depict natural scenery but rather serves as a spiritual and poetic expression of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. On the basis of the analysis above, teachers can guide students to divide the text into three parts: introduction (Para. 1-2), body (Para. 3-6), and conclusion (Para. 7). The introduction part tells the central idea that landscape painting is a spiritual or poetic creation rather than a direct imitation of nature. Meanwhile Chinese landscape painting elucidates the relationship between the painters and nature. The body part focuses on criteria for a masterpiece by using Guo Xi's painting theory of *sanyuan* (three remoteness) to elucidate how to compose Chinese landscape painting. The conclusion part summarizes the whole text and restates the essence of Chinese painting tradition, emphasizing that true art derives from internalizing nature and expressing nature in a personalized manner.

4.2. Analyzing Cohesive Devices

According to Halliday and Hasan, cohesion is achieved through grammatical and lexical devices including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical repetition. In order to understand cohesion of a text, teachers should guide students to identify these five types of cohesive devices and design relevant teaching activities such as identifying reference, recognizing substitution, inferring ellipsis, positioning conjunction and understanding lexical cohesion throughout the text. These teaching designs will effectively help students grasp the structure of the text and reduce misinterpretations caused by fragmented reading. We can

make a case analysis of the five types of cohesive devices based on the third paragraph of the text as follows:

(S1) *Guo Xi, a painter in the Northern Song Dynasty, indicated in his Lofty Record of Forests and Streams (Linquan Gaozhi) that a landscape should be “walkable” viewable,” “livable,” and “enjoyable.”* (S2) *This highlights the mission of a great landscape painter to reveal on paper the profound beauty of the natural world.* (S3) *Gripped by the vibes of the scenery, the audience feel as if they are residing and roaming in it.* (S4) *If a landscape met these criteria, it would be a masterpiece.* (S5) *He wrote: “Painters should bear this in mind when they paint and art critics should remember this when they judge.* (S6) *“Since the Tang and Song dynasties, Chinese landscapes not only contain elements of mountains and streams, but also roads extending to the top of mountain ridges and people on roads or boats on the water.* (S7) *The Chinese like to say they “read” a painting.* (S8) *That is to say, they appreciate the content of a painting and enjoy its spiritual meanings.*[4]

4.2.1. Identifying Reference

Reference uses pronouns or determiners to point back to an element previously mentioned. We can also name the pronouns or determiners as anaphoric reference. In the given paragraph above, we can find pronoun references such as “*He*” (S5) referring back to “*Guo Xi*” mentioned in the first sentence (S1) and the pronoun “*they*” (S8) referring back to “*The Chinese*” in the seventh sentence (S7). As typical demonstrative reference, “*this*” is used twice in the fifth sentence, “*Painters should bear this in mind... critics should remember this...*” (S5). Both refer back to the Chinese landscape painting criteria mentioned in the first sentence “*that a landscape should be walkable, viewable, livable and enjoyable,*” (S1) and its purpose of revealing aesthetic beauty and resonating with viewers.

4.2.2. Recognizing Substitution

Substitution involves replacing a noun phrase, a verb phrase or clause with another word. This type of cohesive device is not prominently used in the given paragraph. However, we can recognize a potential example in the fourth sentence. Here, “*a masterpiece*”(S4) could be seen as a nominal substitute for “*a landscape that is walkable, viewable, livable, and enjoyable,*” (S1) though its functions are more akin to a lexical-level synonym substitution.

4.2.3. Inferring Ellipsis

Ellipsis can be regarded as a form of zero substitution. This cohesive device involves intentionally omitting structurally essential elements under the premise that listeners or readers can fill in the missing information from the context. Using ellipsis helps writers create a tight and concise connection. Being similar to substitution, ellipsis can be divided into three categories. They are nominal ellipsis, verbal ellipsis, and clause ellipsis. In the sixth sentence, we can infer that the verb “*contain*” is omitted after “*but also*”. The complete sentence should read “*Since the Tang and Song dynasties, Chinese landscapes not only contain elements of mountains and streams, but also (contain) roads extending to the top of mountain ridges and people on roads or boats on the water.*” (S6)

4.2.4. Positioning Conjunction

Conjunction means linking words that signal logical relationships between clauses or sentences. Halliday and Hasan summarized four typical types of conjunction as additive, adversative, causal and temporal. In the given text, there is additive conjunction “*and*”, which is used frequently to add information such as “*...mountains and streams,*” “*roads... and people,*” “*on roads or boats*” in the sixth sentence (S6). There is temporal conjunction “*Since*” (S6), which establishes a temporal starting point for the statement that follows. “*That is to say,*” (S8) can also be regarded as an additive conjunction which introduces a restatement or explanation of the preceding clause about “*read a painting*” in the seventh sentence.

