

## **Genre-based Writing Instruction: Implications in ESP Classroom**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the ESP tradition, genre is often defined as “structured communicative events engaged in by specific discourse communities whose members share broad communicative purposes.” ESP genre research has generated numerous descriptions and explanations of discipline-specific genre exemplars and has produced various pedagogical proposals. However, what learners learn from these genre descriptions and the resulting pedagogical proposals and how they develop as learners and writers of genres in ESP genre-based writing pedagogy is still a less-developed area of research.

This paper calls for more learner-focused research that examines learners’ learning of genre and their development of generic/rhetorical consciousness. It calls for more principled investigations into not only the process of learning in which learners develop strategies and cultural tools that enable them to develop generic awareness and discipline-specific writing, but also the contexts of learning in ESP genre-oriented writing pedagogy.

### **Introduction**

Recently, genre-based approaches to writing instruction have become the main institutionalized alternative to process approach. As both a cognitive and a cultural concept, genre is often defined as the abstract, goal-oriented, staged, and socially recognized ways of using language delimited by communicative purposes, performed social interactions within rhetorical contexts, and formal properties. Many writing teachers, especially those working in the domains of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and/or English for Academic Purposes (EAP), believe that explicit attention to genre in teaching provides learners a concrete opportunity to acquire conceptual and cultural frameworks to undertake writing tasks beyond the courses in which such teaching occurs. Among the various schools of interrelated but distinct genre theories and their pedagogical proposals, the ESP School, which is the focus of this paper, is arguably the most influential in the teaching of the specialist varieties of English to L2 users and the most familiar one to ESP researchers and practitioners.

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learners and writers of genres in ESP genre-based writing pedagogy is still a less-developed area of research.

This paper tries to seek the possibilities to apply genre-base approach in teaching written communication skills. This study reports on an investigation into the teaching of written communication to the students of Engineering and Technology at Indian School of Mines University. The paper first describes the historical background of ‘teaching writing’ and ‘genre-based approach’. It then introduces the institutional contexts in which the written communication skills course is offered, and the goals of this particular course. The paper concludes with some remarks on the strengths and the limitations of applying genre-based approach in teaching writing skills.

This paper calls for more learner-focused research that examines learners’ learning of genre and their development of generic/rhetorical consciousness. It calls for more principled investigations into not only the process of learning in which learners develop strategies and cultural tools that enable them to develop generic awareness and discipline-specific writing, but also the contexts of learning in ESP genre-oriented writing pedagogy.

Research on teaching writing in a second language was initiated in the late 1960s, and most early efforts were centered on techniques for teaching writing. These efforts led to the process approach, which helps students to work through several stages of the writing process. Later, more attention was paid to the nature of writing in various situations. This then brought popularity to the genre approach, which focuses on models and key features of texts written for a particular purpose. In the process approach, a teacher typically has students follow the steps of prewriting, writing, revising, and editing before achieving the final product, and this sequence teaches students how to write. In the genre approach, samples of a specific genre are introduced, and some distinctive characteristics of the given genre are pointed out so that students notice specific configurations of that genre. Next, students attempt to produce the first draft through imitating the given genre.

One of the main causes of students’ low performance in English writing is, among other things, the lack of genre-specific writing across the curriculum. For example, the high scorers on English tests performed poorly even on small writing tasks, and most of them consistently exhibited difficulties in expressing themselves in writing. Difficulties include choosing appropriate vocabulary, organizing the structure properly depending on the topic or the purpose of writing, following correct grammar rules, and integrating ideas. To solve these problems learners face in writing tasks, genre-specific writing instruction may be useful since it presents some examples to students who have only limited exposure to authentic English writing.

Process approaches have had a major impact on the ways writing is both understood and taught, transforming narrowly-conceived product models and raising awareness of how complex writing actually is. Few teachers now see writing as an exercise in formal accuracy, and most set pre-writing activities, require multiple drafts, give extensive feedback, encourage peer review, and delay surface correction. But while process approaches have served to instil greater respect for individual writers and for the writing process itself, there is little hard evidence that they actually lead to significantly better writing in L2 contexts. The main reason for this is that their rich

amalgam of methods collects around a discovery-oriented, ego-centred core which lacks a well-formulated theory of how language works in human interaction. Because process approaches have little to say about the ways meanings are socially constructed, they fail to consider the forces outside the individual which help guide purposes, establish relationships, and ultimately shape writing.

