

Running Head: EFFECTIVINESS OF THE GENRE-BASED APPROACH IN
GRADUATE SCHOOL

Effectiveness of the Genre-based Approach for Graduate Students

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Introduction

International graduate students who come to study in the U.S. need to become acquainted with novel genres in the academic discourse. They are expected to interact efficiently in writing with the academic community by using pre-established conventions by which its members abide. The ultimate aim is to actively engage in the evolving academic debate and establish an identity within a field in order to achieve social power.

A great number of aspiring graduate students come to the U.S. with varying knowledge of academic writing and, as a result, experience varying degrees of difficulty before becoming confident and accomplished participants in their field.

There are numerous U.S. programs that aim at preparing students to become successful academic writers, the ESL credit-bearing writing course at Georgia State University being one of them. Students' placement in the program is based on their Georgia State Test of English Proficiency (GSTEP) score. "The course focuses on developing graduate-level writing skills, such as writing research proposals, article summaries, critiques, reports, and other discipline-specific assignments. Development of the ability to address complex writing tasks, with focus on organization of text types, complexity of language, and editing skills are included." (ESL Credit-Bearing Course, para. 5).

This paper sets out to analyze how the ESL program at Georgia State University has applied the genre-based approach, the level of satisfaction of two current students and how they perceive the benefits of this approach. The data derives from an interview with

a Japanese student (Student 1) and a Chinese student (Student 2) and their teacher, whose pseudonym will be Ms. Johnson.

The criteria for the selection of the subjects were that they belong to distinct fields. Since students' needs and career goals are diverse within a classroom, there is an interest in finding out if and how genre instruction can impact all students equally. Also, they had to either speak the same L1 or their L1's rhetoric style had to have commonalities.

The first part of this paper will give background information about Student 1 and 2 and their writing style in their L1. It will then present a discussion with arguments for and against the genre pedagogy followed by how the data proves or disproves them.

Subjects' Background

Student 1 is in the Master's Degree program in the Applied Linguistics/ESL and Student 2 is a doctoral student of Biology, both at Georgia State University. They both came directly from their home country with little previous knowledge of academic writing in L2. Both students received considerably more instruction in speaking, vocabulary acquisition and reading. The only genre they were well acquainted with prior to their arrival was the five-paragraph essay required by the TOEFL exam. Student 1 had never read an article or any academic research in the student's L2, but Student 2 had read several in the medical field and written only abstracts in English. Student 1 started to take the course in his first semester of the graduate program, whereas Student 2 started in the second year of the doctoral program.

Student 1 is required to write discussion board commentaries, research papers and critiques and Students 2 writes research papers, reports and summaries.

Views on the Genre-Based Approach

“Given the fact that we see students for such a short time in our classrooms how can we equip them with the confidence, motivation, language, skills, abilities, and insights necessary to succeed in textual worlds that we, and they, cannot predict”

— Johns, 1997, p. 114

The entry into an organization or professional community calls for the understanding of its discourse conventions that serve meaningful purposes (Paré, 2002). According to Paré, genre can be spoken or written, such as how to carry out a media interview, a medical consultation or how to write a newspaper article. Scientific text is also made up of certain unique features that represent the scientific style, which can be used for explicit writing instruction. Swales (as cited in Grabe and Kaplan, 1996) contends that if students can master genre structure effectively, he or she will be capable of learning and functioning successfully in academic settings and, therefore, can be recognized in a particular discourse community.

In graduate courses in the U.S. (Frodesen, 1995), students may be required to write technical reports, critical review of published research or literature reviews, grant proposals, conference papers, summaries of research, postings to panel discussions. Each

of them requires mastering different genres and the writing norms related to a specific discipline.

Non-native and native speaker students in English-speaking countries are generally evaluated on their written work rather than the spoken and, therefore, need significantly more instruction on the former. Their work is often read by professors and colleagues who lack the understanding that language and writing are culturally bound (Hyland, 2003). Non-native speaker (NNS) students may use different practices such as organizational preferences, complexity of style, and objectivity that may be considered inadequate by the readers. For instance, Japanese speakers tend to present the argument indirectly and make their point clear only at the end (Kaplan, as cited in Hyland, 2003).

Phillipson (cited in Hyland, 2003) and Kachru (1999) criticize the imposition of the Anglo-American writing practices, which prevents a great number of NNS from contributing to the body of human knowledge in all fields. Kachru (1999) also argues that knowledge has been shared between cultures for centuries. If, for instance, genre differences had been an obstacle to sharing knowledge, the world would not have appreciated the nonlinear style of the German philosophers, and multilingual writers such as Keri Hulme would not have received the Booker Prize of Britain.

