

The Relevance of the Genre Approach in the context of the tertiary level students of Bangladesh

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Keywords

- Genre
- Writing instruction
- Second language
- Context
- Learners' needs

Abstract

The genre-approach to teaching writing, although a more recent approach when compared to the process or the product approach, has received considerable attention in teaching writing. Several factors contribute to its wide acceptance including its strong theoretical underpinning, its focus on students' needs and the context of writing. In case of second language (L2) writing instruction, genre-based approach has strong implications as it clearly states what learners need to learn and provides a logical framework for studying language as well as the context in which the language is produced. At the tertiary level, writing is often deemed as the most important language skill because students at higher learning institutes are mostly assessed through their writing performance. However, for second language learners academic writing may seem to be a daunting task if they do not have prior academic writing experience or if they lack proper linguistic knowledge. For these novice student writers, genre –based writing instruction is often considered appropriate as this approach draws learners' attention on the formal and functional features of the text making them understand why the linguistic features and conventions are used to elicit the desired communicative goals. This article explores the relevance of the genre-based instruction in the tertiary level second language writing instruction of Bangladesh and the ways in which this approach can be integrated in the tertiary level academic writing programs of the country.

1. Introduction

Since the last two decades, the notion of the genre has received considerable attention and more particularly its application in teaching academic writing. This is an outcome of the research which has given insights into the social purposes, the 'move' or constituent structures of academic texts, linguistic features of spoken and written discourse and also the pedagogical implications of these in the L2 writing instruction (Bhatia, 1993). Thus, the genre approach (GA) provides an appropriate writing pedagogy especially to the L2 writing instruction as it explicitly states what needs to be learnt and also provides a logical framework for studying language as well as context simultaneously providing learners with the resources to "understand and challenge valued discourse" (Hyland, 2007, p.149). The concept of genre is used in different fields. In education, types of literary texts are referred to by the term 'genre'. However, the term also refers to the patterns of different text types that are predictable and recurring in the context of a specific culture (Hammond and Derewianka, 2001). Genres are determined primarily by their social purposes. Same text types are considered under the same genre if they have similar social purposes (Swales, 1990). A text of the same genre, apart from the same social purpose, share similar linguistic features, schematic structures and linguistic convention. By schematic structure text organization or the internal structure of the text is referred to while language features include features of grammar and lexis that are needed to translate ideas and information into a text.

Recurring internal structures of the texts of the same genre is one of the salient features of this approach. Bhatia (1993, p. 61) suggested that instructors need to draw learners' attention to the formal and functional features of the text simultaneously to make them understand how and why linguistic conventions are employed to elicit the desired rhetoric effects. It is argued (e.g., by Christie and Martin, 1997) that student learners will not be able to produce a specific type of text successfully unless they are taught explicitly about the linguistic conventions of the text type including its internal structure and linguistic features. Genre-based writing instruction puts focus on the explicit instruction of the linguistic conventions and thus it is considered to be a suitable instruction method for beginner student writers. At higher learning institutes of Bangladesh, the dominant focus of most education programs is writing since students are mostly assessed based on their writing performance. Writing, especially academic writing, is a challenging experience for all learners and may seem like a daunting experience to the novice tertiary level student writers of Bangladesh as the secondary and higher secondary levels of education do not focus on writing different text types. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relevance of the genre approach in L2 writing pedagogy, especially in the context of tertiary education in Bangladesh.

2. Literature Review

As any communication is based on a context, has a purpose and Over the last few decades, EFL /ESL teachers have been drawing on a number of approaches in teaching writing. In the 1970s and also in the early 80s the process and product approaches received much attention from the experts in teaching writing, especially the process approach which predominantly equates writing with linguistic skills, such as planning, gathering information, drafting, revising, and editing. Although the process approach has its advantages for individual writers by raising their awareness of the complexity of

the writing process, it gives much less focus on linguistic knowledge, more particularly on the grammatical and text structure features (Badger and White, 2000).

