

A Study of Multimodality Based Construction of Academic Discourse in the English Teaching for EFL Postgraduates

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Abstract

The widespread application of ICT has greatly changed the monotonous approach to EFL teaching and learning in China's higher education, bringing about the multimodal innovation in the Postgraduate English teaching. Studies and reforms on EFL teaching in the universities of Science and Technology indicate that multimodal academic discourse construction is very necessary for postgraduates to engage in international academic communication, which effectively reflects the subject status of students and the interactive characteristics of language learning. Constructing multimodality based academic discourse can prove complex and dynamic. Participants should select and employ the easiest and most effective means of expression by considering variables such as field of discourse, mode of discourse and tenor of discourse, if the successful communication wants to be achieved. Students could construct their English discourses through the integrated use of a range of appropriate multimodal resources, which realizes the deepening from ideational meaning to interpersonal meaning, reducing academic aphasia and strengthening academic discourse power. This teaching approach helps postgraduates improve their English communicative abilities.

1. Introduction

The modern information technology is employed to change the traditional single-mode foreign language teaching, and the multi-modal foreign language teaching is adopted to meet the academic demands, scientific research demands and international exchange demands from the students, and it's becoming a common ground in the foreign language circles day by day. This paper undertakes discussions from the following three aspects: 1) The motivation of multi-modal foreign language teaching, 2) The construction of multi-modal postgraduate English academic discourse, 3) The teaching experiences and reflections.

2. Motivation of Multi-modal Foreign Language Teaching

Mode is the channel and medium for information communication, including the symbol system as language, technology, image, color and music, etc (Zhu Yongsheng, 2007:83). The multi-moding refers to the phenomena of employing multiple symbol resources like language, image, voice and actions, etc for social intercourses (Gu Yueguo, 2007:83; Zhang Delu, 2010:15). The language is one of the multiple communication symbols of the human beings, and the people could express their ideas and construct concepts by resorting to sound, image, color, space and other communication media. Language is a social semiotic system, and is existing by relying on the context (Hu Zhuanglin, 1994:45). The context including variables as field of discourse, mode of discourse, tenor of discourse and so on. Context is closely related to discourse, the discourse is generated in a specific context, and its significance and functions are subjected to influences and restrictions from specific social cultural factors (Halliday, 1994).

Constructing multi-modal academic discourse is a complicated and dynamic process. The participant should express distinct information to make the communication successful, and should choose the expression manner most easily understood by the audiences. From this perspective, the three variables-field of discourse, mode of discourse and tenor of discourse should be considered in constructing the academic discourse. It's because the field of discourse determines the genre of discourse (such as scientific report, news report, legal action and religious preach); the mode of discourse determines the selection of medium and manner (such as colloquial style or written language); the tenor of discourse involves social distance and power, and determines the keynote of discourse (such as the formal discourse and the informal discourse). The mode of discourse will also be different if the tenor of discourse is different.

In postgraduate English teaching, the construction of multi-modal academic discourse mainly involves academic presentations and academic reports. They differ greatly from the discourse construction of academic papers. Although the academic presentations have the same field of discourse with the

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This research is supported by the funding for Education and Teaching Reform from Education Department of Heilongjiang Province (Grant No. JGXM_HLJ_2015009)

academic reports, and both of them mainly elaborate the academic points of view and exhibit the scientific research achievements. However, both of them are different in mode of discourse and tenor of discourse.

The rapid development of new media technology enables the people not to take language as the only means to express meanings (Kress & Theo van Leeuwen, 2001), and multi-modal is becoming a symbol resource for meaning construction day by day. The technical multi-modal context is three-dimensional and multi-dimensional, and is integrity of language context and non-language context (Zeng Fangben, 2008:61). Considering the multi-modal discourse from the perspective of system-functional linguistics, it could enable the expression of meaning more intuitive, concrete and comprehensive in conceptual function; it could facilitate the recognition, interpretation and communication from people toward the information in interpersonal function; it could enable the multi-modal elements as language, sound and image, etc to cross act and collaboratively work, mutually supplement and jointly construct the multi-dimensional, orderly and holographic discourse in discourse function. Therefore, the system-functional linguistics, particularly the metafunction theory of language has provided a solid motivation for our undertaking of multi-modal foreign language teaching.

3. Construction of Multi-modal Postgraduate English Academic Discourse

Investigation and research are required on the English learning motive, learning interest, learning strategy and self-efficiency recognition, etc to undertake the multi-modal foreign language teaching. We perform questionnaire surveys on the English study of ten classes postgraduates in 2012, it's found after the research that the English learning motives from the postgraduates are very clear (for example, they hope to learn the frontier of scientific research through the English study, they hope to participate in international academic exchange and they hope to participate in English interactions). Although they are not satisfied about their English level and learning efficiency, and above 90% postgraduates are interested in participating in English academic presentations.

