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A Genre-Based Approach for Teaching Writing to Low-Proficiency EFL College Students

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Abstract

This paper describes a genre-based approach paired with a range of activities, aiming to provide low-proficiency EFL college students with the ability to create whole texts. A genre-based approach clearly assists students to understand textual and linguistic features, and various activities facilitate student reinforcement of their abilities in both the mechanics and organization of writing.

Key Words: genre--based approach, EFL writing, activities

Introduction

When asked what their writing teachers can do to help them write better, low-proficiency students frequently offer responses such as the following: "I have no idea how to write. Could you please give me a model to use?", "I know very few words. Please teach me more vocabulary", "My grammar is so bad that I always write Chinese English", "Use interesting activities to help me learn the rules", and "I'm an adult. I need useful writing tasks, like writing job applications." These opinions reveal the nature of their writing difficulties, which include an inability to generate ideas, trouble structuring writing properly to accommodate its topic or

purpose, choosing appropriate vocabulary, and adhering to correct grammar rules.

The attitudes of these emerging writers also reflect essential elements that must appear in writing classes. First, teachers should offer explicit instruction of examples and key features of different texts to provide students models to follow. Second, linguistic knowledge must not only be directly taught but also integrated with task-based activities to ensure that students internalize this knowledge. Third, writing tasks must be meaningful if teachers want to motivate students.

The genre approach, accompanied by a range of activities, may be a suitable alternative in terms of addressing the aforementioned essentials of writing instruction to low-English-proficiency college students. This approach, which focuses on the explicit instruction of genres (types of texts) in a variety of contexts, enables students first to recognize textual and linguistic features and then to apply this knowledge to the construction and shaping of whole texts (Hyland, 2003; Johns, 2001). Furthermore, a diversity of activities, each repeating the target genre, provides students with opportunities to reiterate, develop, and practice vocabulary and grammatical features. A combination of the genre approach and activities will facilitate student reinforcement of their abilities in both the mechanics and organization of writing (Christie, 1999, Johns, 2003).

Research investigations have reported the positive effects of genre-based teaching for non-native English speakers. For example, Henry and Roseberry (1998) found that genre analysis assists in the teaching of first year management students to write tourist information texts. They compared students who took part in genre-specific writing instruction with students who had more traditional grammatical instruction for text writing. In their study, they observed that the writing texture of the genre group made a significant improvement, whereas the non-genre group did not. Likewise, Flowerdew (2000) examined the effectiveness of genre-based teaching in writing and suggested that students would improve the organization of their academic writing if given explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in scholarly contexts. In addition, Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) note

that some instructors believe that explicit teaching about genre features can be useful to improve L2 students' genre awareness and to facilitate their processing and production of text.

The literature has certainly demonstrated that the genre-based approach improves the writing skills of students. However, very few studies actually discuss the practical details of how the pedagogical model of genre-based literacy could be introduced into the context of low-proficiency EFL. This paper will attempt to demonstrate that the successful integration of a genre-based approach with various activities to suit lower-level EFL college students is indeed possible.

The Genre-Based Approach

Since the mid-1980s, there has been considerable interest in the genre-based approach to writing instruction, which provides students with explicit and systematic guiding principles to help them understand and produce selected genres of texts. (Derewianka, 2003). A genre is identified by Swales (1990) as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (p. 58). For instance, recipes describe cooking procedures, advertisements promote products, and resignation letters announce and explain reasons for leaving a job.

In addition, each genre has its own set of organizational structure according to those communicative purposes (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998). Paltridge (1996), for example, described the common organizational structure in a formal letter the purpose of which is to file a complaint and suggest 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).

Also, each genre comprises common sets of linguistic features, the so-called text type (Kim & Kim 2005). Six main text types may be identified: narratives, recounts, information reports, instructions, explanations, and expository texts. Narratives tell a story, recounts describe events, information reports provide facts, instructions tell the reader what to do, explanations explain how or

why something happens, and expository texts present or argue viewpoints. Texts in each genre may be purely of one type (for example, a bus schedule is purely an information report), or they may be a blend (for example, sermons often include stretches of narrative or recounting as well as explanations).

Based on the fact that all genres conform to certain conventions in both organizational structure and linguistic features, the advocates of the genre-based approach claim that if a student wishes to successfully join a particular English-language discourse community, he or she must be able to construct texts that meet the expectations of its readers in terms of its grammar, organization, and content (Halliday, 1985; Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Badger & White, 2000). In EFL classrooms, writing teachers should introduce a variety of text types, based on student needs, in order to have students understand and practice different sets of skills with which they can successfully complete their writing tasks in school, job, and social settings.

