Implementing Genre-Based Curriculum Cycle in Teaching Writing in Secondary School Settings

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Abstract

The article investigates the application of Genre-based Curriculum Cycle, which includes four phases: building knowledge of the field, modeling of the text, joint construction, independent writing, in writing class in secondary school settings. The study was conducted by a senior high school in Linfen, Shanxi province. Problems emerge in different phases such as lack of background knowledge, skip of the modeling phase, teacher's focus on mistakes at the sentence level without looking at the schematic structure, and insufficient scaffolding. Suggestions are provided to enable teachers to make an efficient use of Genre-based Curriculum Cycle in writing class. At the same time, students' writing ability can be improved.

Key words: Genre-based curriculum cycle; Modeling; Schematic structure; Scaffolding

INTRODUCTION

In Mainland China, the English proficiency of secondary school students is not satisfactory though they have been learning English for almost ten years from their childhood. One of the reasons is that English is learned and taught as a separate subject instead of being used as a means of communication. Students, particularly those who live in less developed areas, have few opportunities to use English outside the classroom and less exposure to English in their daily life. From my own teaching experience and contact with students, I discover that the writing ability is one of the poorest in four language skills and in the school where I conducted the research, writing is still taught in a traditional way, emphasizing accuracy of grammar and vocabulary. Besides, students hardly ever have an opportunity to express their real ideas and knowledge through English writing. Since the Genre-based Curriculum Cycle attach great importance to both text and context and takes into account language at the level of whole text and clause, as well as sentence (Hammond, 1987, 1989; A Burns, 1990; Derewianka, 1990, cited in Kongpetch, 2006; Martin & Rose 2005; Gibbons, 2002), the approach is adopted to teach writing in a secondary school in Lin Fen, Shanxi Province to discover whether the approach can lead students to improvement of their writing.

The Genre-based Curriculum Cycle (also called Teaching-learning Cycle) was first utilized in Australia (Kongpetch, 2006; Martin & Rose, 2005). Its successful application to teach writing to L1 speakers and English as a Second Language (ESL) to non-native speakers has proven itself an effective approach (for example, Hammond, 1989; Hammond & Hood, 1990; A Burns, 1990; Drury & Webb, 1993, cited in Kongpetch, 2006). The Cycle is initially demonstrated by Callaghan and Rothery in their book *Teaching Factual Writing* in 1988, includes three phases Deconstruction, Joint Construction and Independent Construction. Hammond (1992) and her colleagues as well as Deterwianka (1990, cited in Gibbons, 2002) further develop the Cycle into four parts: Building knowledge of field, Modeling of the text type, Joint Construction, Independent Construction. The Cycle is based on the notion of scaffolding (Bruner, 1975; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; Cazden, 1988, cited in Paltridge,

2001; Gibbons, 2002), which draws from Vygotsky's (1978) view that higher thinking processes, including language, arise as a consequence of human interaction (Paltridge, 2001). The study explores the process of teacher's implementation Genre-based Curriculum Cycle in teaching writing in secondary school settings and identifies problems and provides possible suggestions.

2. OVERVIEW OF TEACHING CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The 45-minute lesson under observation is a Grade 2 classroom with 60 students in a key senior high school where Chinese is the medium language. Data were collected through classroom observations, informal interviews with the teacher before and after the class and handouts. The whole class is videoed and each session of the class is timed to see if the time management is scientific and reasonable. Nineteen minutes were spent on the talking of the teacher and the rest of it goes to students.

The writing task *what we can do to help people with AIDS* is drawn on the reading passage about AIDS they learned during that week. The teacher adopts the Genre-based Curriculum Cycle step by step to teach the information report genre writing. The handouts are distributed to students before the class starts, so they can learn relevant vocabulary on their own first. The teacher is interviewed about what approach she is going to use and what aims she will achieve before the class. After the lesson the teacher talks to me about the satisfactory and less satisfactory part in her view. The video is re-observed many times and the lesson is analyzed and interpreted as follows.

3. REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

The teacher carries out the approach one stage after another but she also makes some changes.

3.1 Stage 1: Building Knowledge of the Field

The stage is extremely important in that overall knowledge of the cultural and social contexts of the topic is built and developed, in other words, the primary aim of the phase is to collect information concerning the "content" of the topic (Martin & Rose, 2005; Gibbons, 2002). The teacher provides two short reading passages in the handouts for students to establish shared experience of the topic. No more discussion or materials are presented on the grounds that the teacher thinks students have gained some knowledge from the text from their textbooks previously. In order to enable students to share their knowledge efficiently and precisely, the teacher helps students to build up vocabulary relevant to the topic, such as acknowledge, get rid of, eliminate, victim, delicate, devote, reunion, suicide, etc.. Context is briefly stated to tell students to carefully choose appropriate words in certain context.

3.2 Stage 2: Modeling of the Text

The teacher does not present any model text; instead, she provides a model text after the Stage 3. In our after-class interview, she says it is better to produce their own model first because students may be restrained to certain rules and lose their creativity, which is crucial for innovation in their writing. In her opinion, writing should enhance creativity rather than stifle it, so she wants her students really think how to write rather than just follow the "recipe" of the text type slavishly.

3.3 Stage 3: Joint Construction

At this stage, students are prepared to consider writing, but they will not yet be writing alone (Gibbons, 2002). Based on the above consideration, the teacher asks students to contribute ideas in group discussions and write their essays jointly. In order to make sure every student is involved in the collaboration, group discussion is strongly advised to adopt the method of Circle of Writers —Take Turns, which means the group has only one piece of paper, and group members take turns writing, when one is writing, the others brainstorm (Jacobs et al., 2002, p.47). The teacher participates students' discussion randomly. Simultaneously, a group is selected to write and share their essay on the blackboard. Actually, the teacher chooses a group she believes they will produce a quite good essay as a model for the whole class to learn from. Here is the essay on the blackboard (with no mistakes corrected):

In the 21th century, an increasing number of people get infected with AIDS, which is deadly. They are living a miserable life and they are helpness. So we should show our love and care to every AIDS patient to cheer them up. For example, if we know someone infected with AIDS, we can keep a secret to make them live as usual. And we can also put up posters that can make ordinary people know more about it. We believe that if we try our best to help them, they don't feel lonely. (93 words)

The teacher leads the students to correct mistakes by asking a few students to tell what the mistake is and how to correct it.

3.4 Stage 4: Independent Writing

After analyzing and identifying problems appearing in student's model, for instance, grammatical patterns, a model text printed on the handouts are shown at the end of the class for students to appreciate and to learn from. Students then are expected to produce their essay independently after the lesson due to the time limit.

4. PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

As can be seen from the above reflection, a few problems appear in the process of Genre-based Curriculum Cycle.

The class will be assessed mainly with reference to Hammond (1992) principles as followed:

> The Genre-based Curriculum Cycle is based on the assumption that in order to learn to write effectively, students first need to have an extensive understanding of and familiarity with the topic they are writing about. They also need models of the genre they are learning to write, in order to have a clear idea of what it is that they are working towards. They need some support and guidance in learning how to organize what they know about the topic into an appropriate written text, and finally they need opportunities to apply what they have learned about writing the text, as they 'go it alone 'and write independently. (Hammond et al. 1992, p.18)

Firstly, in Stage 1, the teacher believes that students gain adequate background knowledge of the topic through reading passages in the text books but they actually don't. We can see from student's model that there is not much concrete information they provide to help AIDS patients. In fact, a number of activities which start where students are at can facilitate students to further their understandings of the topic and open up the field and context of the genre (Martin & Rose, 2005). For example, students can form groups to gather ideas and write them on a list and share it with the group next to them and so on and so forth.

