



Text Interpretation Framework Based on the Core Competence of English Subject

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ABSTRACT

The English Curriculum Criteria for Regular High School (2017 Edition) proposes the concept of core competence for English subject, which mainly includes language competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. Text interpretation is the bridge to implement the cultivation of students' core competence. Therefore, following an analysis of the current misunderstandings in text interpretation, the current study proposed a modified framework for text interpretation based on a discussion of two text interpretation frameworks proposed by Chinese scholars.

Keywords: Text interpretation; core competence for English subject; strategies of text interpretation.

1 Introduction

With the official release of the overall framework of *Core Competence for Chinese Student Development* in September 2016 and the promulgation of *The English Curriculum Criteria for Regular High School (2017 Edition)*, China's curriculum reform for basic education has moved from training students' comprehensive language skills to cultivating students' core competence. The new curriculum also points out that the core competence of English subject should include language competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. Among them, language competence and learning ability are the base, while thinking quality and cultural awareness are the wings of the base. These four aspects are mutually infiltrated, integrated, interacted, and developed in a synergistic relationship. Therefore, the core competence of English subjects has become the guiding framework for English teaching in China. Core competence not only makes a more detailed and specific explanation for the overall development of students but also puts forward higher requirements for teachers' professional qualities.

Text is the product created by the author through the organization from words to chapters, constructing meaning and expressing thought (Zhang & Wang, 2016). Text interpretation is the reader's analysis and understanding of the text and the author's intention, which can be also called a special kind of interaction between the reader and the author (Hou, 2018). In English teaching, text can be either spoken or written, as well as various multimedia text, etc. Text interpretation in English teaching means that teachers read and understand the texts through systematic analysis, and dig into the text in combination with their own life experience to form their own understanding of the text with a particular view to language teaching (Mo, 2018). Finally, the interpretation will be transformed to teaching design and teaching activities, considering the actual level and needs of students.

Teachers' text interpretation ability is a basic but critical component of teacher's professionalism. The quality of teachers' text interpretation not only determines the effect of teaching design, but also directly influences students' learning experience, the dimension of their cognitive development, the depth of their emotional participation, and the height of their learning effectiveness (Zhang & Wang, 2016). To improve the ability of text interpretation is the key for teachers to cultivate students' subject literacy, improve the effectiveness of classroom teaching and the quality of student learning (Wang, 2015). In recent years, China's education has been emphasizing the cultivation of students' core competence, so that text interpretation should also comply with it. Therefore, guided by the core competence of English subject and following an analysis of the current misunderstandings in text interpretation, the current study put forward a modified framework for text interpretation based on a discussion of two text interpretation frameworks proposed by Chinese scholars.

2 Misunderstandings in-text interpretation

Teachers, texts, and students constitute the three essential elements in language teaching. These three components are interdependent and interactive. Among them, the text is a basic tool but an important bridge to connect teachers and students, and teachers' text interpretation ability undoubtedly plays an extremely important role in classroom teaching. However, in real teaching practice, there are some common misunderstandings in terms of text interpretation.

Misunderstanding one: Text interpretation is scrappy. Teachers often deviate from the core competence requirements and cannot fully interpret the text, eventually resulting in fragmentation of text interpretation. First, language usage is often over-emphasized while language use is ignored in text interpretation. Many teachers only regard texts as learning materials for language knowledge and thus mainly interpreting language usage in the text, such as the lexical, grammatical, syntactic aspects of language. Other aspects, like pragmatic function and cultural connotation, etc., are quite often neglected and language knowledge is separated from the thematic context and taught in isolation. The result is a failure for most students in perceiving text from an overall perspective and using language appropriately in a real situation. Secondly, although language skills such as listening, reading, and writing are usually emphasized, these skills are often mechanically trained because little attention is paid to the meaning-making during text interpretation. Thirdly, the cultivation of moral integrity and a healthy outlook on life, a highly valued practice now, is quite often ossified as a ritual, typically exemplified as a quote or proverb as emotional sublimation at the end of a lesson. It is misperceived by many teachers as a good way of emotional education because they fail to perceive the pervasiveness of the educational value embedded in the text. They often take token steps for quality education while ignoring the actual connotation and value of the text (Zhang & Zhong, 2019; Zheng, 2019). Finally, text interpretation of the whole unit is insufficient. When concerning text interpretation, teachers, especially novice teachers, just consider the specific text and ignore its status in the whole unit.