Consequently, many linguists felt the need for what Hyland (2007, p.149) terms as “more theoretically robust, linguistically informed, and research grounded text descriptions” that would meet the practical needs of the student writers. Genre-based pedagogies addressed this need by viewing writing as a purposeful act and more specifically by analyzing the contextual situation in which writing takes place. Swales (1990, p.58) who defined the genre as “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes” pointed out the basic notion that there are some specific rules or conventions for different types of writings that are socially recognized. So, members belonging to the same community can easily recognize the similarities in the texts they frequently use. Drawing on their repeated experience with such texts and by knowing about the readers’ expectations, writers are likely to be able to write those texts relatively easily. Moreover, by teaching learners explicitly how such texts are grammatically patterned, they can be taught to see not only how grammar and lexical choices can create meaning but also to understand how language functions when writers differ in their purposes (Hyland, 2007). Hyland (2007) also mentions the following principles that underpin all genre-based teaching and suggests that these can be translated into a genre-based syllabus.

- Directed towards a listener, writing can be considered as a social activity.
- Learners’ needs form the basis of writing instruction.
- Writing instruction needs to have clear outcomes and expectations.
- Teaching and learning writing can be termed as a social activity as it involves some developmental steps that are scaffolded by the teacher and the peers.
- Learning to use language is involved with writing instruction.

3. Research Methodology

The study will use the secondary research method. It will critically analyze the different features of the genre pedagogy using the existing data. The study will also answer the question how GA can be integrated in the language programs of the tertiary level of Bangladesh.

4. Data Analysis

The relevance of the genre approach to second language writing pedagogy can be justified on several grounds. Perhaps the strongest justification comes from the research insights. Writing research reveals that learners need to get exposure to different genres of writing other than narrative writing and they need to practice them (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Langer, 1986; Perera, 1984; as cited in Reppen, 2002). Poynton (1986) experimented on the types of writings elementary grade students practice, highlighting the significance of making students realize the various purposes of writing. The study reveals that metalinguistic awareness helps students to manipulate information and thus achieve different purposes through writing. Truong (2017) conducted an exploratory study to investigate the perceptions of first-year English major students of Vietnam on the genre-based approach to writing focusing on writing letters. The study revealed that students showed an increased awareness of the type of genre.

More recent studies have explored the different aspects and applications of genre-based instruction and showed considerable positive outcomes. Han and Hiverb (2018) in their

study involving longitudinal cluster analysis found that students' motivational level for writing tasks increased through genre-based instruction. The students also revealed the increased capacity of self-regulation and sustention of self-efficacy. Almacioğlua and Okanb's (2018) study showed an overall improvement of students' writing performance through genre-based writing instruction. Recent research also showed EFL students improved skills in writing short essays and revealed the potential advantageousness of genre-based writing instruction (Douangmala and Widyantoro, 2018). Sirisuda and Wisut (2020) conducted a study to investigate the effectiveness of genre-based instruction in the development of both linguistic features and performance in a writing task. The study involved 44 undergraduate Thai students who lacked competence in writing skills. They concluded by stating the effectiveness of a genre-based approach to the development of EFL writing competence. After twelve weeks of instruction, the students showed significant improvement in the use of language and rhetoric organization.

Thus, Genre-based writing instruction also allows students to reflect on the purposes of communication in specific social contexts and form an idea of the appropriateness of a communication style. In other words, this exploration of context helps learners to understand the purpose of a text, its internal structure, grammar and vocabulary features which are governed by linguistic conventions (Hammond and Derewianka, 2001; Hyon,1996). Christie and Martin (1997) also suggested the benefits of the genre approach for learners by pointing out that it not only pulls together language, content relating them with contexts but also offers teachers a strategy of showing learners explicitly and systematically how writing works to communicate. Genres are culture-specific which L2 learners may not be aware of. By going beyond syntactic structures, vocabulary, and composing, helps students to make sense of how the texts to be produced are structured and the reasons behind the conventions of such texts (Hyland, 2007).

Again, the strong advocates of the genre approach, more particularly Hyland (2007), think that genres can have important implications for teaching L2 learners writing in the classroom both in terms of theory and practice. Hyland also thinks that the genre approach enables teachers to design their courses with texts that match the professional, academic or social writing needs of the learners.

Genre-based approaches can also prove to be advantageous in the assessment of second language writing as they take into account the basic principles which Hyland suggested (2004, p. 163-166). The following table summarizes the principles Hyland (2014) suggested.