A liberal progressivist argument against the genre-based instruction is that it teaches “language facts” analogous of the old authoritarian classrooms (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993) where students’ achievements depend on how successfully the ‘rules’ can be applied. Hence, the argument is that it inhibits students’ creativity due to its prescriptive nature. According to Swayer and Watson (cited in Hyland, 2003), there is a danger of learners strictly reproducing the textual organization and models.

Genre pedagogy (Hyland, 2004) is also criticized for being static and decontextualized based on the claim that the teacher is not able to reproduce in class the culture and contexts by which texts are shaped. There is a belief that “teaching genres in the classroom can only teach classroom genres. Teachers cannot, therefore, hope to reproduce authentic cultural and community contexts in writing class and so can only provide instruction in general writing skills rather than specific understanding of vernacular genres” (Hyland, 2004, p. 17).

Another limitation (Paltridge, 2001; Russell, 2002) of the genre-based approach is the concept of genre itself, especially when several genres merge into another, for example, a newspaper article that covertly sells goods or services. The teacher must possess not only textual and knowledge, but also social and cultural knowledge, and this may be difficult to acquire if the instructor does not use that genre often or has never used it. According to Paltridge (2001), the issue becomes more complex when the “rules of the game” are always changing, especially with the influence of electronic mailing and the Internet. Furthermore, it may not be feasible to teach each genre when students do not share a common goal.

In her argument against the stylistic dominance, Kachru (1999) mentioned notable writers such as Keri Hulme (Hulme, 2000), of Maori, Orkney Island Scottish, and English descent. Hulme attended University of Canterbury, in her home country, which probably followed a writing discourse she was acquainted with. Besides, novels do not seem as “deeply embedded in the social functioning of groups” (Kress, as cited in Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 136) as academic writing.

In a case study with Inuit social workers, Paré (2002) reports that it is very difficult to resist or alter institutional discourse especially if one is a student or new practitioner. In order to participate in a discourse community, it is necessary to understand one's position in the power structure of institutions in order to maintain ideologies. Therefore, we may conclude that NNS graduate students have to abide by the "conservative forces" (p.68) institutionalized by a culture. In fact, Student 1 stated that he was penalized for vagueness in his first major assignment and Student 2 for using hedges unnecessarily. On the other hand, teachers (Paltridge, 2001) need to allow students to question the need to follow the conventions and when it is appropriate to diverge. The author also stresses the importance of students bringing their individuality into their work. This is particularly relevant in academia where international students aim at creating a strong identity in their field.

As for the argument that teaching genre pedagogy is authoritarian and lacks creativity (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993), it seems unrealistic to expect a L2 learner who has just been introduced to a novel genre to be creative. Learners need considerable scaffolding before attempting to write independently and creatively. One technique used to achieve this is through writing frames (Hyland, 2004). Frames are "skeletal outlines to scaffold and prompt students' writing" (p. 126), such as the first few introductory words of a complaint or application letter (e.g.: I am writing in order to...).

According to Cope and Kalantzis (1993), "the most powerful written genres are those generically and grammatically most distant from orality."(p. 6). Frames provide the scaffolding to help students to transition from spoken to written language use (Hyland, 2004). According to the subjects, frames increase their confidence before attempting to

use it outside the class. Both Student 1 and 2 recognize the value of writing frames because they can use them as references when they forget how to start an argument or conclude his paper. Student 1 said that, from the very beginning, the teacher made it clear that the ESL course was not discipline-specific and that the skills taught would have to be modified to meet the requirements of each professor, as recommended by Johns (1995). In her interview, Ms Johnson corroborated this statement:

Eve: How do you make your students independent so that they can adjust to what is expected from them by different professors/classes?

Ms Johnson: Similar to the IEP curriculum, I try to teach them transferable skills – help them to be aware of writing conventions, expectations that can be applied to other writing assignments and disciplines. I also teach self-editing.

As suggested by Frodesen (1995), encouraging students to engage and evaluate their own learning can serve as a tool to make students active participants in the process and combat the authoritarian syllabus where students feel like “cultural outsiders” (p.344). According to a survey (Casanave and Hubbard, as cited in Frodesen, 1995) and Ms Johnson, NNS graduate students find discourse-level features, including organization and development, very challenging.

Eve: In general, what is the skill student takes the longest to acquire?

(e.g, voice, organization, summary, reaction). Is there a reason for that in your opinion?

Ms. Johnson: I'm not sure about this. Perhaps development is difficult, understanding how much detail must be provided to support ideas in grad academic writing. Paraphrasing is also difficult because it requires such an advanced understanding of the English language and is influenced by cultural issues.