Misunderstanding two: There is a model to do all the text interpretation. However, different types of texts, like conversation texts which focus more on turn-taking and reading texts which emphasize more on text type, are quite different. If teachers use a fixed way to handle different text materials, it will inevitably lead to an inappropriate interpretation, either under-interpreting or over-interpreting (Liu,2017).

Misunderstanding three: Teachers often consciously or unconsciously start interpretation from their own teaching experience, combining their own cognitive characteristics and knowledge reserves (Liu, 2017), with students' needs largely ignored.

3 Frameworks for text interpretation

3.1 Two frameworks of text interpretation

Some Chinese scholars and frontline teachers have put forward various frameworks for text interpretation under the guidance of core competence.

Zhang and Wang's framework is a widely used one (Huang & Lei, 2018; Chen, 2019; Pan, 2020; Yu, 2021). Based on the three-centered belief, namely text-centered, author-centered, and reader-centered, Zhang and Wang (2016) systematically proposed five perspectives of text interpretation, including thematic perspective, content perspective, language perspective, stylistic perspective and author perspective. As for thematic

perspective, the theme is the core topic and penetrates the entire text, reflecting the author's or the textbook editors' main intention. As for content perspective, teachers are supposed to dig into the content and make a "detailed" summary, exploring the logical relationship of each part of the text is the key for this aspect. As for language perspective, teachers are supposed to analyze the text in details, that is, the lexical, grammatical, syntactic, and rhetorical features. Furthermore, teachers need to figure out how these language features serve the construction of the text and realize the function of the discourse. Sharp awareness of the strong connection between form and meaning, therefore, is highly important for the adequate interpretation of language perspective. As for the stylistic perspective, it means that teachers need to study the structure and features of a text and classify it into a specific genre or text type. As for the author perspective, teachers can start from the author of the text, analyzing the author's background for a well-informed interpretation of the writing purpose. These five perspectives are not separated. Rather, they are interconnected, interacting, and interdependent.

Zhang and Zhong's (2019) framework for text interpretation is named "WHAT-HOW-WHY". WHAT is the interpretation of the theme and content of the text from the title, illustrations or topic sentence of the article, etc. HOW is the interpretation of the way that the author presents the theme and content from a discourse level, such as the logic of the article, applying visual tools like a mind map to construct the structure, etc. WHY is the interpretation of the author's writing intention and the educative value of the text from the conceptual level, such as designing empathy chain questions. The succinct three-WH questions help teachers to remember the main dimensions of text interpretation.

These two frameworks have roughly the same effect and are all mainly for reading texts. WHAT is a combination of thematic and content perspectives, both of which analyze the theme and content of the text; HOW is a combination of language and stylistic perspectives, both of which analyze the structure and language features of the text; WHY is a synonym for the author perspective, both interpret the writing intention and the deep connotation of the text. These two frameworks offer a comprehensive and systematic way of interpreting text; however, the four core competencies of English subject seem to be not clearly integrated. Furthermore, how to present the text interpretation is not fully addressed, although applying visual tools is mentioned in Zhang and Zhong's framework. The author, therefore, put forward a modified text interpretation framework based on those two above-mentioned frameworks.

3.2 Modified framework for text interpretation

The modified framework adopts the five perspectives proposed by Zhang and Wang (2016) with a more clear indication of integrating the core competencies and adds one more principle, namely structurization and visualization.

Perspective one: theme interpretation. Theme interpretation is mainly for the cultivation of moral integrity and a healthy outlook on life. To this end, theme interpretation, either in the form of a dialogue or reading text, should, first of all, be related to the real world and real life, particularly related to student's life experience. The widely-used themes are actually listed in the topic appendix of the curriculum, an important guidance and resources book to refer to. Secondly, it should not be limited to a single text, instead, teachers should consider the topic of the whole unit, even all the relevant units with the same topic in the whole set of textbooks, due to the feature of a spiral arrangement of teaching materials in textbooks. By doing so, it can not only highlight the theme more systematically but also help to build a complete and meaningful knowledge system for students (Zhang, 2019).

