# An Analysis of Application of Register Theory in Teaching College English Writing

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Halliday's register theory is one of the important theories in the field of functional grammar. Halliday believed that register is a "functional variant of language", a form of language change resulting from the change of situational context. Register consists of three parts: field, tenor, and mode. Register theory has been proved to be tremendously useful in English teaching and learning. This paper aims to briefly introduce the application of register theory in teaching college English writing.

*Keywords:* register theory, application, writing

## Introduction

Language is an important tool in social communication. When people use language for social communication, they always communicate with a specific person on specific occasions about specific topics. Therefore, the use of language is always constrained by specific situations. To truly master a foreign language, one not only needs to master a rich vocabulary and use correct grammar to make words and sentences, but also needs to be able to choose the appropriate language based on different situations, which is the choice of register. However, in our English teaching, register is not paid much attention to. When teaching phrases, sentence patterns and passages, English teachers often point out whether the language is correct or not, but seldom mention the situations in which it should be used. In addition to the lack of natural environment for language acquisition, students' English expression is not idiomatic and inappropriate, which is a relatively common phenomenon. The task of English teaching in the 21st century is not only to train students to use correct English, but also to teach students to use appropriate English.

## Halliday's Register Theory

Register theory is an important part of systemic-functional linguistics and also an important topic that systemic-functional linguists often discuss. As early as 1923, Ogden, Richards, and Malinowski (1989) proposed "context of culture" and "context of situation". The former refers to the social and cultural background of the speaker, while the latter refers to the actual environment in which the language occurs. Halliday, on the other hand, connected these two concepts with the language system, made a deeper study of this, and defined "register" as "the meaning structure usually associated with a situation type" (Halliday, 1978). For example, a professor gives a lecture in a classroom, a housewife goes to a vegetable market to buy

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vegetables, and a lawyer defends a criminal suspect in court. In these three different situations, the language used by people is also different. This gives rise to a variety of linguistic variants governed by contextual factors. These linguistic variants are different classes of register. Halliday (1985) further pointed out that in any situational context, there are three variables that affect the use of language. These three variables are field, tenor, and mode. "Field of speech" refers to the place where language occurs, including the topic of conversation. Due to different language fields, registers belonging to different disciplines or fields can be produced (such as medical English, business English, mathematical English, etc.). "Tenor" refers to the participants in language activities and their basic information, such as their social status, roles, and mutual relations. Due to different tenor, registers of different degrees of formality (such as formal English, informal English, etc.) can be produced. "Style" refers to the channel or medium of language communication, including rhetorical style. Due to the differences in language styles, registers distinguished by different channels, media or rhetorical modes (such as oral English, written English, etc.) can be produced. It can be seen from the above that we can use the register theory to study and discover the general rules governing language variation, that is, what contextual factors determine the characteristics of the language used, so that we can decide to use the appropriate language according to the type and characteristics of the situation in our communication.

## The Importance of Register Theory in College English Teaching

For a long time, English teaching in China has not been closely related to the actual environment of communication, and the students' understanding of register only stays on the shallow level. For example, when explaining non-finite verbs, the teacher may ask the students to make the following conversion:

John went to bed early because he felt tired.

→ Feeling tired John went to bed early.

But teachers often do not explain the difference in register between the two sentences. The first sentence can be used in a wide range of daily conversation, as well as in general written expression. The second sentence uses the participle structure to express the reason, which is a more formal syntactic structure and is mostly used in written language. Students often have a relatively easy grasp of this grammar point, but they have little idea of when it is appropriate to use the first sentence and when it is better to use the second. Traditional English teaching often regards the cultivation of students' "language ability" (vocabulary, grammar, and other aspects of knowledge) as the purpose of teaching, and believes that as long as students have acquired a certain language ability, they can naturally use it in practical communication. As everyone knows, "language ability" is not equal to "communicative ability", and "language knowledge" is not equal to "language use". The real purpose of English teaching is not only to impart language knowledge to students. More importantly, we should cultivate students' communicative ability, so that they can use the language to communicate effectively with different objects in different occasions.