Frodesen (1995) also suggests assigning students the role of ethnographers in order to build their confidence and a sense of belonging to the American post-secondary environment.

Eve: How do you deal with different requirements in different disciplines?

Ms Johnson: I provide clear assignments surrounding types of writing, like extended definition, data commentary, or summary-critique. Then, I require students to select topics in their field to complete these assignments. They also must share papers with and receive feedback from a mentor in their field. When they submit their papers, they also submit this mentor feedback. The mentor can assist the student with area such as content, discipline-specific language issues, etc. That would be difficult to provide.

When Student 1 was asked if he thought that a mentor was helpful, he reported that “the mentor is someone you know who is more experienced” and who can assist the learner with discipline-specific issues. On one occasion, for example, his mentor brought to his attention that he was using hedges unnecessarily, which made the rhetoric discourse. Student 2 said that it was very helpful because his mentor is a native speaker who points out problematic sentence structures and errors in field-specific vocabulary. The social interaction between learners and someone more skilled provides further scaffolding (Hyland, 2004) and gives the student power over the learning process (Martin, as cited in Grabe and Kaplan, 1996).

As stated above, there is a concern about assignments and instruction being distant from the real academic context. As a result, assignments would not reflect the needs and have the authenticity that would lead learners to develop their language skill by transferring what was introduced in class. Ms Johnson responded to this issue:

Eve: Do you feel that the academic writing style changes over the years? How do you keep updated?

Ms. Johnson: I imagine so in various fields. I read a lot, look at writing across different fields, talk with students and discipline faculty. Look at authentic sample assignments.

Eve: Do you think that what you teach in the classroom really reflects what is expected from readers. In other words, do you think it is authentic?

Ms. Johnson: Yes, I do believe my assignments are expectations are realistic. The curriculum is based on a recent needs assessment of international graduate students at GSU. Both students and faculty were surveyed.

As graduate students (Belcher, as cited in Frodesen, 1995) are more focused in their intellectual objectives, reading and writing assignments are approached with close attention to technical language and field-specific topics. Thus, programs that provide writing practice that is relevant and incorporates their field-specific research can better meet the needs of NNS graduates. Ms. Johnson reported that one of the advantages of using the genre-based approach is its high face validity due to the fact that students are writing papers on topics that they are researching.

The subjects consider the program very effective and reported that it was helping them improve their ability to complete their written assignments successfully. On a scale from 0 (not effective at all) and 10 (extremely effective), Student 1 and 2 ranked it 9.

A case-study approach is reported (Berkenkotter, Huchin, & Ackerman, as cited in Connor, 1996) in which a novice doctoral student made significant progress in adopting the academic discourse at a U.S. college within a year's time. In another study (Connor & Kramer, as cited in Connor, 1996), results shows that experience in the discipline may be an important factor leading to learners' academic success. In this study, both subjects are deeply involved in their field. This may have had an effect on the way they progressed and hence how they view the efficacy of their received instruction.

Ms Johnson also expressed a positive opinion about the outcome of her instructional plan:

Eve: Do they feel there is improvement during the course, after or no improvement at all?

Ms. Johnson: Yes, all students improve in some way. Sometimes the improvement may be an increased awareness of expectations.

Conclusion

There is a pressing need for learners to acquire the academic writing style in a short period of time so that they can engage in the academic debate. Based on the data collected from the students and the teacher, it appears that the program offered by Georgia State University employs techniques that ensure the effectiveness of the genre pedagogy. Its student-centered syllabus appears to help students develop discipline-specific knowledge, especially through the use of an informant or a mentor who can introduce the novices to the academic discourse and make them feel “at home”.

In addition, genre is not taught as an end but as a mean to grasp content, purpose and social context in which a genre functions. The teaching of transferable skills empowers students to use their knowledge for various assignments and departmental requirements, and also helps students recognize features of new conventions they might be exposed to later on in their careers.

School administrators who intend to adopt this approach must bear in mind that “genres must be taught as both constraint and choice so that individual awareness can

lead to individual creativity.” (Devitt, 2004, p. 191). Even though frames are considered to constrain writing, they are favored by students due to the aid they provide along the process of building linguistic competence. The challenge of using a genre-based syllabus appears to be how to reach a balance between what is imposed and what is negotiable. The answer might rest in students’ development of critical thinking about their own and other people’s writings and their possible outcomes.

The data must be looked at taking into consideration that this research used a small number of subjects and did not investigate speakers of languages that do not share the same rhetoric style as Chinese and Japanese. Also, the teacher was asked questions that did not directly refer to a particular class or students, limiting the accuracy of this research.

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