

An Exploration of the English Reading Instruction Model with a Systemic Functional Linguistic Perspective*

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Reading is an important channel for students to acquire knowledge and information. Therefore, exploring an effective reading instructional model to improve students' reading ability is one of the main goals of today's university English teaching. The model of English reading instruction based on the theory of systemic functional linguistics is designed to study how teachers can apply this theory to the teaching of reading in order to improve students' reading comprehension.

Keywords: systemic functional linguistics, reading instruction, reading proficiency

The University English Syllabus points out that reading is an important channel for acquiring language knowledge, laying a good foundation for language and acquiring information. Reading ability is the main language skill that most college students need for their future work. In university English teaching, we should always pay attention to the cultivation of reading ability. Therefore, it is one of the important goals of university English teaching to actively explore an effective reading teaching model and improve the reading ability of college students in an all-round way.

Halliday, the founder of Systemic Functional Linguistics, argued that Systemic Functional Linguistics studies language from the perspective of social symbols in order to address its main concerns, specifically language learning and teaching (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 89). Thus, systemic functional linguistics can provide a new theoretical research perspective for English teaching in universities, especially for reading instruction.

I. Discussion on Reading Models

Reading is a psycholinguistic process. The reader is initially exposed to a string of linguistic symbols chosen by the author to represent the ideas the author is trying to convey. By the end of the reading, the reader understands the meaning that is intended to convey. As a result, it is the author who transforms meaning into language, and the reader who transforms language into meaning (Liu, 1996).

Reading models have been studied for a long time, the most popular of which are the top-down and bottom-up models. The top-down model is based on conceptual theory and proposes that, in the reading process,

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readers make predictions based on their existing syntactic and semantic knowledge in their brains, which are confirmed and modified during the reading process. In other words, the reading process is a process of meaning reconstruction rather than decoding; the reader is the center of the reading process rather than the discourse. The meaning of the utterance is reconstructed from the reader's experience and context. This is the model advocated by the context- and function-focused approach to reading instruction.

The "bottom-up model" suggests that in the process of reading, the reader processes the text letter by letter, word by word, and sentence by sentence to arrive at the meaning of the text; each level of processing is completed before the next level can begin. The meaning of each part is arrived at first, and then the meaning of the text as a whole is arrived at last. This approach assumes that readers can understand utterances as long as they have mastered the physical and formal features (phonology, word order, vocabulary, grammar), which is the reading model recommended for teaching reading with language form as the primary goal.

To address the shortcomings of these two models, Stanovich proposed an interactive-compensatory model of reading ability. He pointed out that there are several levels of factors at play in the reading process, including word recognition, syntactic analysis, and contextual knowledge. When reading, the various levels of knowledge (which can be one level higher or lower) compensate for each other (Stanovich, 1980, pp. 32-71). This model is considered to be a modification of the above two traditional models.

2. Current Problems in Reading Instruction

Although the communicative compensation model has contributed to the development of reading instructional theory, the first two models still dominate English reading instruction today.

One is the bottom-up model of reading instruction, in which the teacher first explains vocabulary, requires students to master pronunciation, spelling, and meaning, as well as some idioms and collocations, and then requires students to read aloud and recite the utterances proficiently, and finally, explains and translates the utterances sentence by sentence. This teaching approach focuses only on the teaching of formal items and structure, but not on the grasp of meaning patterns and contextual features, believing that learning to read means learning vocabulary and grammar, and that language parts are composed of sentences, and that understanding the sentences means understanding the language parts. This mode of teaching enables students to improve their vocabulary accumulation, accuracy of spelling and pronunciation, and precise delineation of grammatical structures, but students have poor communicative skills and have difficulty capturing the overall meaning and important information of the utterance.

The other is the top-down model of reading instruction. This model is usually general reading, in which the teacher first has students roughly read the text and then discusses its thematic meaning, structure, and communicative purpose. This model leads students to focus only on the mastery of contextual features, the expansion of knowledge, and the correct understanding of semantics, but not on the learning of basic features such as word families, vocabulary, grammar, and other formal features, resulting in students' ability to skim, speed read, capture the thematic meaning of the text, and enhance their communicative functions, but their basic language skills are not solid, with frequent spelling errors, mispronunciation, punctuation errors, and other problems, etc.

3. Reading Instruction Model with a Systemic Functional Linguistic Perspective

According to the Systemic Functional Linguistics school, language is a symbolic system consisting of three levels: phonological (word family), lexico-grammatical, and semantic, linked below to entities (sounds and characters) and above to situations, classes, and cultures (Halliday, 1973). The same language-related factors that students should master in reading instruction also relate to multiple levels of language, and these factors play different roles in reading. The recognition of written symbols and knowledge of vocabulary and grammar are the basic conditions without which reading in a language is not possible; the meaning of language is the basic goal of reading; culture, categorization, context, and communicative purpose are the external conditions for readers to achieve their goals (Zhang, Miao, & Li, 2005, p. 288).