With the gradual improvement of English teaching level, after about 10 years of English learning in primary and secondary schools, college students have a relatively solid foundation in vocabulary, grammar, and reading. While college English teaching can be said to be a new starting point. Through studying in college, students should reach a new level in English. An important mark of college English teaching which is different from primary and secondary schools is college English teaching should aim to let students have a deeper understanding of "register", to cultivate their ability to distinguish different registers, and to know how to use appropriate English in different contexts.

## Application of Register Theory in Teaching College English Writing

English writing is always a headache for students and teachers. Students often do not know how to express their ideas in correct and idiomatic English, and teachers often feel that students' compositions are simple in terms of words, loose in structure and relatively colloquial in style. More and more English teachers are paying attention to how to integrate language theory into English writing teaching effectively. Teachers can try the following methods to help students have a more intuitive understanding of register.

### Help Students Analyze and Compare the Register Signs of Texts

In college English teaching, the teaching of stylistic knowledge is mainly carried out through the analysis of text content. Teachers can introduce the ways of identifying register signs to students through examples of vocabulary, syntax, and discourse, so as to help them recognize and master basic stylistic types. Read the following two passages:

> A. Immigration and visa requirements. The possession of a passport does not exempt the hold from compliance with any immigration regulations in force in any territory or from the necessity of obtaining a visa or permit where required. It should be noted in this connection that the majority of British territories overseas have immigration restrictions to the British nationals as well aliens. (From British passport)
> B. Well, we've got here-at last! The queues at the airport were awful! But the weather's great and we're really enjoying the beach. I forgot to ask you to feed Tigger before we set off-could you it for me? Ta. See you soon. Love, Susie. (From a postcard)

The difference between the two passages is obvious. The former is formal, while the latter is colloquial.

Generally speaking, the articles about daily communication are more colloquial and less formal in style. For example, the text "A Busy Weekday Morning", Unit 2, *Book 1 of New Vision College English*, is a dialogue mode in colloquial style. Its register marks are reflected in its vocabulary, sentence pattern and even the whole text. First of all, its text structure is scattered. The whole text is less than 700 words, but is divided into 26 natural paragraphs. Secondly, its sentence structure is simple. Most sentences are simple and elliptical. In terms of vocabulary, the address forms are "daddy" and "mom" and the words used are colloquial, such as "make-up" in place of "cosmetic". Comparatively speaking, the written language is more elaborate: The sentence structure is compact, the text is well organized, and the style is more formal. For example, in the text "Saving the Nature, but only for Man", Unit 8, *Book II of College English (New Edition)*, we can find a large number of "big words" and compound nouns, such as "accommodation, humanistic, sentimentalism, livelihood, greenhouse effect, human emergence, temperature range, etc". In the article, prepositional phrases are frequently used, such as "in the name of, on the grounds of, and to the point of", which makes the article more rigorous and logical. From the perspective of sentence structure, the sentences in the text are quite complete without elliptical sentences, and the proportion of compound sentences is relatively high. Therefore, the register marks of the text are mainly expressed in its vocabulary and sentence pattern.

Thus, there are obvious register differences between formal and informal styles, and between written and spoken language. Compound sentences, passive voice, nominalized structure, and complex noun phrases are often found in formal style. On the contrary, simple sentences, elliptical sentences, and tag questions mostly appear in informal style.

By guiding students to analyze vocabulary, sentence structure, and discourse of the text, teachers help students to acquire an intuitive understanding about colloquialism, neutral, and written style, and strengthen

their register consciousness. Thus, in their own writing, students can also notice the register problem, and express their thoughts smoothly.

**Help Students Distinguish the Differences in Vocabulary Register**

Vocabulary expression is one of the difficulties for English learners in writing. When students learn vocabulary, they often only pay attention to the "correctness" and ignore the "accuracy" of the words in English, but this does not mean correct English words are proper English words. Chinese English teaching has always attached great importance to the discrimination of synonyms. But this kind of teaching method is often confined to the discrimination of meaning, and it neglects the analysis of the register characteristics of words. As a result, students seldom consider the appropriateness of vocabulary use. In fact, quite a few synonyms in English have very different registers due to their different etymologies. In addition to the native language, a considerable part of English vocabulary is derived from French, Latin, and Greek. Among them, English native words are mostly used in daily life and French words are mostly used in literary works, while Latin and Greek words are mostly used in academic works. For example, the Chinese definitions of "begin" and "commence" are both "start", and the difference between them can only be identified in terms of register. "Begin" is a daily term, but "commence" is derived from Latin and belongs to a formal, official or academic term. For example, in Text B, Unit 5, Book I, *New Vision College English*, the author describes himself "initiated a historic jump" in the Olympic Games and used "to commence the moves".