Secondly, it can be seen from the teacher's practice that the biggest problem appears in the modeling phase. The aim of the stage is to analyze the genre through a model text related to the topic (Gibbons, 2002) and teach students the generic schematic structure and grammatical features so that they are clear how the text is organized to achieve its social function (Kongpetch, 2006). However, she presents the model text without analyzing it after the Joint Construction rather than before it. What's more, she fails to discuss the social function of the genre and the purposes intended by the writer and analyze characteristic schematic structure and grammatical patterns. A better way to do is provide a model text selected by the teacher before students start joint writing to make them clear about what they are working towards. When read the text with students, the teacher can try to develop an understanding of the social function and purpose of the text by eliciting students to think:

——What is the text about?
——Why language choices are made?
——What tenor is used?
—— Who wrote it and who will read it?
——Why the text is written?
——Where the text can be found?
——What's relationship between the text and its context?
(Kongpetch, 2006)

In addition to the above questions, schematic structure and major grammatical patterns should be included in the phase. What's crucial, the teacher should assist students to establish a link between the function and schematic structure and grammatical patterns of the text to fulfill its purpose (Gibbons, 2002).

The teacher worries that the creativity will be stifled if the model is provided. However, offering rules and expectations through model text does not limit students' freedom and autonomy. On the contrary, it provides them tools to be creative and autonomous. Students are able to manipulate conventions of text types after they are conscious of them (Gibbons, 2002).

Thirdly, the following is the student's model corrected by the teacher as well as students: (——stands for corrected mistakes; ——stands for good points)

In the 21st century, an increasing number of people get infected with deadly AIDS. They are leading a miserable life and they are helpless. So we should show our love and care to every AIDS patient to cheer them up. For example, if we know someone infected with AIDS, we can keep a secret to make them live as usual. And we can also put up posters that can make the public know more about it. We believe that if we try our best to help them, they won't feel lonely. (Please look at p.5 for original version)

It is clear that the teacher focuses on mistakes at the sentence level without looking at the schematic structure, in other words, the whole text, let alone the context. The teacher does not regard structure important as long as students can construct meaningful sentences without grammatical mistakes. Apart from that, the teacher is too dominant, and students are significantly influenced by her ideas. A possible solution to the problem is that peer proofreading can correct these mistakes easily and what the teacher needs to do is demonstrate the schematic structure and linguistic features of the genre and better prepare students to move to joint construction (Gibbons, 2002).

Finally, in Stage 3, scaffolding is insufficient for students to write jointly. The term scaffolding is used by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976, cited in Gibbons, 2002) to describe the teacher's role in the collaboration process, where the teacher contributes what learners are not yet able to do alone or do not yet know. The crucial point at this stage is teacher's guidance and support to scaffold students to convert their ideas discussed orally into the written mode. The learner's *zone of proximal development* has clear pedagogical relevance to scaffolding as Vygotsky (1986) considers learning collaboration between teacher and learner, with the teacher playing an authoritative role similar to that of an expert supporting an apprentice; "What the learner can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow." (Vygotsky, 1986, p.188)

The teacher can assist students through questions and elicitation and by modeling the writing process with students, for instance, the teacher can negotiate with students regarding the beginning, middle and end construction of text (Hammond, 1992, p.21).

SUMMARY

The Genre-based Curriculum Cycle is relatively new in Shanxi Province, so problems emerge inevitably when conducting it in the classroom. The teacher skips Stage 2, which is an important part of the Cycle and should be treated with great care. There are 3 points worth noticing: First, in Stage 1, communicative activities can be carried out to enable students to share, discuss and argue about different aspects of the given topic instead of only looking at the textbooks or listen to the teacher (Martin & Rose, 2005; Gibbons, 2002). Then, modeling is essential for students to understand the generic structure social function and purpose of a genre and it cannot be omitted. Finally, scaffolding plays an important role in the Cycle and teacher should provide guidance and assistance to students at any stages when necessary.

The Genre-based Curriculum Cycle can help teachers and students in a meaningful way, as it can improve the teaching outcome of writing and students' interest and cooperation in writing. As a result, students' writing ability can be improved after a period of time.

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