

## A Study on the Application of Register Theory in Foreign Trade English Correspondence Teaching in Vocational Colleges

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### Abstract

With the guidance of systemic functional grammar of register theory, this paper makes a quantitative analysis on the foreign trade English correspondence writing of the students in two classes majored in customs clearance in Shandong Agriculture and Engineering University, and tries to make the conclusion that mastery of the register characteristics of foreign trade correspondence English helps to quickly improve the skill to write foreign trade English letter of the students in vocational colleges, hoping to provide a reference for the teaching of foreign trade correspondence writing in vocational colleges.

**Key words:** Register theory; Foreign trade English letter; Higher vocational education

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## 1. OVERVIEW OF REGISTER THEORY

### 1.1 The Studies of Foreign Scholars on Register Theory

Register theory is one of the important theories of systemic functional linguistics, and is also a topic that systemic functional linguists often discuss. Ure & Ellis (1969, 1977), Gregory (1967), Gregory & Carroll (1978), Fawcett (1980), Halliday (1964, 1978, 1985, 1989), Martin (1982, 1992, 1997), Eggins (1994, 1997), Leckie-Tarry (1995) and other foreign scholars have carried out corresponding studies in this regard.

Register theory can be traced back to Malinowski and Firth of the London School. The anthropologist Malinowski proposed situational context and cultural context in the 1930s. In 1962, Firth developed the concept of context as a theory of semantic existence in context. The concept of register was first proposed by Reid (1956) in his study of bilingualism. In 1964, Halliday and others made a further exploration on the register in the study of “language planning framework”. They argued that “language will change as its function changes. When the situation is different, language will be different. The language variant distinguished by usage is called register.” Halliday also argued that the differences between register domains are mainly manifested in the form, that is, in vocabulary and grammar, of which the differences in vocabulary are the most obvious. Later, Halliday changed his original view, and regarded register as “a meaning structure associated with a particular situation type.” Thus, the differences between registers are not only in the form (vocabulary, grammar), but also in the meaning, and meaning determines form. Halliday concluded the situational factors that determine linguistic characteristics into three categories: field of discourse, tenor of discourse, and mode of discourse. Field of discourse refers to what actually happens and the context in which language occurs, including the topic, speaker, other participants and the entire conversation. Toner of discourse refers to the relationship between the participants, including the social status of the participants and their respective roles. Mode of discourse refers to the communication channels or media. These three variables of context tend to determine the three components of the meaning system: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Halliday has not only put forward the theories of register and context, but also realized the importance of register theory in foreign language teaching.

Martin and Leckie-Tarry have made further explorations on Halliday’s register theory. In his research, Martin has emphasized the social nature of the three elements of

register, and has combined register theory of genre analysis to analyze discourse. Leckie-Tarry (1995) has made a dynamic analysis on the role of discourse field and the interactions among the three variables.

## 1.2 The Studies of Chinese Scholars on Register Theory

The theory of systemic functional grammar was first introduced by Fang Li to Chinese readers in 1977. In 1989, *Introduction to Systemic Functional Grammar*, a book coauthored by Hu et al. (1989) proposed that “register theory means that the language we speak and write will change in accordance with the changes in situation”, “the purpose to develop register theory is to find out the general law governing these changes, and then understand what context factors determine what language features”. Huang (2001) holds that by examining the use of language in specific discourses, we can determine the cultural context or register that a particular discourse belongs to. In the late 1980s, Professor Zhen (1994) emphasized the guidance role of register theory in foreign language teaching in China. Since then, domestic scholars have come to realize the necessity and importance of the combination of register theory and foreign language teaching. Hu Zhuanglin and other scholars hold that the most extensive application of register theory is language teaching. The new century requires multi-skilled talents, and many countries have actively explored and practiced in this field.

However, in view of the domestic and foreign studies, it has been mostly discussed at the theoretical level (Hou, 1988; Guo, 1986; Huang, 2002). In recent years, many researchers tried to put its application to college English teaching, made a lot of research in theory and practice, and according to the practice of teaching of foreign trade correspondence is few.