Genre-based pedagogies address this deficit by offering students explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts. As such they represent the most theoretically developed and fruitful response to process orthodoxies.

### **Genre Approach to Teaching Writing**

Since the mid-1980s, considerable attention has been paid to the genre approach to teaching writing. In terms of writing in a second language, *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning* has defined the genre approach as “a framework for language instruction” (Byram, 2004, p. 234) based on examples of a particular genre. The genre framework supports students’ writing with generalized, systematic guiding principles about how to produce meaningful passages.

But a question arises, what is a genre? Swales (1990) defines a genre as, “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes” (p. 58). His definition offers the basic idea that there are certain conventions or rules which are generally associated with a writer’s purpose. For example, personal letters tell us about [their writers’] private stories, film reviews analyze movies for potential viewers, and police reports describe what happened. Most genres use conventions related to communicative purposes; a personal letter starts with a cordial question in a friendly mood because its purpose is to maintain good relationships with friends, and an argument essay emphasizes its thesis since it aims at making an argument.

Swales (1990) and Martin (1984), as cited in Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998), shared an essential viewpoint that all genres control a set of communicative purposes within certain social situations and that each genre has its own structural quality according to those communicative purposes (p. 309). Therefore, the communicative purposes and the structural features should be identified when genres are used in writing classes.

The structural features that genres are made up of include both standards of organization structure and linguistic features. Standards of organizational structure refer to how the text is sequenced. For instance, Hammond (1992, as cited in Paltridge, 1996) described the common organizational structure in a formal letter whose purpose is to file a complaint and suggest a proper action to solve the problem as follows: “sender’s address, receiver’s address, greeting, identification of complaint, justification of complaint, demand action, sign-off, and sender’s name” (p. 240).

Common sets of linguistic features can constitute a text type. Text type was defined by Biber (1988, as cited in Paltridge, 1996) as a class of texts having similarities in linguistic forms regardless of the genre (p. 237). For example, Hammond (1992, as cited in Paltridge, 1996)

examined the characteristics of several genres and categorized them according to similarities in text types: recipes are known to have the text type of procedure; personal letters are used to tell private anecdotes; advertisements deal with description; news articles have the text type of recounting; scientific papers prefer passive voice over active voice in presenting reports; and academic papers are likely to have embedded clauses (pp. 237-239). This means that different text types involve distinctive knowledge and different sets of skills, so teachers should introduce a variety of genres to have students understand and practice different sets of skills.

### **The Process Approach vs. the Genre Approach**

In the process approach, the steps or stages are illustrated and practiced from the generation of ideas and compilation of information through a series of activities for planning, gathering information, drafting, revising, and editing (Campbell, 1998, p. 11). This sequence of activities typically occurs in four stages: “prewriting, composing/drafting, revising, and editing” (Badger & White, 2000, p. 154).

Proponents of the process approach argue that the procedures of process writing help learners to develop more effective ways of conveying meaning and to better comprehend the content that they want to express. They strongly believe that students can discover what they want to say and write more successfully through the process model than the genre approach, as the process approach is viewed as writer-centered.

However, none of the process writing procedures of the past sufficiently dealt with linguistic knowledge, such as grammar and the organization of content, as much as necessary. Even though the final stage of editing addressed some mechanical features of language, they were mainly concerned with the skills of processing ideas like planning and drafting. Furthermore, the process approach has a very restricted view of writing, in that the approach presumes that writing proficiency takes place only with the support of the repeated exercise of the same writing procedures. Although it is obvious that the amounts of pre-writing necessary for writing a personal letter and for creating an academic research paper are different, in the process model, the practice of writing is identical regardless of what the topic is and who the writer or the reader is (Badger & White, 2000, pp. 154-155).

