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Genre-Based Approach to Teaching Writing

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Abstract: This paper considers the application of genre-based approach to teaching of writing in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context, especially for learners aiming to use English in the professional setting. The genre-based approach to language teaching attempts to teach learners the 'moves' of a genre and to raise awareness of the linguistic features associated with the moves as a way to overcome learners' difficulties in writing appropriately and effectively. This paper addresses the concern to help learners to make their choices in deciding what kind of information should be put in their writing to create meaningful and purposeful texts. A number of genre analysis strategies are presented to demonstrate how learners can be taught to modify and blend their choices of words according to the contexts in which they write. 65 Business majors participated in this study. The control group (N=31) were taught through the usual lecturing style while the experimental group (N=34) were taught using the genre-based approach. Following the multiple trait scoring of the learners' texts, the texts were analyzed for content, structure and language while the moves were analyzed using the moves score. The results of the study indicate that learners do write better when they are made aware of the rhetoric structure and providing models seem to increase the salience of the communicative moves considered by the learners for inclusion in their texts.

Introduction

Writing is considered to be one of the most difficult skills learners are expected to master. An ability to write appropriately and effectively is a task that most ESL learners faced in spite of the years spent learning and developing their writing skills. Writing is complex and multifaceted in nature. Tribble (1996, p.57) posed a question pertaining to writing, "What makes one piece of writing more acceptable than another?" Hopefully, through the understanding of genre-based approach, taking the communicative purpose as the key characteristic feature of a genre, this question can be answered. This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of using a genre-based approach to teaching learners to use language purposefully by using model text designed for specific professional context which is referred to as modeling. It is a common technique used for teaching genre where learners are presented with a model text that can be imitated while they are writing their texts. There is no doubt that a model text varies but basically, model text is seen as being exemplary of its kind written by writer in specific situation that is subsequently reused to exemplify a genre. Through modeling, learners duplicate the defining characteristic of its genre but using a different content. The genre chosen for this study is an adjustment letter.

Writing for technical or professional purposes presents many challenges to learners as it involves many different areas of knowledge and skills. In most cases, learners who have average proficiency of the English language still perform poorly in their writing tasks, and most of them consistently exhibit difficulties in expressing themselves in writing. In writing, it is essential that learners do not just know how to write grammatically correct text but also know how to apply their knowledge for particular purposes and contexts. A focus on genres in writing instruction can provide the learners with a frame that enables them to orient to and interpret particular communicative events. A genre-based approach helps the learners to be more aware of the concept of genre and understand why the discourses are arranged in such a way. With this

knowledge the learners are able to differentiate their language and text structure through the use of greater linguistic choices.

Every discipline, profession and business has its own genres or conventional forms of written communication. With its wide range of genres, it is quite difficult to teach or to predict the type of genres the learners need in their future workplace. Moreover, there is not one model that can adequately fit every situation. In short, the task of writing is obviously more challenging for the novice writer who is not a native speaker. Therefore, learners must know how to adapt certain constraints to fit the task at hand. Adopting a genre approach relieves writers from having to create a new text or communication for each situation. This is because genre arises from the frequent recurrences of similar situations. Hence, learners can assimilate what they have learned and put it into practice. In this aspect, modeling of exemplary samples of prose can be introduced as a way to help learners to achieve a better sense of purpose, form and direction in their writing. Through modeling, they are made aware of the defining characteristics of a text. With this awareness, they can then create a similar text using different content to suit the task at hand.

The Study

This study investigated the effectiveness of using genre-based approach to teaching writing through the use of model texts. In particular the study aimed to identify the moves of the adjustment letter, the allowable moves order and the strategies used to realize the moves. From a language teaching perspective, it is essential to view genre as consisting of a series of moves (Swales, 1990). A move is considered as a part of a text which achieves a particular purpose within a text. Within a move itself, there cam be a series of steps executed to achieve a particular purpose. Apart from the analysis of moves, this study also viewed the learners' writing in terms of content, structure and language.

The following research hypotheses were addressed:

1. The participants will structure their writing through the moves identified in the specified genre after genre-based instruction.

2. The participants will improve their ability to write better after genre-based instruction.

Method
Participants
Sixty-five undergraduates from a Business Degree Program from a private University College enrolled in English for Business Study II participated in this study. They were second year students. All these students have passed their pre-requisite, English for Business Study I before they could enroll in this English for Business Study II. On top of this they were also asked to sit for an English Placement Test to ensure that all of them have acquired a certain level of English proficiency in order to participate in this study. The results obtained from the English Placement Test indicated that there was no difference in their level of English proficiency and the level of significance recorded was p= 0.837. In short, all of them have the level of English proficiency needed for study.

