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The application of Genre Theory to improve Academic English Writing Courses

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Malakul, K. and Bowering, M. Department of English, Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University, Thailand and School of Education, Edith Cowan University, Australia. The application of Genre Theory to improve Academic English Writing Courses

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ABSTRACT

The development of academic writing skills in English has recently become a global priority. However, these courses, where they exist at all, usually adopt an out-dated approach. This paper seeks to redress this by giving an example of a research program, where current linguistic theory was blended with an awareness of local conditions to good effect in terms of student outcomes.
In this case what is known as genre theory was applied to the teaching of basic scientific report writing to final year science students at Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University. According to genre theory, as interpreted by the Australian School of Genre, it is argued that students will learn to write after first listening to and/or reading authentic samples of the target text type or genre. It is only then that they will see how the purpose of the text is conveyed in the overall organisation and features of the language. Thus the grammar and vocabulary are related to the meaning of the genre and not seen as isolated aspects. Finally this holistic approach helps students write their own text, something that is not usually possible with the separate sentence method most frequently used.

The researcher, Dr Karmolnad Malakul, in developing this model compared two separate genre-based courses, one of which followed the genre theory more closely than the others. In both cases, however, students were advantaged by this new approach. Details and examples of how she analysed and taught the five micro-genres of the science report will be given, concluding with the optimistic view that this approach can be adapted for much wider use.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of academic writing in English in most parts of the non-English speaking world has been neglected for many decades, particularly since more communicative teaching methods have emphasized speaking rather than writing in English. Within the last decade, however, the demand for writing in all the academic areas has been increasing owing to the impact of globalisation. Students and graduates have become more aware of how important it is to be able to write well in order to apply for employment, further their education and participate in the world of academia.
In an attempt to improve the teaching of academic writing in the Rajabhat universities, this study investigated the effects of a method of teaching writing known as the genre-based approach. The researcher in using this approach taught two different genre-based courses to find which model of genre-based teaching of report writing would be more effective for her final year science undergraduates studying in Phitsanuloke, Thailand. In this the first part of the paper the rationale for the approach will be explained with special reference to how knowledge of both theory and local expectations was used to produce the models. The course designs resulting from these models are described in the second part, while the paper concludes with the view that this genre-based approach is worthy of extension to other academic writing areas.

APPROACH TO TEACHING ACADEMIC REPORT WRITING

In searching for ways to teach scientific report writing the researcher was guided by several key principles. Although she was ready to work within the latest thinking about ways to teach academic writing, she knew from experience that these ideas had to be considered in the light of student learning styles and abilities. The blending of the theoretical with the actual context is the key to understanding her approach.

The theoretical basis of the study

In terms of theory there were two major influences on the design. The first of these came from the most recent findings on how a second language is best acquired and the second from the more specific contribution of genre studies

The first theoretical question, 'How do teachers teach a foreign language?' has been answered in new ways over the last three decades. Instead of concentrating on the separate parts of a language such as the sounds, the words and the grammar, applied linguists are now more aware of needing to keeping these parts and of teaching from whole texts.
Three processes have been found to be necessary:
Listening to and reading from authentic second language texts selected to represent the students' language level ie INPUT
Talking and writing to others about what is understood from a spoken or written text ie INTERACTION
Individual writing about what is understood from the input and the interaction ie OUTPUT

These principles have provided the basis of the communicative language methodology, which is currently recommended by the Thai Ministry of Education for foreign language teaching. It was therefore expected that it would have an influence on this research. However for this study, a second theoretical question needed to be answered. 'Is there anything special about writing methodology that would help students learn to write? It is here that genre theory is useful, because it proposes that students need to be taught to recognise the distinctive features of each text or genre such as a letter, a report, a description or an explanation. Paltridge (2001, 3) describes genres in the following way:
'Genres provide ways for responding to recurring communicative situations. They further provide a frame that enables individuals to orient to and interpret particular communicative events. Making this knowledge explicit can provide language learners with the knowledge and the skills they need to communicate successfully in particular discourse communities.'

From the above the key ideas are that genres contain patterns in language use, that these patterns can help learners understand what is written and that these patterns need to be taught.