Based on Halliday’s view on register, this paper analyzes the foreign trade English letter writing of the two classes of 2015 majored in customs clearance in Shandong Agriculture and Engineering University, tries to make the conclusion that mastery of the register characteristics of foreign trade letter English helps to quickly improve the students’ skill to write foreign trade English letter, and hope to provide a reference for the teaching of foreign trade letter writing in vocational colleges.

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## 2. A DISCUSSION ON THE ROLE OF REGISTER THEORY IN ENGLISH CORRESPONDENCE TEACHING IN VOCATIONAL COLLEGES

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### 2.1 The Importance of Business English Correspondence Teaching

With China’s accession to the World Trade Organization, China’s international trade and technological cooperation

with other countries have developed rapidly. Trade practices have become more flexible, more diversified, and have had increasingly frequent information exchanges with the outside world. As a major carrier of business information in international trade, business letter and telegram reflect the economic trades and business activities among different countries in English language. Their roles are receiving more and more attention. It can be said that the achievement of each transaction can not be separated from correspondence. Mastering the writing skill of business English letter is the premise and foundation of effective communications and successful transactions.

### 2.2 The Current Situation of Business English Letter Teaching in Vocational Colleges

In order to meet the needs of the development of the times, various vocational colleges, as the main body to output a large number of application-oriented talents for the community, have offered the course of foreign trade English correspondence for some specialties. However, due to the diversified sources of students in vocational colleges, students’ uneven English basis, single English teaching mode and some teachers’ insufficient teaching experience, the teaching results are barely satisfactory. In the past, many researchers have studied ESP teaching from different perspectives and in different ways. However, in view of the relevant researches at home and abroad, empirical researches on the combination of register theory and foreign trade English correspondence teaching are not many. In particular, the empirical researches on the combination of register theory and foreign trade English correspondence teaching in vocational colleges are even fewer. The author holds that register theory can be applied to all aspects of foreign trade English correspondence teaching, and it has a close relation with foreign trade English correspondence teaching in vocational colleges.

### 2.3 Application of Register Theory in Foreign Trade English Correspondence Teaching in Vocational Colleges

Foreign trade English correspondence is a required course for students majored in customs clearance in our College of Humanities. This course starts at the second semester of the first academic year for all the students majored in customs clearance. This course requires teachers to focus on helping the students master the writing skill and method of foreign trade letters in the business work that they may be engaged in. In order to achieve this teaching goal, the author used Halliday’s register theory as the basis to analyze the discourse field, discourse tenor and discourse mode of some correspondence examples, covering the establishment of business relation, inquiry and reply, order and confirmation, insurance, packing and shipping marks, shipment, payment, inspection, arbitration, complaint, claim, agent and compensation trade, etc, and tried to analyze the characteristics of

foreign trade English correspondence and the guidance of contextual knowledge in teaching practice from the three aspects.

In the study, the author first selected his own two classes of 2015 in the first academic year majored in customs clearance, class 1 and class 2, in the College of Humanities, Shandong Agricultural Management College as the respondents. Secondly, in the first class of foreign trade correspondence, the author carried out test on the argumentation writing and personal letter writing abilities of the two classes to ensure they were at an equivalent writing level. The he selected Class 1 as the experimental class, and Class 2 as the controlled class. Without previously informing the students of this experiment, the author strengthened the application of register theory in the teaching of the experimental class, analyzed the register characteristics - discourse field, discourse toner and discourse mode of foreign trade English correspondence, and emphasized that the cultural and predictive functions of register theory could be applied to discourse analysis. The controlled classes were not emphasized with the use of register theory.

The following is a simple analysis on an inquiry letter in the fourth unit of teaching from the three aspects of discourse field, discourse toner and discourse mode.

Dear Mr. Wang:

Subject: Parts of Machine Type B-114

Thank you for your letter of Feb. 15th, 2001 and the enclosure requesting quotes for parts for the captioned machine.

As requested, we are submitting our quotation in triplicate and wish for you to place your order with us as early as possible because we have a large backlog.