In the genre approach, on the other hand, the knowledge of language is intimately attached to a social purpose, and more focus is on the viewpoint of the reader than on that of the writer. Writing is mostly viewed as the students’ reproduction of text based on the genre offered by the teacher. It is also believed that learning takes place through imitation and exploration of different kinds of models. Accordingly, learners should be exposed to many examples of the same genre to develop their ability to write a particular genre. Through exposure to similar texts, students can detect the specialized configurations of that genre, and they also can activate their memories of prior reading or writing experiences whenever they encounter the task of creating a new piece in a familiar genre (Badger & White, 2000, pp. 155-156).

When it comes to explaining writing development in the genre approach, Hammond (1992, as cited in Burns, 2001) proposed “a wheel model of a teaching-learning cycle having three phases: modeling, joint negotiation of text by learners and teacher, and the independent construction of

texts by learners” (p. 202). Modeling, Hammond noted, is the time when the target genre that students should construct is introduced to them [the students]. At this stage, discussion focuses on the educational and social function of the genre, and analysis focuses on the text structure and language. Joint negotiation of text refers to the stage when learners carry out exercises which manipulate relevant language forms. It fosters a negotiating process between the teacher and the students. It involves reading, research, and disseminating information, and the text of the genre is dependent on those activities. The independent construction of texts is the final phase, in which learners produce actual texts through activities such as choosing a topic, researching, and writing (p. 202).

Proponents such as Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) have argued that the genre approach is more effective for learners to advance their writing skills in a second language than the process approach since the model helps free students from their severe worries over writing (p. 310). For instance, at the University of Brunei Darussalam, Henry and Roseberry (1998) did an experimental study in academic classes using short tourist information texts in English. Participants in this research were divided into two groups: a group which used the genre-based instructions and a group which did not employ the genre approach in the same writing task. After three weeks, participants took a test. The genre group did better than the non-genre group, and the data showed that knowledge of the typical structure of the content made it easier for learners to arrange their ideas in terms of both achieving their communicative goals and producing more well-organized writing. It proved that the learners’ understanding of both the rhetorical structure and the linguistic features was increased by the genre-based instructions (Henry & Roseberry, 1998, pp. 154-155).

### **Applications of the Genre Approach**

There are various practical applications of the genre approach to the teaching of writing. One of those applications is in English for Specific Purpose.

Most ESP researchers, including Bhatia, Flowerdew, and Swales (as cited in Hyon, 1996), primarily outlined the genre approach with spotlights on the formal distinctiveness of genres in order to help students gain understanding of the communicative purposes and linguistic features of texts that they are required to write in their professional discourses, while these experts paid less attention to the specific roles of content and their social environments (p.695). They regarded genres as devices for examining and teaching the written texts that students needed to master in specific settings like English for academic purposes and English for professional communication classrooms.

### **A Case at Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad**

The course, English for Science and Technology, under discussion is being offered as a compulsory course in the first semester B. Tech. at the Indian School of Mines (ISM), Dhanbad (India). This course aims at developing learners’ writing and reading skills for specific academic and professional needs. The students meet four times in a week for the class. The writing section of the course mainly covers the following items:

1. Instruction
2. Reporting
3. Description of Physical Objects
4. Description of Processes
5. Writing Definition
6. Narration
7. Classification and Exemplification
8. Hypothesis, Prediction and Conclusion
9. Generalisation: Induction and Deduction
10. Explanation
11. Comparison and Contrast
12. Letter Writing

All the above rhetorical functions are taught using genre-based approach. Firstly, we describe about that rhetorical functions. Then we tell the students about the grammatical structure used in that writing. After that we give examples to the students. Examples can clarify that how they should go with that writing. Then we give situation/topic to the students and ask to write and they produce the similar kind of writing.

### **The Strength and Limitations of the Genre Approach to Teaching Writing**

There are several advantages and disadvantages of the genre. First, on the positive side, students generally appreciate the models or examples showing specifically what they have to do linguistically. Studying a given genre also provides them with an understanding of why a communication style is the way it is through a reflection of its social context and its purpose. Swales (1990) pointed out how rhetorical instruction plays as pivotal a role in writing improvement as prior knowledge (p. 83). In this context, the genre approach is very beneficial because it brings together formal and functional properties of a language in writing instruction, and it acknowledges that there are strong associations between them.