In the genre-based approach, emphasis is placed on the understanding and production of selected genres of texts. This pedagogy often involves three stages. First, students are given examples from a specific genre. Second, teachers use the examples as models to provide their students with generalized systematic guiding principles about how to produce meaningful passages. Third, students construct a first draft, imitating the elements that characterize the sample text for the genre in question. (Derewianka, 2003).

The genre-based approach, like other approaches, has received criticism. Caudery (1998), for example, notes that the genre-based approach does not require students to express their own ideas and may be too dependent on the teacher's finding suitable materials to use as models, thus becoming counterproductive. However, concerns over a lack of student creativity and independence can easily be resolved by incorporating extra attention and effort into lesson plans. In writing classes, the teacher can provide students with opportunities to express their own opinions about the writing topic in addition to demonstrating a variety of model texts that address student needs. Moreover, the teacher should remind students that a model text is like general

cooking procedures and tips--the success of a delicious meal depends on its ingredients and spices. The contents of a written work are like its ingredients; students must create original, unique ideas if they want their writing to appeal to their readers.

There is no perfect approach to the instruction of writing. Despite concerns that the genre-based approach might result in a lack of student creativity and independence, these problems can easily be overcome through careful and appropriate planning on the teacher's part. Learning is best accomplished through an explicit awareness of language (Connor, 2003). Therefore, the genre-based approach, which offers students an explicit and systematic instruction of how language functions in social contexts, offers students a greater opportunity to improve their writing and advance to a higher level of proficiency.

Vygotsky's Principles and the Genre-based Approach

The underpinning theory of the genre-based approach is derived from Vygotsky's ideas on learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), learners will be more likely to achieve a higher level of performance via scaffolding. "Scaffolding" refers to either assistance from experts or interaction with others. The scaffolding is temporary but essential to help learners to move toward new skills, concepts, or levels of understanding (Gibbons, 2002).

The genre-based approach emphasizes the interactive collaboration between teacher and student. In the beginning, the teacher plays a key role to scaffold or support learners as they move towards their potential levels of performance. In the scaffolding activity, students are provided with models and are asked to discuss and analyze their language and structure. The scaffolding element gradually lightens as the students independently produce a text parallel to the model. The role of the teacher thus moves from explicit instructor to facilitator, and eventually the learners gain autonomy.

Low-level EFL students with linguistic and rhetorical difficulties typically produce texts that are less organized, less coherent, and less grammatical (Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). They most certainly require scaffolding in order to be able to produce good

writing. In the genre-based approach, both the teachers' explicit instruction on distinctive characteristics of different genres and their provision of opportunities for students to physically model the genres through a range of task-incorporated activities can function as scaffolding to assist students to overcome their writing difficulties.

The Curriculum Cycle

The goal of the genre-based approach is to enable students to perform, through the mastery of various genres, a range of social purposes for writing in English. These purposes include examples such as telling what happened, providing factual information, telling someone what to do, explaining why something happens, and arguing different viewpoints. Systemic-functional linguists Derewianka (1990) and Butt, et al (2001), have proposed a model based upon Vygotsky's ideas-learning through guidance and interaction-for developing lesson units around genres to be taught. This model, termed as the Curriculum Cycle, consists of four phases: Phase 1: Context Exploration, Phase 2: Text Exploration based on Model Texts, Phase 3: Joint Construction of a Text, and Phase 4: Individual Application. Descriptions of each phase and activities related to each are provided below.

Phase 1: Context Exploration

In this phase, the teacher begins preparing the students to write by defining a situation that will require a written text and placing it within a specific genre, such as expository writing explaining why you vote for Tokyo as a destination for the graduation trip. This phase, similar to the pre-activities in skills-based teaching, activates the schemata and allows students to anticipate the rhetorical organization and the linguistic features of this genre. The activities in this phase include introducing a topic, brainstorming ideas about the topic, illustrating key vocabulary, and explaining the characteristics of the specific genre to be taught.

Phase 2: Text Exploration

The goal of this phase is to raise the students' awareness of both organizational and linguistic features closely associated with the target genre. Model texts play a crucial role in this phase. The teacher highlights the salient lexical and grammatical features of the model text. At the same time, a number of opportunities are provided for the students to reiterate, develop, and practice vocabulary, metadiscoursal and lexico-grammatical features. In addition, discussion or exploration on how the formal features work to help the genre achieve its purpose is carried out. Furthermore, communicative activities, such as the reassembling of "jigsaw" texts, information gap exercises, or role-playing the model text, are utilized to reinforce the students' understanding of the specific genre.