Since the major aim of this study was to enable learners to understand and produce such genres, the study had to show how genre approaches could be used in a Thai university. For this we will first turn to the work of John Swales (1990) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). At least three things make Swales' work attractive as a model for helping academic student use English in those situations needed by their discipline. These are setting up classroom situations similar to the real world for learning about genres, guiding students to use the same features that are found in model genres and using known grammatical terminology to describe genre language features.

The implementation of a genre-based approach in the teaching of academic writing has been supported by a great deal of research in teaching scientific writing for both L1 and L2 learners (Dudley-Evans, 1995, pp. 293-312; Jacoby, Leech & Holten, 1995, pp. 351-373). Several ESP studies with second language learners have added to our understanding of how genre teaching can assist learners. John Flowerdew (1993) reported on the introduction of a genre-based program at the Hong Kong City Polytechnic. In Hong Kong too, Lynne Flowerdew (2000) adopted a holistic genre-based approach in a study of the organisational patterns of student-produced engineering reports. Her approach was somewhat similar to that adopted by Hyland (1990) at the University of Papua New Guinea.

However, the approach developed by Swales was not completely appropriate for this study, because it is more suited to high level academic English students and texts. Clearly an alternative theory had to be found. In addition to the fact that the language level of these students was still fairly elementary, their learning styles were quite traditional. Because the teaching method should not interfere too much with their established practice, it was decided that students could benefit most by being taught in a way that suited their language level and learning style, yet introduced sufficient innovation for improved skills to emerge.

The most appropriate alternative method found was the Australian School of Genre, which had been developing out of research, and publication since the 1980s. Its great advantage was that it combined the teaching of more basic genres with a system, which kept an important role for teachers, while still giving some responsibility to the students in terms of output and interaction. In the case of each genre or authentic text, the teacher is responsible for modelling the text, by explaining its purpose, organisational features and linguistic markers (Paltridge, 2001, 31-32). Students respond first in discussion with the teacher and/or with each other and then put this knowledge to work, gaining skills in developing their own genre texts both jointly and individually.

Its appeal came not only from its theoretical basis, but also from the formula for teaching and learning that it offered. Known as the teaching and learning cycle and shown in Figure 1 below, it provided the framework for the design of both courses. Although this cycle influenced the overall course design, differences occurred in its application for each group, thus allowing for comparison of the two courses ie the first group, Mode X, was much closer in its implementation of the cycle than the second group, Mode Y, which could be regarded as following a more traditional methodology.

The major areas of difference between the two groups relate to:

Aims

Although in both cases students studied the same texts the primary objective in Mode X was to raise student understanding of the meaning and elements in the genre. In Mode Y, however, meaning of the text would be explained by treatment of the vocabulary and grammar of the genre.