4.2.5. Understanding Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion involves repeating key words or using synonyms to maintain topic focus. In the given text, the author makes full use of repetition of core nouns to establish lexical cohesion. We can find that the key term “*landscape*” is used three times. Nouns like “*painting*”, “*paint*” and “*painter(s)*” are used more than three times throughout the third paragraph. Synonyms and paraphrasing are also adopted. For example, “*reveal... the profound beauty of the natural world*” in the second sentence paraphrases the earlier idea of creating “*a poetic world*” in the first paragraph of the text. The audience feeling “*as if they are residing and roaming in it*” in the third sentence directly exemplifies what makes a landscape “*livable and enjoyable*” in the first sentence. Besides, “*...appreciate the content... and enjoy its spiritual meanings*” in the eighth sentence is an elaboration of what it means to “*...‘read’ a painting.*” in the seventh sentence.

4.3. Interpreting Coherence

Unlike cohesion, coherence often does not exist on the surface of a text, which means that teachers should help students to infer logical connections, identify cause and effect relationships or problem-solving structures and even deduce assumptions shared between writers and readers.[5] Through close reading of the text, teachers and students can identify the underlying cause and effect patterns between the lines. For instance, only by internalizing the nature in their mind just like “*the whole horse is in the heart*” (Para. 7) can the painters be able to render it on paper in a personalized and spiritual manner and this is the essence of artistic creation. For another, only by meeting aesthetic criteria of being “*walkable, viewable, livable and enjoyable*” (Para.3) put forward by Guo Xi can a Chinese landscape painting be considered a masterpiece. Problem-solving is another obvious coherent feature of the text. How can Chinese landscape painters represent the vast and profound natural world on a two-dimensional paper? They can apply compositional principle of integrating nature into an organic whole like “*mountains as body, water as arteries;*” (Para. 4) as well as *sanyuan* theory (Para.5). How can we protect the spirit of artists and viewers from being “*spoiled by the temptations of the material world*”? (Para.6) We can create and appreciate landscape paintings which embody the distance from worldly affairs. In this way, we obtain a spiritual sanctuary and a sense of “*being pure and lofty*” (Para. 6). So, art itself is presented as a spiritual means to address worldly issues.

4.4. Understanding Register

According to theories of text linguistics, each text is created within a specific social, cultural and contextual environment. Based on this understanding, teachers can guide students to analyze the text from the perspective of register.

4.4.1. Field Analysis

Field means the events or activities described in the text. It is not difficult to find that the text is an explanatory essay. It elucidates the philosophical and aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese landscape painting. In the text, the author discusses several core concepts about Chinese landscape painting such as ideological and spiritual purpose, aesthetic criteria of a masterpiece, technical and compositional principles of *sanyuan* and underlying philosophical implications. The text can be read as an academic or cultural expository piece for interpreting Chinese landscape painting.

4.4.2. Tenor Analysis

Tenor refers to the participants involved and their relationships. We can infer that the author of this text could be an expert or educator specializing in China’s art while the target readers of this text are those who are interested in the fields of art, culture or philosophy. Though the readers might not be professionals, but they are assumed to acquire knowledge because the

author clearly explains specific culture-related terms such as “*rushi*” and “*chushi*” in the text. We can also infer that the reader audience may include students, well-educated general readers, and readers from abroad. The relationship between the author and the reader is unequal: one party is the expert imparting knowledge, while the other is the learner.

4.4.3. Mode Analysis

Mode means the presentation format of a text and its level of formality. Obviously, the text is a written discourse intended for college students. Its structure is well-organized just like an academic journal article or a formal lecture manuscript. The text is formal and academic in tone. At the lexical level, we can identify the use of academic terms such as *sanyuan*, *rushi* and *chushi*. There are many abstract nouns such as “*essence*, *harmony*, *conception* and *endeavor*” and complex nominal structures such as “*the warmth of the spiritual world*” and “*the artistic conception of a landscape*”. At the grammatical level, the passive voice is frequently employed to focus attention on the concept like “*nature should be respected*”. The text adopts a monologue-style interaction mode without interaction between the speaker and the audience because its primary purpose is to introduce and interpret an artistic tradition to a literate audience.

5. Summary

Taking all the analysis above into consideration, we can conclude that text linguistics provides a practical and effective way for college English teachers to cultivate students’ competence in text learning. College English teachers are able to guide students to understand a text from a different perspective which is beyond sentence-understanding level. In this way, students are able to have a deeper and better understanding of a text. Additionally, college English teachers should adopt multiple teaching activities such as identifying cohesive devices and analyzing context features to improve college English reading teaching quality. College English teachers can make use of effective reading teaching design to motivate students to take part in classroom learning and then enhance their independent learning ability. With the continuous development of English teaching in colleges and universities, we believe that text linguistics will play an increasingly significant role in improving college English reading teaching and fostering college students’ language proficiency.

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