Perspective two: content interpretation. In addition to the “detailed” summary and logical relation interpretation emphasized by Zhang and Wang (2016), the cultivation of the four core competencies of English subject can also be achieved through the deep interpretation of the content of a text. For example, when interpreting the content, logical relation itself is an effective way for cultivating the thinking quality. Critical and creative thinking can also be extracted from the content. Texts, either conversations or reading texts, are usually constructed within a particular social context and thus contains lots of cultural connotations which is worth ‘digging’ from the content, especially the implicit ones hidden between the lines.

Perspective three: language perspective. Language usage like lexis, grammar, syntax, and rhetoric proposed by Zhang and Wang (2016) are particularly important. But Language is social and communicative, not simply structural. In order to cultivate students’ language competence, teachers should attach equal importance to pragmatic function and intercultural meaning. Take interpretation of a conversation as an example. An utterance gains its meaning not simply from the vocabulary and grammar that are used to construct it, but from its utterance by a speaker to a listener at a particular time, and in a particular context, to achieve a particular communicative function. Meaning, therefore, comes from the interrelationship and the interactivity of the conversation with its context (Liddicoat et al, 2003). In addition, when interpreting language, teachers can also pay attention to some micro-strategies of learning to develop students’ learning abilities. For example, teachers can identify the constituents of words, such as prefix, root and suffix, as well as other skills of word-formation. Similarly, teachers also can sort out the words into different groups according to the topic of the text and help students build up a different thematic thesaurus in order to train their logical thinking ability. Besides, some words, sentences and rhetoric contain cultural meaning in certain contexts and teachers are supposed to help students notice and form a good habit of comparing those cultural similarities and differences as well as cultivate their cultural sensitivities and awareness. In this way, not only language competence but also learning ability, thinking ability and cultural awareness are developed.

Perspective four: stylistic interpretation. Different types of texts should be analyzed in different ways. Although the two above-mentioned frameworks are mainly for the interpretation of reading texts, the four perspectives (theme, content, language and style) can still be applied to the interpretation of dialogues in textbooks. However, in terms of style, the reading texts and conversation texts differ quite a lot. Conversation texts need to take the communicative or pragmatic function, the conversation structure (like turn-taking structure, adjacency pairs etc.) into consideration. How to initiate a topic appropriately, how to organize and sustain the topic exchange, and how to conclude and end the exchange appropriately are also extremely important in conversation texts. However, genre, text types and their corresponding features are more concerned in interpreting the reading texts.

Perspective five: author perspective. As Zhang and Wang (2016) believed, for those texts with a specific author, teachers can start from the author’s background as well as the social situation the writer was in. However, for textbooks, texts are usually chosen from foreign publications and adapted for the target students. In this case, teachers should try to trace the original text to show more background information. Moreover, for texts without specific author or traceable resources, teachers should interpret the intention from the perspective of the compilers of the textbooks as well as the requirement of the curriculum to understand the content and theme better.

One principle: structurization and visualization. Structurization refers to the clear and logical summary, especially at the perspectives of content, style and language. Visualization is any technique for creating images or diagrams to communicate a message. Structurization and visualization are meant to make the text interpretation more explicit and vivid(Wei, 2019). It can be a visualization of the text structure and its corresponding function, as well as content, such as its chronological order or spatial order. Typical features of the language, both lexical and sentential, can also be visualized. The way of visualization can be realized either by hand or with the aid of computer tools like mind maps, with the latter more preferred.

4. Conclusion

Text interpretation mentioned in this article is mainly related to English teaching in China with a particular emphasis on the cultivation of the core competencies of English subject. The analysis of text and textbook is also highly concerned abroad. However, there seems no such comprehensive framework particularly designed for text interpretation for the coursebook. Instead, the studies of text analysis for teaching materials disperse in different areas, such as the discourse structural analysis, the pragmatic analysis, and the cross-cultural analysis. In contrast, the frameworks of text interpretation proposed based on the Chinese educational context seem to be more comprehensive, more systematic and more operational, deserving more attention and promotion.

Whatever framework teachers use, either the above-mentioned two frameworks or the modified one by the current author, the strategies of text interpretation can be further improved and should be readjusted according to the actual task of text interpretation. Teachers need to have a sharp awareness of text interpretation, and more importantly, a good command of subject knowledge is a must for successful interpretation. Furthermore, the text interpretation still needs further efforts to transform into teaching design and teaching practice. Only when treating text interpretation seriously, teachers can avoid the above-mentioned misunderstandings, and finally realize the instrumental and humanistic nature of English teaching.

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