Phase 3: Joint Construction

Here, utilizing the knowledge and awareness gained from the exploration of the text, the students work with the teacher to construct their own text. The joint construction's form varies from the teacher guiding the entire class to construct a single text on the board, to small group or pair construction, assisted by the teacher, to individual student-teacher conferencing. A significant amount of oral interaction occurs during this phase. Students receive feedback beneficial to the drafting, editing, and redrafting of their texts through interaction with their teacher and peers. Both text exploration and joint construction are repeated before the introduction of the next stage, individual application.

Phase 4: Individual Application

After having examined model texts and jointly constructed a text in the genre, students now move on to the last stage. As the name suggests, Individual Application requires the students to work individually and independently to construct a written text. While this is carried out only after the students have successfully produced a jointly constructed text or understanding of a text, the teacher must be available at any time during this process to help, clarify, or consult.

A Lesson Unit Example of the Genre-based Approach

In Taiwan, the instruction of writing to low proficiency EFL students tends to focus on the sentence level due to the fact that these students are thought to have minimal awareness at the level of complete texts. The genre-based approach may be a beneficial alternative method of instructing writing to lower-level students. This approach, which emphasizes the explicit instruction of genres in many contexts, assists students in first recognizing textual and linguistic features and then using this knowledge to construct and shape whole texts through a range of activities.

The following genre-based lesson unit has been developed according to the Curriculum Cycle, with the goal of improving the writing abilities of low-proficiency college students. A range of activities are paired with the genre-based approach to enhance the effects of learning. It is hoped that through a number of activities, students' linguistic and rhetorical knowledge will be consolidated and their writing skills will improve.

The entire lesson unit is completed over the course of five 50-minute lessons. The genre that will be instructed in this lesson unit is expository writing to explain why you pick a particular place as a destination for your graduation trip. In Taiwan, most college students have a graduation trip in their third year. Since this is a big event that students look forward to, they engage in a lot of discussion before choosing a destination. This topic is of interest to most college students, and it will motivate them to write something that is applicable to real life, rather than just writing for tests or to receive a grade from the teacher.

Phase 1: Context Exploration

The Context Exploration stage begins with a description of a situation in which students are required to write a text. The situation in this example is that the class is going to travel abroad on a graduation trip during their summer vacation. The travel agency proposes 5 countries: Japan, Thailand, Korea, China, and Singapore. Since there is no consensus among the class, the class leader decides that everyone will write a 100-word piece to explain why he/she picks a particular country as a destination for the

graduation trip. The purpose of this writing is to justify your decision to choose a particular country.

After students are introduced to the topic, the teacher divides them into five groups. Each group is assigned one of the five countries that the travel agency proposes as a destination for the graduation trip, and each group is told that they should offer three pieces of information about the country they have been assigned: the names of the recommended tourist spots for the graduation trip, the features of these spots, and the estimated price for this trip. Students are given 15 minutes to browse the internet for related information. Through peer cooperation, students will develop a deeper understanding of the country they wish to visit for their graduation trip, and this can provide the students some writing content.

In the Context Exploration, the teacher also distributes worksheets containing four questions to the class: "What is the country you choose for the graduation trip?", "What are the tourist destinations in this country?", "What are the features of these destinations?", and "What is the price for this trip?" While one group reports the information about their country for the graduation trip, students in other groups answer the four questions based on the report. The answers to these questions can serve as data that students can use when completing the writing task.

After each group finishes presenting its oral report on the country for the graduation trip, the teacher can teach the vocabulary items that the group mentions in their presentation. For example, a group reports, "We want to go to Thailand on our graduation trip. The two most famous tourist places in Thailand are Bangkok and Pattaya. Bangkok is a shopping paradise, where you can pick up fantastic silk bags and unique handicrafts at great bargains. You can also enjoy gourmet Thai cuisine. The food is spicy and sour, and you can drink coconut milk. Pattaya is a world-class resort island you can't miss in Thailand. In Pattaya, you can relax on a deckchair, swim through clear blue water, or do endless sports and leisure activities. The four-night, five-day trip will cost you NT\$10,000. Nothing is better in terms of price and quality than Thailand. So come with us and have the time of your life in Thailand. It will be unforgettable!" Then the teacher categorizes the

words on the blackboard. The 'place' words include *Bangkok* and *Pattaya*, and the 'adjective' words include *fantastic*, *unique*, *spicy*, *sow unforgettable*, *world--class*, and *endless*. After explaining their Chinese meanings, the teacher can ask true-or-false questions. Each question contains one of those words, for instance, "Because lemons are sour, you put salt on them to make the juice taste better," and "Green peppers are spicy and you usually eat them raw." This practice shows students how to apply the words in the context, which might help them to use these words in their writing.