Some linguists classify English words according to their degree of formality (see Table 1):

Table 1

*Degree of Formality*

| Very formal Rigid Frozen | Formal | Neutral | Informal | Very Informal Casual Very familiar |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

However, in our practical use, English vocabulary can be roughly divided into three levels: colloquial, neutral, and literary (see Table 2). Many synonyms are distributed on all three levels, such as:

Table 2

*Formality of Vocabulary*

| Colloquial | Neutral | Literary |
|---|---|---|
| kid | child | offspring |
| daddy | father | parent |
| get out | go away | retire |
| go on | continue | proceed |

In addition, a single verb in English often has a phrasal verb corresponding to it, such as:

encounter-come across                    diversified-put up with

investigate-look into                    participate-take part in

Although these words and phrases are semantically the same, they differ in register, that is, the words are more formal and the phrases are more casual.

After learning several words with similar or corresponding meanings, students often choose one of them randomly in order to express a Chinese concept. If in vocabulary teaching, the teacher can timely introduce the

concept of register, combined with the analysis of synonymous words, briefly introduces to students some knowledge of etymology, guide students to express the same concept of some words or phrases from the aspects of register distinction, they can help students develop the ability to use different words in different communicative situations.

**Help Students Understand the Requirements to be Followed in the Use of Register**

When teaching English writing, the teacher should ask the students not to start writing in a hurry after assigning the writing topic, but to think about the following questions first:

1. Who you are writing to or for? (reader)

2. Why you are writing? (purpose)

3. What you are writing about? (content)

4. Where you are, how much time you have, how you feel, etc. (situation)

Why ask students to think about these questions? Because the answers to these questions determine the register characteristics of the composition, that is, the field, tenor, and style of the composition. In this way, it is easier for students to meet some requirements of register use in writing. The use of register in English writing should follow the following requirements:

**Conform to norms.** To conform to norms is to conform to the habits of English expression and to the standards and norms of the language used by native speakers. For example, "红糖" is "brown sugar" not "red sugar" in English. Teachers should guide students to read more beautiful English passages and remind them not to copy metaphors and allusions mechanically. They must first understand the cultural background contained in them before using them, so as to avoid the emergence of Chinglish.

**Accurate and appropriate.** This requires students to be first clear about the task given by the composition topic when writing, accurately and aptly choose words to effectively express the concept of things and people's thoughts and feelings. If we are required to write a paper, we need to use logical language; If we want to create literature, we should use artistic language with strong modification. For example, in order to help students realize the richness and stylistic differences of causal relationship expression, teachers can provide students with some cause-expressing words, such as because, as, since, for, etc. And composite prepositions (because of/as a result of, etc.), noun classes (cause/reason, etc.), the preposition (with/through/by), and verb classes (cause/result in/contribute to, etc.) At the same time, the corresponding context is also provided for them to practice, so as to strengthen the mastery of domain language knowledge.

**Avoid abuse.** In writing, if the purpose of communicating with target readers is not taken into account, and the register characteristics of vocabulary and sentence patterns are not taken into account, students cannot produce good articles. When Chinese students use English, they are often susceptible to the influence of Chinese. If they still think in their mother tongue, they will deviate from the conventional use of English. Therefore, teachers should help students analyze language phenomena, pay attention to the register function of vocabulary and sentence patterns, in order to lay a solid foundation for writing a good article.

## Conclusion

The use of language varies from situation to situation. Teachers should be fully aware that the task of English teaching is not only to train students to use the correct language, but also to cultivate their ability to communicate effectively, using appropriate language. Therefore, integrating register theory into daily teaching

has become an important part of foreign language teaching. Teachers should help students to choose appropriate language expressions in different linguistic fields, so that students can effectively and accurately communicate with target readers in English writing. Only by fully understanding the connotation and functional characteristics of register can we write good articles with rich content, rich language, coherent writing, and authentic expression.

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