In reading, students are first exposed to the written symbols of the language, so reading instruction can be given in a bottom-to-top and then top-to-bottom sequence. Teachers need to train students both in bottom-up vocabulary recognition skills and in top-down overall processing skills. However, in the actual reading process, students do not strictly follow the bottom-up, then top-down reading order, but often use knowledge or skills at all levels almost simultaneously, compensating for the lack of information at one level with information at another. To facilitate instruction, we divide reading instruction into the following steps.

3.1 Phonetic (Word) Characteristics

In the reading process, students first need to identify words. Therefore, in the early stages of reading instruction, the focus of learning should be on learning the features of the word or sound families. In English learning, many students feel that the number of English words is huge and that shortcuts are hard to find. In fact, although English words are difficult to learn and remember, they have an inherent pattern. Words are made up of morphemes (roots, suffixes) and their meanings are generated by morphemes. Although the number of words is vast, the number of morphemes is limited. If students are trained to master the morphemes and know how to construct basic words, they can easily overcome the difficulty of remembering words. In addition, teachers can give synonyms, antonyms, and derivatives of each word to help students expand their vocabulary through association.

In reading, students will often confuse words with similar spelling or pronunciation, and thus misunderstand the content of the text. Therefore, teachers can use the context to provide students with special training. In addition, teachers should also guide students to pay attention to the special meaning of punctuation marks and different glyphs, such as italics or boldface, which must represent a certain meaning when they suddenly appear in a text in regular font.

3.2 Vocabulary & Grammar Features

In addition to phonological (word system) features, the recognition of lexico-grammatical hierarchical features is also a basic skill that students should focus on mastering. According to the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the meaning system of a language is represented by its lexico-grammatical system. Therefore, the lexical-grammatical system of a language should be appropriate to the meaning system of the language. The grammatical system is not an autonomous system, so grammar learning must be related to the social and situational contexts in which the grammar is applied, i.e., to the use of the language.

In reading, students usually encounter words, phrases, idioms, and other items that can pose a barrier to comprehension of the language. Therefore, in reading instruction, teachers can guide students to first read through the whole text and record unknown vocabulary and phrases as key learning items. Secondly, students should be trained to make inferences of meaning through the context in order to reduce the barriers to comprehension caused by these vocabulary words; at the same time, students should try to master these vocabulary words and phrases. In addition, students should not only understand the meaning of the vocabulary in the text, but also know its meaning and function in other contexts, as well as the semantic and collocation relationships with which the vocabulary is associated.

3.3 Meaning Analysis

According to Systemic Functional Linguistics, language is essentially a network of semantic systems and provides meaning potential through conceptual, interpersonal, and textual functions. The conceptual function reflects human experience and logical perception of the objective and subjective world; the interpersonal function reflects interpersonal relationships and the judgment and evaluation of the likelihood and frequency of occurrence of things; the textual function is the function of the speaker to organize the conceptual and interpersonal functions into utterances, which forms a semantic whole within the utterance and connects it to the context and makes it an integral part of the context (Halliday, 1973).

The function of linguistic units in the structure of language refers to the semantic components that play a specific role in constituting a semantic system and are discrete parts of the formalized meaning potential, which is embodied by the lexical grammar. Conceptual meaning is embodied in the and material system, including actors, processes, goals, environments, etc.; interpersonal meaning is embodied in the tone system, including components such as tone and remainder; and schematic meaning is embodied in the position system, with two functional components, subject and discourse, and the information system, with two functional components, known information and new information (Zhang, Miao, & Li, 2005, p. 8).

The meaning of language is the basic goal of reading. Therefore, the analysis of the meaning of language parts plays a pivotal role in reading instruction. After the syntactic analysis of utterances, we can guide students to understand the conceptual meaning of utterances by understanding the nature of the process and the characteristics of the participants; to understand the interpersonal meaning of utterances by examining tone structure and what components are primarily subjects; and to understand the schematic meaning of utterances by analyzing subject positions and themes.

3.4 Contextual Inference

Understanding the context in which a passage is produced is an element that directly affects the reader's understanding of the whole passage, and without a proper understanding of the context in which the producer of the passage relies on, it is impossible to make an interpretation of the passage that is consistent with the author's intent. Therefore, context governs verbal activity and determines the choice of meaning. To understand the author's intent, one must first understand the context in which the text is produced.