As Bhatia (1993, as cited in Kim & Kim, 2005) recommended, it is meaningful for writing instructors to tie the formal and functional properties of a language together in order to facilitate students' recognition of how and why linguistic conventions are employed for particular rhetorical effects (p.6). If the rhetorical structure of content is analyzed by students in the genre approach, some common patterns can be identified in each genre. Naturally, these patterns will form a kind of background knowledge students can activate in the next learning situation. Eventually, the prior knowledge will make it easier for students to produce acceptable structures in their writing tasks. Therefore, an assigned genre seems to serve as an influential tool for both the learning and teaching of writing.

Furthermore, the genre approach encourages students to participate in the world around them, to comprehend writing as a tool that they can utilize, and to realize how writers manage content to promote logical organization. It also allows students to become more flexible in their thinking and eventually to realize how authors organize their writings. However, some proponents have indicated that the genre approach is more suitable for learners at beginning or intermediate levels of proficiency in a second language rather than those at advanced levels, in that it releases

students from deep anxieties about their writing tasks. When people learn something new, they commonly want to find some cases that they can refer to or consider as samples. There is no doubt that writing tasks can be more demanding than other language skills, so students at low level of proficiency absolutely need something that they can rely on since they have little exposure to English writing (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998, p. 310).

Despite genres' beneficial roles in helping learners to produce written work with confidence, there are two limitations of the genre approach. One is that it underestimates the skills required to produce content, and the other concern is that it neglects learners' self-sufficiency (Byram, 2004, p.236). The genre approach not only places too much emphasis on conventions and genre features but also is less helpful for students in discovering the texts' true messages due to the targeted aspects of the specified genre. Likewise, if teachers spend class time explaining how language is used for a range of purposes and with a variety of readers, learners are likely to be largely passive. Thus, the genre approach is blamed for limiting learners' creative thoughts about content and is criticized in that it overlooks natural processes of learning and learners' creativity (Badge & White, 2000, p.157). Finally, Bawarshi (2000) pointed out that, at its best, it helps learners to identify and interpret literary texts, while at its worst, it interferes with the learners' creativity (p.343). This concern means that students may end up writing genres as meaningless reproductions.

However, according to Bakhtin (1986), genres always evolve through incorporating a rich variety of voices, styles, discourse features, and points of view. The genre approach allows students to be exposed to the plurality of a genre, which implies that students still have chances to develop their creativity in the genre approach. Thus, if the genre approach is to remain true to the fundamental nature of genres, then teaching in the genre approach should include a final step in which students are encouraged to break the style of the existing genre and let it evolve.

Due to the weaknesses of the genre approach noted above, Badger and White (2000) experimented with using the genre and process approaches together as an alternative in a model called the process-genre approach. Through this research, they affirmed that this dual approach works well if the writing cycle begins with models, description of the key linguistic features, discussion of the social situation in which it happens, and analysis of the recommended rhetorical patterns of each genre. Student writing is then subjected to the sequence of drafts in the process approach (p. 157).

## **Conclusion**

Genre-based teaching approaches are finding their place in writing courses for developing students' sensitivity or awareness to diverse genres and their facilitating students' writing tasks of different genres. Genre-based approaches to teaching students how to write can sensitize students to the move structure of writings and the motivations behind it, which makes it possible for students to exploit linguistic resources creatively to achieve their personal goals in their writings. This paper is no more than a tentative attempt concerning the teaching of writing based on the results of genre analysis with a view to demonstrating how students can be taught to adapt to and acquire a genre.

The present paper, in assessing the strengths of the genre method to teaching writing, identifies numerous advantages. Undeniably some limitations exist, but they are far less substantial than their antipodal numbers. It would appear that the use of generic patterns can complement the dicta prescribed by the Process approach, and coordinating the approaches offers learners genuine opportunities to develop skills to reproduce coherent and cohesive texts. This approach is relevant for learners who lack exposure to practical writing tasks. There remains some latitude for further research to validate the claims of the genre movement made here, particularly with more research on whether teaching via the genre approach actually helps students become better.

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## **BIO-DATA**

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