Phase 2: Text Exploration

In the Context Exploration, which takes up two 50-minute lessons, the teacher introduces a writing topic: Pick a foreign country that the travel agency proposes for the graduation trip, and explain your reasons for picking this country as a destination. Then, through the oral report presented by each group, students collect content information about the five foreign countries for the writing task. In addition, the teacher illustrates vocabulary words that each group has used in their presentation and gives practice about these new words.

All the activities done in the Context Exploration aim to prepare students to have a general idea of what the writing task is about. After the Context Exploration, the teacher moves to a second stage, Text Exploration. During this stage, students are given a model text and the teacher explains how expository writing goes according to the text. Because the target students are at a lower level, their organizational skills and linguistic knowledge are not sufficient. The model text should not be too difficult in both organization and language.

Expository writing is used to explain, describe, give information, or inform. In this writing topic, each student has to describe the foreign country he/she picks as a destination for the graduation trip and explain why. This expository writing serves two functions: describing and explaining. In terms of describing a country, students can list its features, and as for explaining their choice, students can list reasons. The teacher asks the students to highlight the sentences of the model text (See below) about the

features of the country and then the sentences about the reasons for picking the country. The teacher also asks students to mark the transition words between paragraphs.

An Expository Writing Model Text

I vote for Thailand as a destination for our graduation trip. I choose Thailand for two reasons, its fantastic tourist attractions and its reasonable price.

Bangkok and Patta.ya a.re two tourist attractions you can't miss in Thailand. Bangkok is a shopping paradise where you can buy Thailand's famous silk bags and unique handicrafts. You can also enjoy a selection of Thai gourmet cuisine, which is sour and spicy and smells like coconut. It's a delicious taste that you'll never forget. In Pattaya, another tourist spot, you can relax on a deck chair and swim in the clear blue water. In addition, you can experience exciting water sports like riding banana boats and jet skis. Imagine how wonderful it would be to spend our graduation trip in a shopping paradise like Bangkok and a resort island like Pattaya! It would be a truly unforgettable trip.

As good as this trip sounds, students a.re more concerned about the price, since most of us are financially dependent on our pa.rents. The trip to Thailand is even cheaper than a trip around Taiwan. For four nights and .ive days, it costs just NT 5000, a.bout 1000 NT per day. Isn't that a better value for our money? The trip to Thailand won't be a burden on our parents. We don't need to ask them for money. If we ea.ch work pa.rt-time for two months, we'll be able to save this amount. Wouldn't it be great to travel abroad through our own ha.rd work?

Graduation trips a.re a symbol for beginning a new phase in our lives. We should open our eyes to new people and places. In Thailand, you can broaden your horizons without having to spend much money.

In the phase of Text Exploration, the teacher has to give a clear concept of what expository writing is. In this case, expository writing is about explaining and describing. Students explain why

they pick a particular country as a destination for the graduation trip. During the explaining process, they have to use 'describing' techniques to give readers information about the particular country.

Phase 3: Joint Construction

In the second phase of Text Exploration, students read the real writing, the model text, and develop a clearer idea of what and how they can write. After that, the teacher can move into the third phase, Joint Construction, where students can experiment with the language by themselves. In this stage, the teacher can have two students work on the writing task as a pair. Ask students to list three key points as a reminder before they write: first, the foreign country they pick as a destination for a graduation trip, second, the reasons why, and third, the supporting ideas to illustrate their reasons. Also ask them to list some transition words (in addition, moreover, further, however, in contrast, furthermore, etc.) they can use to link the sentences or paragraphs.

Activities utilized in this phase include asking students to read their writing out loud to the class. The other students, acting as an audience, offer suggestions such as clarifying the information or giving clearer reasons. The writers themselves cannot find something wrong or insufficient in their writing piece; other people's comments can function as an aid to make their writing sound more appealing and readable.

Joint construction, as the term suggests, is a bridge that helps lower-level students construct their writing first with other people's assistance, then move on to independent work. During this phase, the teacher has to offer immediate help both in language and ways to organize their writing.

Phase 4: Individual Application

Going over the three stages (being given an idea about the writing topic, being given a model text to follow, and constructing the text with the assistance of other people), students now begin to write their own pieces all by themselves, which takes up the final 50-minute lesson out of the five. For lower-level students whose

language proficiency is insufficient, the teacher can allow them to use any resources available, such as sheets they fill in when listening to the other groups' oral presentations about the foreign countries, the model text, and the writing pieces they cooperated on with their peers. Students should be allowed to use dictionaries in this stage. With all of these references available, students can resort to whatever they need. Additionally, the teacher should circle the classroom to offer help, regardless of words, phrases, collocations, grammar points, and ways to organize the writing.