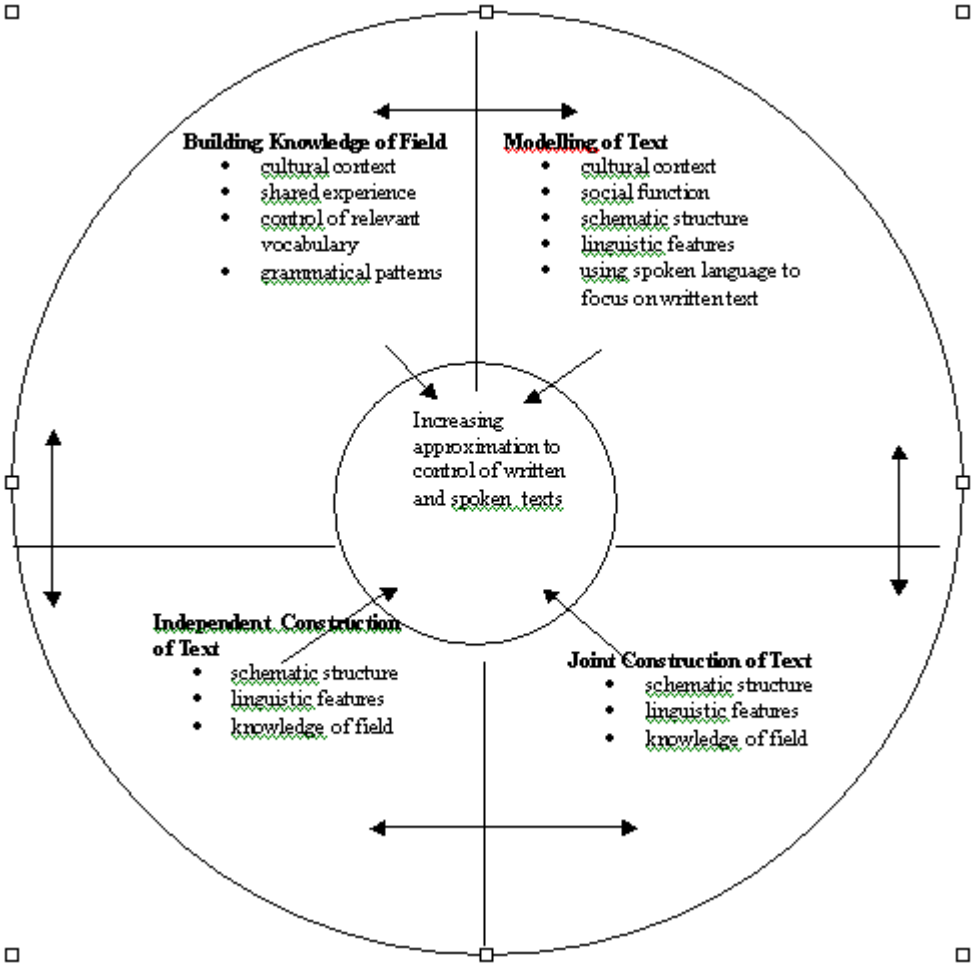

Figure 1 The teaching and learning cycle (Hammond et al, 1992)

Methodology

The nature of the practice activities accounted for the second difference. Mode X activities required production in English and Thai from the students in groups, while in Mode Y more timewas given to individual practice following teacher exposition in Thai.

Results

In terms of speaking in English, students in Mode X were encouraged to speak English to both the teacher and each other, while this was not the case in Mode Y. In relation to writing the situation was much more equal, as the written tasks were the same for both classes.

Through the application of these principles, two quite distinct genre-based courses were created. As the stronger application of modern theories in relation to both second language and genre acquisition occurred in the first course, it was expected that better results would result in that group. The next part of the paper concentrates on giving details on how the genre teaching was put into practice for teaching report writing and what results were produced.

THE MODEL FOR ACADEMIC WRITING COURSES

The three components, essential for SLA, namely English input, interaction and output, which were described in the first part of the paper, will now be discussed to explain what happened in both courses.

Research over the years has shown that students gain benefits from 'input' ie listening to and reading authentic and relevant genres in the target language, particularly if written at a suitable language level. It is claimed that these input activities improve student cognitive process, thus helping students retain both the ideas and the language. Therefore input in the form of sample texts was one of the most important components in both courses. However, the search for reports,

that dealt with relevant science experiments in a comprehensible way presented many difficulties. The main stages of this long search were first to select reports written by Australian students on relevant, interesting science topics, second to ask science-trained native speakers to rewrite and shorten them and third to give instructions that the reports were to contain the organisation and language features of the science report in straightforward, academic style within 2-3 pages.

The sample texts used in the two courses show that they meet the major characteristics required. Firstly, the topics belong to non-specific fields; secondly, the texts relate to the everyday life of the students; and thirdly, the length of the texts is suitable for class use. Finally, the language is not too complex and would therefore provide comprehensible input for the students.

From the genre analysis of the eight original samples, the organisational structure of the scientific reports was derived. Each report was found to comprise six micro-genres or stages; namely, abstract, introduction, methodology, results or findings, discussion and conclusion. Further examination of each part was carried out in order to find a suitable ordering of lessons, since some may be easier than others. As in Jacoby, Leech & Holten's study in 1995, the decision was made to teach the micro-genres in the following order.

1. Methodology
2. Results
3. Discussion
4. Conclusion
5. Introduction
6. Abstract

Although eight reports were examined, only three of these were finally selected for use in the three-week courses because of the time factor. An outline of the overall course program is shown in Figure 2 below.

