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A Literature Review on Using the Genre-Based Approach and Collaborative Learning to Teach English Argumentative Writing to Chinese College Students

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Abstract

This literature review explores the application of the genre-based approach and collaborative learning in teaching English argumentative writing to Chinese university students. Despite the growing emphasis on academic writing in English education, Chinese students often face persistent challenges in argumentative essay writing, including limited critical thinking skills, inadequate structural coherence, and insufficient linguistic resources. Existing teaching practices, often dominated by product- or process-oriented approaches, fail to address these issues effectively. This paper introduces GBA, grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and CL, rooted in social interdependence theory, as complementary methodologies. The review discusses their theoretical foundations, practical applications, and advantages in addressing the identified problems. The findings suggest that integrating GBA and CL enhances students' genre awareness, critical thinking, and language proficiency while fostering collaborative skills and learner autonomy.

Keywords: Argumentative writing, Chinese college students, collaborative learning, genre-based approach, systemic functional linguistics

Introduction

Argumentative writing is a core component of academic communication and a critical skill for college students. However, teaching and learning English argumentative writing in the Chinese context present unique challenges due to cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical factors. Traditional teaching methods often fail to develop students' critical thinking and effective argumentation skills, resulting in essays that lack logical structure and linguistic sophistication. This paper aims to review

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the literature on using the genre-based approach and collaborative learning to address these challenges. By examining their theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical implications, the review highlights their potential to improve students' writing outcomes and overall learning experiences.

Challenges in Chinese College Students' English Argumentative Writing

In Chinese universities, argumentative writing is positively correlated with students' academic performance and competence (Ma & Li, 2022). Although the Curriculum Standards cover a variety of writing genres, they emphasis argumentative writing. Writing an argumentative essay requires logical and critical thinking, as well as the ability to persuasively connect ideas and evidence, which makes this form of writing part of the academic genre (Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014). Argumentative writing requires research to gather evidence and support arguments. Developing critical thinking and research skills is essential for academic success and sets the stage for future academic endeavours. Effective communication, critical thinking, and the ability to present well-reasoned arguments are skills that are needed in all walks of life. College students who are able to master argumentative essay writing are better prepared for academic success and future career success (Sabu & Vernandes, 2019).

Despite the importance of argumentative writing, the current state of argumentative writing among Chinese university students is unsatisfactory. In an empirical study (Deng, 2024) reviewing the period published between 2000 and 2020, three main categories of deficiencies in Chinese college students' English writing can be identified: students' difficulties in content creation; students lack skills in expressing their positions in an authoritative manner; and students argumentative writing often lacks organization, e.g., a lack of logic in the presentation of ideas.

Chinese students often struggle with critical thinking, which is a prerequisite for effective argumentative writing. Many students lack the ability to analyze problems, evaluate evidence and construct logical arguments, partly because the examination-oriented education system emphasizes rote learning over analytical skills (Amiri & El Karfa, 2021). In addition, students are not adequately exposed to tasks that require independent judgement and evaluation, which limits their ability to present well-reasoned arguments. Effective teaching needs to embed critical thinking tasks, such as debate-based essay assignments, to develop students' analytical skills (Rahmatirad, 2020). Secondly, essays often show poor organization and coherence. Students tend to focus on isolated sentences rather than constructing paragraphs and essays with a clear logical structure. This problem is compounded by little exposure to well-structured argumentative essays. Research has emphasized the importance of teaching rhetorical structures, such as the Toulmin model, which includes claims, evidence, proofs, counterclaims, and rebuttals, to improve logical progression in writing (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). Finally, many students lack the vocabulary and grammatical knowledge needed to effectively express complex ideas. This linguistic deficit hinders their ability to articulate arguments and provide persuasive evidence (Hyland, 2007). Incorporating scaffolding strategies, such as explicit instruction in academic vocabulary and grammar exercises related to argument structure, can help address these issues. In addition, peer editing activities can provide students with opportunities to learn from each other's linguistic nuances.

Problems in Current English Argumentative Writing Pedagogy

Chinese students' poor performance in argumentative essay writing can be attributed to the traditional approach to teaching writing, which focuses on the outcome and ignores the process (Deng, 2024). Most teachers still use teaching methods that focus on linguistic accuracy and final writing outcomes (Jiang et al., 2023), teaching practices that rarely emphasis the context and purpose of writing (Zhu, 2021; Li et al., 2020), and limited opportunities for peer interaction (Hu, 2022).

In some Chinese EFL writing classrooms, a product-based approach to writing is prevalent, where the main goal is to write without errors in a linguistically correct form by imitating a model text (Khaki & Heidari Tabrizi, 2021). In this approach, the teacher presents a model text, and students are usually asked to imitate the model text to produce a similar result (Huang & Jun Zhang, 2020). This writing strategy does not emphasize how students should approach or view the writing process. Badger and White (Badger & White, 2000) argue that writing development is essentially the result of copying input from teacher-provided texts. Writing itself is considered to be primarily concerned with knowledge of language structures. As each teacher is a judge of the model used, this strategy is considered teacher-centered. This approach to writing has been criticized for ignoring the writing process. As a result, process-based strategies advocated by Zamel (1987) began to replace the product-based approach.