We await your decision.

Sincerely,

Sander De Haan  
International Sales Manager

(a) Field of the discourse: This is a letter in which a seller (the international sales manager of parts) replied to a buyer's inquiry, which can be seen from the subject and the signature of the international sales manager. The characteristics of the words and phrases are mainly reflected as courtesy (Thank you for your letter of...), and expectation (wish for you to place your order with us as early as possible, await).

(b) Toner of the discourse: This is a letter in which the seller (the international sales manager of parts) replied to the buyer's inquiry. The seller should have taken a proactive attitude to attract the buyer's order based on the their relationship. This letter has only three paragraphs and each constituted by a sentence, which can be described as concise and comprehensive. The first paragraph gets

straight to the point, precisely but courteously: Your letter dated February 15, 2001 and the attached requesting quotes for the captioned machine have been received, thank you. The second paragraph is a long sentence: At the request of you, we shall send you a quotation in triplicate and look forward to your earliest order because we have a large backlog of undelivered orders. The third paragraph shows the expectation for the buyer's decision. In this way, the buyer could see that the seller's products were in short supply. The letter flexibly uses a language strategy.

(c) Mode of the discourse: This letter is more in line with the characteristics of written language, which is reflected in the following words: captioned, as requested, submit, backlog, await and so on. The second paragraph is a complex long sentence rather than a short sentence. Because long sentence in foreign trade correspondence can make a clearer and more rigorous response to an inquiry. The third paragraph uses the word await, which equals to wait for. These two words are verbs, meaning "expect" or "look forward to". This letter does not use wait for, because await is more used in written language with abstract noun as the object, and wait for is more used in spoken language with people or thing as the object.

In the experimental group, the author analyzes all the examples of each unit. In the controlled group, traditional teaching method was implemented. When the experiment came to the end of the first semester, the author selected the final question of 2014 self-examination paper of foreign trade correspondence—writing an English letter—to test the two classes. When the experiment came to the end of the second semester, the author selected the last question of 2014 self-examination paper of foreign trade correspondence again—writing an English letter—to test the two classes. In the teaching of foreign trade English correspondence, the author was also aware of the progress of the foreign trade correspondence writing ability of the experimental class and controlled class, and paid special attention to the mastery of register three variables—discourse field, discourse toner and discourse mode of the experimental class. After class, the author randomly selected a number of students from the experimental class for interviews, and let the students make an analysis on their letters (the last question of the self-examination paper of foreign trade correspondence over the years—writing an English letter) by memory.

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## CONCLUSION

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Using the statistical analysis software SPSS13.0 to analyze the data, the Obtained results are as follows:

(a) Quantitative analysis showed that, there was no significant difference in the level of English communication between the two groups of English learners in the middle of the experiment. At the end of the experiment, the second writing test results showed

that the writing level of the experimental group was more improved than that of the controlled group, indicating that the register-based teaching method of foreign trade English correspondence had a positive effect in improving the learners' writing skill. The two tests showed that the register-based teaching method needs to be implemented for a long time to improve the learners' writing skill.

(b) Qualitative analysis showed that the experimental group has improved register sense in the testing process. The majority of the respondents held a positive attitude to the register-based teaching method of foreign trade English correspondence, and hoped to continue to use this pedagogy in the future. This showed that the register-based teaching method has played a positive role in promoting the students' learning interest, and the implementation of this teaching method has some practical significance.

With the guidance of systemic functional grammar of register theory, this paper makes an analysis on the foreign trade English correspondence writing of the students in two classes majored in customs clearance in Shandong Agriculture and Engineering University, and concludes that the foreign trade correspondence teaching based on register theory has played a positive role in improving the students' interest in learning, and the implementation of this teaching method has some practical significance. However, the author believes that this study still has many shortcomings. For example, the respondents are from only two classes, which are not representative enough due to the small number and limitation to the particular school. The above results can only be used as a hypothesis for future researches, which aims to provide a reference for the teaching of foreign trade correspondence writing in vocational colleges.

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