After students turn in their writing pieces, the teacher revises them and provides feedback in terms of language and content. The teacher should not give too many corrections, which might frustrate the students, but should give comments that address the most critical needs of each student. Moreover, the teacher can select examples of good writing, show them to the class, and ask students why these pieces of writing are good. At the end of the class, the teacher can conduct a voting activity to select a particular country as a destination for a graduation trip. Each student is first given a file consisting of his /her peers' writing pieces about a particular foreign country as a destination for their graduation. After 20 minutes, he/she writes a country on a piece of paper. Finally, the teacher counts the votes. The country with the most votes might be a suggested place for the students' graduation trip.

In summary, the teacher first introduces in the Context Exploration phase a writing topic. In order for students to feel motivated to write, the topic suggested should be meaningful and one that students can apply in real life. During this stage, content information in the form of students' oral presentations and demonstrations of vocabulary knowledge in conjunction with the teacher's instruction are offered as a base for students to build their writing upon later. Moving on to the Text Exploration phase, students are provided a model text to assist them in grasping the correct style for written composition. Explicit and systematic teaching of genres can help students gain awareness of textual and linguistic features that are used to construct and shape whole texts. After students have a linguistic and rhetorical knowledge, they are encouraged to cooperate with their peers to experiment with

language. Through interaction with and assistance from their peers, students receive the skills (e.g. vocabulary, sentence patterns) they lack in constructing texts and at the same time share what they know to help their peers to write better. Finally, in the phase of Individual Application, students are given an opportunity to write on their own. In this phase, the teacher will evaluate how far on the writing proficiency scale students have progressed after an explicit instruction of genres combined with a variety of activities. After revising students' written pieces, the teacher can categorize students' strengths and weaknesses and offer appropriate feedback. Going through the four phases of the Curriculum Cycle in the genre-based approach, low-proficiency students will be more likely to transcend from sentence-level writing to being able to compose complete texts.

Tips for Using the Genre-based Approach to Teach Writing to Low-Proficiency College EFL Students

Low-proficiency college EFL students will be more likely to be able to create complete and sensible compositions if they are explicitly taught how such works are structured and why they are written in the ways they are (Feez, 2002). Below are the tips for using the genre-based approach to teaching emergent college EFL writers.

1. Writing tasks should be relevant and interesting to students, so that they feel more motivated to write. Don't give students the feeling that writing is only for exams. Writing tasks like preparing job application letters or explaining to teachers why they were absent from class are more suitable than topics like "My Ambition" or "My Family".
2. The teacher should provide explicit instructions in a highly systematic manner. First, choose specific topics that are frequently encountered in students' academic or daily lives. Second, select examples appropriate to the students' proficiency level. Texts that are too easy might bore students, but too-difficult ones might intimidate them. The best option is to select a composition that is just beyond their current level. Third, explicitly explain the linguistic and rhetorical features of the

work, and utilize a range of activities to consolidate students' knowledge and enable them to write complete compositions.

3. Create opportunities for students to cooperate with their peers to construct compositions. Through collaboration and interaction with their peers, students are more likely to get better ideas of how to revise their writing to make it sound more intelligible and readable.
4. Encourage students to write as much as possible. Writing requires lots of practice; therefore, the teacher has to design a variety of writing topics for students to experiment with the language. Only with incessant practice can students gain a better ability to write.

Conclusion

Writing is never an easy task for lower-level EFL students. The teacher should focus the instruction of writing beyond the sentence level; more emphasis should be placed on helping students to write complete texts. The genre-based approach provides students with the generation of ideas, the study of individual genres, and the planning of the texts. The generation of ideas means planning what the writer will write. The study of individual genres provides students with useful examples, appropriate language, and the relationship between the intended readers and the layout of the chosen genre. Making a plan for a certain text means deciding in which order to arrange ideas and how to present the information the best way possible.

To maximize the function of the genre-based approach, one must combine it with a diversity of activities. Students will then physically model the genres through a range of different activities. These types of activities would involve oral presentation and discussion linked with a particular topic. The activities would assist students in the development, expansion, and practice of vocabulary related to the topic. In addition, they will practice semantic and grammatical features.

The genre based approach may be a useful method for the improvement of writing skills for students who have been generally

stereotyped as underachievers. The process of acting, generating an understanding of the nature of a text, using concrete examples, and finally organizing their writing would be a highly effective way of teaching low-proficiency EFL students in an environment that is both pleasant and positive.

The Author

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