The process writing approach is also a teaching method often found in Chinese classrooms that emphasizes the writing process rather than the product. Process writing places more emphasis on language skills such as planning, drafting and rewriting than on language comprehension skills such as grammar and sentence structure. 'Prewriting, writing/drafting,

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revising, and editing' are the four steps that this set of tasks typically goes through (Dewi, 2021). As a result, social and cultural factors that influence various forms of writing are not taken into account (Kadmiry, 2021). Students rarely receive explicit instruction on adapting writing for different audiences and purposes (Feez & Joyce, 1998). In addition, it has been argued that process pedagogies that emphasize multiple drafts are not sufficient to prepare students for the rigors of academic essay writing (Iskandar, 2020).

In addition, due to crowded classrooms and limited lecture time, Chinese students mainly listen to the teacher explaining the text (Sari, 2019). Classmate relationships are mostly individualistic. The unequal status between teachers and students hinders the development of critical thinking (Zeng & Xue, 2022). Classroom practices tend to focus on individual writing tasks, ignoring the benefits of peer collaboration. As a result, students miss the opportunity to learn from each other's strengths and perspectives. Peer assessment and collaborative brainstorming sessions can significantly improve students' ability to revise and refine their arguments (Wu & Tao, 2022). Teachers can also use structured feedback scoring rubrics to facilitate effective peer assessment. Therefore, EFL teachers must urgently explore effective writing teaching methods in order to revolutionize mechanical learning in university English writing classes. This is crucial to improving the quality of academic argumentative writing.

The Genre-Based Approach (GBA) in Teaching Argumentative Writing

In order to address the shortcomings of previous approaches, genre-based approaches began to emerge in the 1980s. Since Martin first proposed the genre-based approach in 1979, it has attracted increasing attention in the field of teaching English as a second language. Targeting language education, it covers almost all language skills in student learning. The genre pedagogy closely links language skills and social goals. It emphasizes the perspective of the reader more than the writer. Every piece of writing is a reflection of a specific goal and takes place in a social context (Azhar & Maolida, 2019). Through genre-based training, learners have the opportunity to understand how to create multiple pieces of writing for different goals in a social context (Mauludin, 2020). Genre can be seen as a deliberately manufactured social behaviour that divides into different groups based on traditional external, non-linguistic criteria (e.g., audience, purpose, and language community). In this context, the link between linguistic form, function and linguistic social context is the focus of genre-based approaches (Han & Hiver, 2018). Using genre-based approaches, some researchers have examined the teaching of writing in various discourses; others have examined the growth of students' generic awareness, arguing that genre sensitivity is an important aspect of good writing and that teachers should be aware of the practical applications of different genres as a way of improving students' writing by increasing generic awareness (Almacıoğlu & Okan, 2018; Cholifah et.al., 2022; Huang & Jun Zhang, 2020).

Theoretical Foundations of Systemic Functional Linguistics Genre-based Approach is rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics, which views language as a resource for creating meaning in social contexts. SFL emphasizes the relationship between language, context, and purpose, and how linguistic choices shape and are shaped by particular genres (Halliday, 1994). The three meta functions of language - ideational, interpersonal and textual - provide a comprehensive framework for analysing and teaching argumentative writing. By integrating these meta functions, teachers can help students understand that argumentation is not only logical, but also social and linguistically constructed. The rise of genre pedagogy has also attracted the attention of Chinese scholars. According to Fu et al. (2020) and Li et al. (2020) studies on EFL teaching, genre-based pedagogies in Systemic Functional Linguistics are beneficial to Chinese students' writing development. Through explicit instruction and practical support from teachers, students are encouraged to interact and communicate to develop their understanding of how language functions to fulfil the social purpose of the target genre and ultimately become independent writers in that genre. Numerous EFL settings around the world, such as (Almacolu & Okan, 2018; Emilia & Ed, 2021; Ganapathy et.al., 2022; Ghane & Mazdayasna, 2022) have demonstrated the genre-based approach to student writing development's Importance.

Genre-based approach involves the explicit teaching of genre conventions, including text structure, linguistic features, and communicative purposes. It uses a scaffolding approach to guide students through the stages of modelling, co-construction and independent writing (Feez & Joyce, 1998). This teaching and learning cycle process ensures that students gradually build understanding and control of the argumentative genre. During the modelling stage, teachers can use annotated instructional texts to demonstrate effective rhetorical strategies and language choices. During the co-construction stage, students can be facilitated to work in pairs or small groups with other students to co-construct texts, brainstorm, negotiate ideas, write, and revise (De Oliveira et al., 2021).