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3
Monday Overview of science report organisation	Monday Discussion 1	Monday Introduction 2
Tuesday Methodology 1	Tuesday Discussion 2	Tuesday Abstract 1
Wednesday Methodology 2	Wednesday Conclusion 1	Wednesday Abstract 2
Thursday Results 1	Thursday Conclusion 2	Thursday Practice
Friday Methodology review	Friday Introduction 1	Friday Post test

Figure 2 Course structure for both groups

Since at least one micro-genre was central to every lesson it was necessary for teachers to have a proper way to show students the genre model. Each model micro-genre was presented in a frame with the analyses given at the side of the frame and pointing into the text. Each genre sample thus comprises a frame of the text in the centre of a page with the organisation analysis on the left and the linguistic features on the right. Arrows are used to link the text parts with the analysis. With this holistic method of modelling, students could read the text and see how it had been analysed at one and the same time (Hammond et al., 1992).

For the analysis of the model, not only was the textual organisation important, but also the special vocabulary and grammar. With the help of these features, each micro-genre could be modelled and show the similarities between the three sample reports. The resultant comparison of these samples was beneficial to students as they could follow the organisation and be able to generate ideas of what types of grammatical features they should focus on. For example, students saw the use of passive voice in almost every model and realized that this grammatical structure was important for them.

The extent of 'interaction' ie what members in the classroom have the opportunity to speak Thai or English is largely dependent on the methodology used. Therefore we need to look at the different types of organisation adopted for the lessons as a way to compare the type of interaction, which might result. The study of language form was made secondary within the more cooperative approach of Mode X, where the process of looking for meaning was emphasized. To do this

collaborative learning in the form of pair and group work was added to activate the process of interaction and thus enhance the both spoken and written output. In Mode Y, however, the approach focused on the language features of the genre rather than organisation, making the methodology more traditional. Other differences between the two modes stemmed from these two position statements. The balance between English and Thai was approximately equal in Mode X while there was greater reliance on Thai in Mode Y.

Figure 4, which shows a summary of the major differences and similarities in relation to input, interaction and output, provides evidence that the amount of these elements in English would have been greater in Mode X than Mode Y.

Differences	
Mode X	Mode Y
Emphasis on genre. organisation and features. Treatment of selected vocabulary and grammar. Practice in report organisation. Focus on group/pair work Equal use of English and Thai.	1. Emphasis on grammatical and lexical features. 2. Emphasis on explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary. 3. Practice in syntax and vocabulary. 4. Focus on individual work. Dominance of Thai language.
Similarities	
1. Reading and listening to authentic genres 2. Computer-based genre exercises.	

Figure 4 Differences and similarities in Modes X and Y

The third and final element in the trio of features essential for second language acquisition is output. In the context of language learning this means the language that the learners can produce as a result of a course. For these particular students it was only written output ie the ability to write a western style scientific report and abstract that was measured.

In terms of results posttest scores indicate that both genre-based approaches were capable of assisting the students to produce an individual report of their own experiments in English, something which all students were incapable of doing in the pretest. Even in the short time period allowed for the course, however, some signs were evident that the experimental group, whose course more closely resembled the application of the genre-based approach than the control group, was able to gain slightly more benefit. However, when detailed comparison is made of the abstracts for which student-produced pretest and posttest versions are available, several other positive factors about Mode X are revealed. Students in that group not only wrote better abstracts as shown by both scores and native speaker comment, but they also made greater improvement in grammar and in overall understanding of what it means to write a particular genre.

These factors provide some evidence for accepting the hypothesis that the Mode X model, where the implementation was closer to the theoretical position of the Australian School of Genre, had a stronger impact on outcomes than the Mode Y course. The greater degree of English language input and the stronger emphasis on the model in Mode X may have contributed to the result, but does not negate the fact that the effect of the more traditional genre-based teaching in Mode Y was nonetheless positive.

CONCLUSION

We might conclude by asking the question as to what pedagogical implications flow from this. Although this was an exploratory study applied in one field, it gives considerable encouragement to the view that both such genre-based approaches may be of use for the teaching of academic

writing in Thailand at university level. Furthermore by paying due consideration to the real teaching situation in Thailand and providing two versions modified to suit that situation, the methodologies used here could be capable of extension to other content areas as well as to other levels of learning such as in schools or technical institutions. Much needs to be done however in further research in the area as well as in locating and developing suitable sample texts.

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