On the basis of analyzing the meaning of an utterance, the teacher can guide students to speculate about the context of the utterance. The context situation consists of field of discourse, tenor of discourse, and mode of discourse, and these three variables together govern the choice of meaning and the manner in which language is

embodied, i.e., registers. Field of discourse is expressed through conceptual functions; tenor of discourse is expressed through interpersonal functions; and mode of discourse is expressed through textual functions. Changes in the context of a situation cause changes in the registers.

If we know the situation and the social context in which the language will be used, we can predict many of the languages that will be used, and this prediction is likely to be correct (Halliday, 1978). From this perspective, moving from meaning to context is not unidirectional, but bidirectional. Students can make predictions about the contextual factors of a language through its meaning, and the contextual factors, in turn, help students to understand the meaning more precisely. Accordingly, we can train students to make two-way guesses about the meaning of a passage and its context. For example, after reading a passage, students can be guided to make judgments and inferences based on the logical development of the passage's content. At the same time, students are provided with the necessary cultural background knowledge to train them to make inferences and predictions about the content of the text based on the context.

3.5 Generic Inference

The use of language is always closely related to cultural context, because the choice of meaning can only be meaningful in a certain culture, i.e., cultural context constrains the choice of language categories. Cultural context consists of three aspects: (1) attitudes, values, and shared experiences of any group living in the same culture; (2) culturally formed expectations of how to behave; and (3) culturally formed ways of doing things or reaching common goals (Harmmond, et al., 1992). The culturally formed ways of doing things through language are called language genres. Each language class has a special schematic structure, i.e., a generic structure potential. In different cultures, the intentions to do things with words are mostly the same, but there are cultural differences in the way the intentions are realized, and these differences are reflected in the differences in the structure of the language classes.

Genres reveal to some extent the communicative purpose of an utterance. In a certain social culture, language is capable of fulfilling multiple functions, which will result in a number of speech genres. After a two-way investigation of the meaning and contextual factors, the teacher can further guide students to speculate on the linguistic characteristics of the utterances. For example, for biographies, they can be understood according to the main lines of characters, time and events, successes/achievements/beliefs, and evaluations; for stories, they can be understood according to situations, including characters, time, space, problems, actions, conclusions, and other clues; for explanatory texts, they can be understood through examples, comparisons, classifications, causes and effects, definitions, and other procedures to understand the characteristics and essence of things.

3.6 Discourse Evaluation

In the advanced stages of reading, we should focus on understanding the deeper meaning of a text and evaluating and appreciating the text according to different cultural features, genres, and contexts. The evaluation of a language text should not only take into account its linguistic features, but also its situational and cultural contexts. Discourse is produced in certain cultural and situational contexts. On the one hand, utterances are the result of selection in a certain generic structure potential, and to some extent, they reflect the behavioral patterns in a particular culture; on the other hand, they are constrained by the situational context. On the other hand, utterances are constrained by situational context. Situational context constrains people's choices in the potential

for meaning provided by semantic functions, so that the utterance is ultimately reflected in a particular linguistic form or register characteristic. For an utterance, it must not only express a certain meaning, but also make appropriate linguistic choices in the meaning potential according to the situational and cultural contexts (Zhang, Miao, & Li, 2005, p. 228).

A qualified utterance must have both register appropriateness and genre appropriateness, i.e., the speaker must not only choose appropriate language according to the situational context to achieve functional meaning, but must also choose appropriate linguistic structures according to the specific cultural context to achieve communicative intent. Linguistic appropriateness includes not only the choice of language, but also whether the linguistic structure of an utterance matches the communicative intent. When evaluating the linguistic appropriateness of an utterance, students may be asked to first identify the genre to which the utterance belongs or the communicative intent of the utterance, such as explanation, persuasion, description, etc. Second, determine whether the utterance achieves the communicative intent of the speaker. Next, determine whether the utterance fulfills its communicative intent. If the answer is yes, then how does the utterance fulfill its communicative intent. In addition, we can analyze other linguistic features of the utterance, such as the type of participants, tense, etc., in order to make further judgments about the linguistic appropriateness of the utterance.

4. Concluding Remarks

Reading is a bi-directional process of multiple interactions that constantly shifts between different levels (Zhang, Miao, & Li, 2005, p. 298). Therefore, in actual reading instruction, we need to link the various levels of the language, on the one hand, training students to infer meaning, context, and communicative intent from formal features and markers; on the other hand, guiding students to analyze the meaning and formal features of the language according to the context and communicative intent. On the other hand, students are guided to analyze the meaning and formal features of the utterances according to the context and communicative intentions. In addition, on the basis of understanding the basic contents of the utterances, teachers should guide students to analyze and evaluate the linguistic appropriateness of the utterances as a whole. Systemic Functional Linguistics believes that language theories are formed in use and serve the use of language, so it pays special attention to the practicality of language theories. Its theories are not only applicable to the teaching of English reading, but also play an important guiding role in the teaching of listening, speaking, and writing.

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