Application in argumentative essay writing in argumentative essay writing, genre-based approach can help students identify and analyze the rhetorical devices and linguistic features of an argumentative essay. For example, students can deconstruct model essays to understand how claims, evidence, and counterarguments are presented (Derewianka, 1990). Co-construction activities, such as teacher-led collaborative drafting of the introduction or body paragraphs of an essay, can

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provide additional scaffolding. Finally, independent writing tasks allow students to consolidate what they have learned and apply genre conventions independently.

Collaborative Learning in Teaching Argumentative Writing

In order to change the teacher-centered mode of teaching (i.e. the main way in which teachers impart knowledge to students is by lecturing), what we should encourage is collaborative learning among students. Group activities are one of the most popular models(Wang, 2020). From a theoretical point of view, the use of collaborative writing, pairing and cooperative group learning in the second language classroom is supported by socio-cultural perspectives. From this perspective, Vygotsky (1978) states that students involved in collaborative activities are able to think at a higher intellectual level than students who learn alone. This stems from the development of language, which increases social interaction when learners are helped by more knowledgeable people in the community. Social interdependence theory suggests that positive interdependence among group members promotes individual and collective learning. Through collaborative learning, students develop critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

In group writing, students actively participate, interact, and collaborate to achieve common writing goals. They share ideas, discuss concepts, and work together to complete the content of their writing. This collaborative approach to writing has several advantages and benefits. First, group writing allows students to take advantage of the collective knowledge and skills of the group. Each member brings his or her own unique perspective, experience, and language skills to the table, resulting in richer, more diverse ideas. Through discussion and brainstorming, students can produce written work that is more creative and comprehensive than individual writing (Alghasab et al., 2019; Budiartha & Vanessa, 2021; Teng, 2021). Secondly, group writing provides opportunities for peer feedback and revision. This feedback process enhances students' critical thinking skills and encourages them to collaboratively revise and edit their work. By receiving comments and suggestions from multiple perspectives, students gain a deeper understanding of the writing process (Cui et al., 2022). In addition, group writing promotes communication and language development. Students can engage in active discussions, negotiate meanings, and clarify concepts, thereby deepening their understanding of the topic and improving their language use (Veramuthu & Shah, 2020). Through group writing, students can practice using appropriate vocabulary, sentence structure, and writing conventions while learning from the linguistic strengths of their peers. Group writing also promotes the development of teamwork and interpersonal skills. Students will learn how to communicate and collaborate effectively with their peers, sharing responsibilities and coordinating efforts to achieve common writing goals. They develop skills such as active listening, compromise, and respect for different points of view, which are valuable not only in writing but in all aspects of life and work. According to the results of several previous studies (Arumugam et al., 2020; Maulidah & Aziz, 2020; Rababah, 2019), many students made significant progress in their writing skills through collaborative learning.

In argumentative writing, collaborative activities include peer review, group brainstorming, and collaborative drafting. These practices enable students to refine their arguments, improve language accuracy, and deepen their understanding of audience expectations (Situmorang, 2021). For example, group brainstorming sessions can help students develop different perspectives and identify stronger evidence for their arguments. Group writing tasks can also encourage learners to negotiate meaning and develop a shared understanding of argument structure.

Advantages of Integrating GBA and CL

Firstly, the clear guidance provided by the genre-based approach helped students to understand the conventions of argumentative writing, while the collaborative activities allowed students to practice and internalize these conventions through interaction. Students gained a deeper understanding of how genre-specific features can serve communicative purposes in authentic contexts. Second, while genre-based approach focuses on rhetorical devices, collaborative learning focuses on dialogue and encourages students to critically analyze issues, evaluate multiple points of view and construct coherent arguments. Collaborative activities, such as co-constructing arguments, promote deeper student engagement with the content (Kartika-Ningsih & Gunawan, 2019). In addition, scaffolding in GBA and feedback-rich environments in CL help students expand their vocabulary and improve their grammatical accuracy. Teachers can conduct targeted grammar exercises based on errors observed during group writing activities (Rahmatirad, 2020). Finally, by combining genre-based approach and collaborative learning, students gain independent writing skills while benefiting from collaborative learning experiences that develop teamwork and interpersonal skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). For example, after collaboratively drafting a paper, students can apply the skills they have learned to revise the paper independently.

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Conclusion

The combination of genre-based approach and collaborative learning offers a promising solution to the challenges of teaching English argumentative writing in Chinese universities. By addressing the issues of limited critical thinking skills, weak structural coherence, and insufficient linguistic resources, these approaches provide a comprehensive framework for improving students' writing outcomes. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these approaches and their applicability in different educational contexts. In the meantime, we encourage teachers to adopt these strategies to promote more effective and engaging writing instruction.

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