According to the constructivism learning theory, the acquiring of knowledge and skills require the learner to initiatively select, understand, digest and construct the external information on the basis of the former experiences and knowledge (Tschirhart & Rigler, 2009). In this process, the learner is a subject of meaning construction, while the teacher is a promoter. The teacher needs to create a real, concrete, vivid and visual scene for the learner (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

On the basis of analyzing the needs from postgraduates in learning English, our course teachers are conducting perform on the postgraduate English teaching, and the academic presentations are increased. Guiding the postgraduates for English presentations in combination with scientific research issues, devote to multi-modal English academic discourse construction, so as to meet the actual demands from the postgraduates. We encourage the postgraduates to construct multi-modal academic discourse, and to participate in the English interaction. Each postgraduate should construct the multi-modal English academic discourse in combination with their majors, and should make an academic presentation (generally 5-7 minutes, and 3 minutes Q & A), and try learning by doing.

Postgraduates are encouraged to highlight the technical terms and key concepts when making English presentations. In this way, it will help the audience "understand, follow up and participate". As for the professional contents difficult to understand, we encourage them to make the speech with diagrams. For example, one student adopts the multi-modal elements like texts, images, and colours, etc. in his English presentation of environmental water treatment, and vividly present his ideas. Rich information has been transferred in limited time, it has aroused the interactive learning interests from the audiences.

We could see from the examples that the multi-modal academic discourse construction is very essential for postgraduates to participate in academic exchange. With the deepening of recognition from the people toward the multi-modal academic discourse, the multi-modal academic discourse has huge teaching potentials, and undoubtedly it will add vitality to the postgraduate English teaching reform.

4. Experiences and Reflections in Teaching

After the teaching practices of more than four years, the course teachers and postgraduates have generally given active comments to the construction of multi-modal academic discourse. Many course teachers consider that the construction of the multi-modal academic discourse has provided a platform for the postgraduates in employing the multimedia technology to exhibit their academic levels, it's beneficial to the postgraduates to improve their English comprehensive applicable capacities, and it's also beneficial to cultivate the transcultural academic communication capacities from the postgraduates. The multi-modal postgraduate English academic discourse construction teaching has stimulated the vitality from the postgraduates in participating in the English academic presentations.

Not only the Chinese postgraduates, but also more and more foreign students favour to actively construct the English academic discourse in combination with their own professional research, and to participate in the classroom English speaking interactions. What is worth mentioning is the multi-modal postgraduate English academic discourse construction teaching has accelerated the English teaching new concept of “the elegant demeanor of youth, and international blossoming”. Plenty of postgraduates have processed and transformed their English academic presentations into scientific research papers, have obtained the opportunities of releasing on international journals and communicating on international academic conferences, and therefore, realize the pursuit of “Chinese standpoint and international expression”.

Most postgraduates have given positive comments to the multi-modal academic discourse construction. However, it's worth noting that some students, particularly those of a low English level consider that the after-class preparation of multi-modal academic discourse construction is time-consuming and strenuous; one student speaks, many students listen, the interactions between teachers and students are reduced, it's lack of interactions between students, with little results.

It's thus clear that the multi-modal academic discourse teaching attempts and relevant research are still in a preliminary period, and it's still to be continuously perfected and improved. The different opinions from the postgraduates are impetus to deepen the postgraduate English teaching reform. The English teachers should strengthen our recognition toward the multi-modal academic discourse construction, should collect the English discourses from postgraduates of different subjects (such as material science, life science, electromechanical engineering, automatic control and computer science and engineering), investigate the traits of their English academic discourses in dot, line and surface, and should get to know the complexity and progressivity of their multi-modal English academic discourse construction. Perform three-dimensional study on their English academic discourses from multiple dimensions as cognitive linguistics, cross-cultural communication and English learning psychology, and therefore further explore the new patterns of postgraduate English teaching: take the scientist English as the primary line, experience the multi-modal English teaching, recognize construction in experiences, and turn into talents in cognitive construction.

5. Conclusions

Guided by system-functional linguistics theories, this paper elaborates the viewpoint that the interactions between language and other symbol modals should not be ignored in the construction of multi-modal academic discourse. The people living in the new media technology era will not take language as the unique means for expression of meanings, employ the symbol modal resources with international universality to create multi-modal discourses, and make them to be important elements of intensifying the interpersonal functions. The postgraduates should integrate their symbol modal resources as language, vision and audio, etc. in the construction of the academic discourses, and jointly create meanings, therefore, the audiences will acquire more accurate recognitions and more comprehensive understandings on their academic discourses. Thus the English teaching at universities should further stimulate postgraduates' interests in English learning, and help them improve their cross-cultural academic communicative abilities.

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