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Research Method

The Quasi-experimental study was used because under the present situation the random selection and assignment were not possible. Therefore, sixty-five students were designated to two classes. In other words, there were a mixed-selection of students in a class comprising of the four main programmes, namely Finance, Accounting, Business Administration and Marketing. The general aim of the quasi-experiment was to examine the impact of a genre-based approach on the participants' writing in Business context as in this case, was on the adjustment letter. The writing task designed and administered during this phase of the study aimed to measure the following dependant variables: Context of Participants' Text (CPT), and Written Recall of Salient Points-The Moves (WRSP). In this research design, one experimental and one control group were used in the study.

The study was conducted over a period of eight weeks.

Procedure and Materials

Writing Topic: The learners' task – to write an adjustment letter based on a given scenario. Before the writing task was administered, the learners, both the experimental and control groups undergone a series of workshops. For the experimental group, their workshops were on genre-based approach while the control group was taught based on the usual normal lecturing style. Both the groups were given the same materials. Apart from the experimental materials which were specifically highlighted to raise the learners' awareness of the genre-based approach, most of the essential features of the two studies remained identical.

Learners were given five exemplary model texts of an adjustment letter for their modeling session. For the experimental group, the principle orientation used for genre-based approach is based on the teaching learning cycle by Martin, Christie and Rothery, (1987). The techniques used are Modeling-Negotiation-Construction cycle. At the end of the eight weeks, learners were asked to respond to a claim letter.

Data Analysis

The participants' writing task (the adjustment letter) was assessed in terms of: Context of Participants' Text (CPT) and Written Recall of Salient Point-The Moves (WRSP). The scoring procedure used for assessing the CPT was based on the Multiple Trait Scoring by Hamp-Lyons (2003) and the instrument used for assessing the WRSP was based on the Moves Score by Henry & Roseberry (1998). The results from the experimental and the control groups were compared using the T-tests.

Results and Discussion

Both researchers Ellis (1990) and Schmidt (1990) through their empirical studies, advocated that learners learn better through formal instruction as they become more aware of the particular features of the target language and form explicit representations of what they are taught. When learners go on to notice the feature in the subsequent communicative input, acquisition of that feature may occur.

Context of Participants' Text (CPT)

This is very much reflected in what the learners wrote in their texts. First, the experimental group showed that to some extent, they have internalized the input they have learnt through the Teaching and Learning Cycle as advocated by Martin, Christie and Rothery, (1987). The

techniques used are Modeling-Negotiation-Construction cycle. As a result, they have assumed responsibility for deciding the structure, language, and the tone of the texts. These three aspects were clearly reflected in the learners' writing. With the learners' prior knowledge of the rhetorical context made aware to them during the series of workshops, they were able to select organize and connect information to fit in to their task at hand, which was writing a response to claim letter (adjustment letter).There was a clear development of recycled vocabulary and structure encountered in their writing. Hence, the researcher's notion of the proposed theoretical framework on input processing and intake (Van Pattern & Cadierno 1993) is in consistent with this view where learners must attend to linguistic features in the input. With this awareness, the learners' learning process is very much enhanced and facilitated through their exposure to extensive contextualized modeling of 'expert' for scaffolding to be effective. This view is very much in line with the assumption underpinned by genre pedagogies that L2 writing instruction is more effective when learners are constantly made aware of the target discourse and through analyzing 'expert' texts (Hyland 2004).

From the study conducted, the results show that the writing task of both groups differed significantly at the 0.05 level, thus allowing the null hypothesis of no difference to be rejected. As might be expected, the results from the three raters with regard to their marking for the three criteria, content, structure and language, all show (except from Rater 2 on language) that there are significance in the writing between the control and experimental groups. Table 1.0 below shows the mean rating and the level of significance obtained from the three raters of the control and experimental groups in their writing task, an adjustment letter. The mean results obtained seem to indicate that the experimental group writes better in terms of the content, structure and language as they are more aware of the linguistic features contained in this particular genre, an adjustment letter. Through the modeling sessions, they are able to modify and blend their choice of words according to the contexts in which they write.

Table 1   Results Showing the Mean Rating and the Significance Level Obtained from the three Raters of the Control and Experimental Groups in their Writing Task, an Adjustment Letter in terms of Content, Structure and Language

Criterion	Group	Mean Rating			Significance (p)		
		Rater 1	Rater 2	Rater 3	Rater 1	Rater 2	Rater 3
Content	Control group (N=31)	2.35	2.23	2.39	p= 0.019	p= 0.003	p= 0.017
	Experimental group (N=34)	2.94	3.03	3.03			
Structure	Control group (N=31)	2.00	2.42	1.71	p= 0.016	p= 0.016	p= 0.004
	Experimental group (N=34)	2.56	3.03	2.53			
Language	Control group (N=31)	1.84	2.13	1.84	p= 0.028	p= 0.054	p= 0.009
	Experimental group (N=34)	2.42	2.65	2.62			

According to Dudley-Evans (nd) genre analysis is particularly useful for students with relatively little experience of writing. This seems to be the case for the learners in this study as they only have two English courses in their whole degree program. They found learning the genre-based approach to be very useful as it has given them a sense of knowledge as what to write and how to go about it. Hence, with an awareness of genre conventions, the learners will have less difficulty in the ordering and reordering of the text.

Written Recall of Salient Points-The Moves (WRSP)

The aims of analysis the moves in a genre are to identify the linguistic features used by the writer to achieve their communicative purpose and how conformed the writers are to the allowable move structure in producing their texts. The measuring tool used to see how well the students conformed to the allowable move structure was calculated using a Move Score as introduced by Henry and Roseberry (1998) which is based on the following formula:

$$\text{Move score} = \frac{MP - 0.5(IM + MM)}{OM}$$

where

MP: is the number of obligatory moves present in a student's text,
IM: is the number of inappropriate moves present
MM: is the number of misplaced moves present
OM: is the number of obligatory moves in the particular genre identified.

The learners' writings were graded using this formula. As suggested by Henry and Roseberry (1998), when a learner managed to present all his obligatory moves in the right sequence as expected of the genre, he would receive a score of 1. However, when a learner did not indicate any obligatory moves in his writing, he would be given a negative score. Based on this calculation, the move scores were analyzed and compared between the control and the experimental groups. The results show that the writing task of both groups differed significantly at the 0.05 level, thus allowing the null hypothesis of no difference to be rejected.

Table 2   Results Showing the Mean Rating and the Significance Level Obtained from the three Raters of the Control and Experimental Groups in the Move Analysis of their Writing Task, an Adjustment Letter

Rater	Group	N	Mean	Significance (p)
1	Control	31	0.3253	p = 0.047
	Experimental	34	0.4265	
2	Control	31	0.3737	p = 0.036
	Experimental	34	0.5000	
3	Control	31	0.2339	p = 0.039
	Experimental	34	0.3824	

The above results show quite clearly that the experimental group scored better than the control group through the mean score indicated by the three raters. In comparison of the control and experimental groups, there was an indication that the experimental group tend to produce texts that conform more closely to the allowable move structure.

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Rater 2	Rater 3
= 0.003	p= 0.017
= 0.016	p= 0.004
= 0.054	p= 0.009

One possible explanation for the result is that the awareness of the moves strategies highlighted to the learners in the series of workshops, makes it easier for learners to concentrate on the obligatory moves to texture their writing. Both the groups were asked to give their opinions regarding the feelings towards their writing task. The participants from the experimental group reported that they did not find writing the adjustment letter that difficult as they have the structure in mind to guide them and most of them finished their writing within the allocated time. As for the control group, they felt that they needed more time to write. Clearly, from the opinions gathered from most of the ,participants from the experimental group, indicate that the experimental group has gained the empowerment through learning to control and modify their writing. This notion is very much in line with Wennerstorm's (2003) belief that familiarity with a discourse domain entails genre knowledge. Hence, with the familiarity at hand, the learners are able to take control of their writing because of repeated experience.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that providing learners with explicit knowledge of the genre of the adjustment letter can be beneficial to the learners' output in deciding what kind of information is appropriate and how information can be organized. Clear and explicit teaching of linguistic feature can help to bridge the gap of learners' poor command of the language or lack of vocabulary as it empowers the writers (Hyland 2004). In addition, through genre-based writing instruction, learners are provided with a coherent framework to focus on the language and contexts. Without a road map, the learners would definitely find the writing task more difficult given that many of our students find writing a very daunting task because of their lack of confidence in deciding what information is needed to make a piece of writing appropriate.

On reflection, I believe using the genre-based approach has two major strengths. First by providing appropriate scaffolding through the teaching and learning cycle, the learners are able to write better as they are able to focus attention on the language and structure needed to write a particular genre. Secondly, the learners are empowered to establish links between their prior knowledge and their own in order to achieve a clear sense of why they are writing, who are they writing for and what information they needed to include in their texts. In conclusion, I would like to view genre-based approach as an additional approach to teaching learners to write better in a shorter period.

Limitations to the Study and Further Research

As this study has only shown the benefits of a short period of genre-based instruction on a small sample size of participants and one type of activity, namely the adjustment letter, further research is necessary to determine to what extent learners are able to transfer the skill acquired during genre-based approach on other types of genres needed in the workplace. It is recommended that the sample size of participants should be bigger and the distribution of participants should cover a few colleges to gauge the effectiveness of this genre-based approach.

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