Table-1**Basic principles of Genre-based approaches**

Explicit	clearly stated criteria required for assessment and feedback are provided
Integrative	teaching and assessment are integrated
Relevant	writing instructions are relevant to learners' writing goals
Competency	learner competencies and genre features are specified
Preparedness	learners are assessed only when they are completely ready for it

Adapted from Hyland (2004, p. 163-166)

According to Hyland (2007), since genre-based approaches give learners explicit ideas of what is required, they help to link teaching with assessments. Since students know what teachers give importance to in writing and what precisely they expect from students, they are in a better position to know how they are going to be evaluated and the things students need to do in order to succeed. This, as Hyland (2007) further points out, gives students on one hand stronger motivation and confidence to write and on the other gives teachers an advantage to identify students' problems in writing, giving them the opportunity to give precise feedback and also to decide whether they need to give any further remedial to help them improve their skills.

The following table is an adaptation of Hyland's (2004) summary of the main advantages of the genre pedagogy:

Table 3**The advantages of genre pedagogy**

Explicit	makes clear what students need to learn to acquire writing skill
Systematic contexts together	gives a logical framework to help learners to focus on language and contexts together
Needs-based students' needs.	makes sure that course has objectives and contents based on students' needs.
Supportive and creativity	provides teachers scope for scaffolding learners' knowledge building and creativity
Empowering are valued	gives access to the patterns and likelihood of variations in texts that are valued
Critical that are valued	gives students the resources to understand and challenge discourses that are valued
Awareness- raising increases instructors' awareness of texts to help students write confidently.	
Motivating and boost motivation	provides support first and then gradually removes it in order to alleviate writing anxiety

(Adapted from Hyland, 2004, pp.10-14)

a. Relevance of the genre-based writing instruction for the tertiary level ESL writing classes of Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, most of the students are taught in Bengali, their native language (except for two papers in English) at the secondary and higher secondary levels and they hardly engage in any academic discourse in these two levels. Although Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been applied for around two decades at these two levels, teachers show their reluctance to promote CLT (Hamid and Baldauf, 2008). Students' grade, to a large extent, depends on their ability to memorize without internalizing the content.

It is only at the higher level and especially at the private universities where the medium of instruction is English, they are introduced to academic writings of different genres like report writing, academic essays, writing formal letters, etc. These students are normally unprepared for putting together a coherent piece of academic writing that meets the international standard. Recent studies have shown that the tertiary level EFL learners of Bangladesh lack minimum writing competence (Afrin, 2016; Mustaque, 2014) as their writing skills are "seriously flawed" (Shamsuzzaman and Everatt 2013, p.71). These EFL learners lack sufficient knowledge to write standard essays and paragraphs and there is a growing emphasis on the need to carry out more research to explore the writing problems of these student writers and to find proper solutions to the problem (Mustaque, 2014). Thus, in the higher learning institutes, a writing approach that is effective in meeting these students' writing needs has to be addressed very strongly.

After considering the above-mentioned advantages of the genre-based pedagogies in L2 instruction, we can attempt to justify its implementation in the education system of Bangladesh. The principles of the genre-based syllabus that Hyland (2007) mentioned are highly relevant in the case of the Bangladeshi education system. Here (as probably in many other countries where English is a non-native language) at universities and also, later in the professional life, students need to produce writings of different genres such as report writing, informal and formal letters, memos and so on. In private universities since the medium of instruction is English, students also need to write assignments and give presentations. Unfortunately, there is a marked disparity between students' needs and the contents of the secondary and higher secondary level syllabuses as these do not include any genre-based writing instruction (Hyder and Chowdhury, 2012). As in these two precursors of tertiary education, students do not get introduced to writings of different genres, suggestions can be made to adopt the genre-based instruction at the tertiary level. The following section discusses the ways to implement genre-based writing instruction in the tertiary level ESL classes of Bangladesh and why and how the implantation will help novice student writers to overcome their problems.

b. Implementing the genre-based writing instruction at the tertiary level education in Bangladesh

The student writers of the tertiary level in Bangladesh are mostly novice writers lacking experience. Following the genre-based instruction, students can be instructed to analyze the rhetorical structure of the contents of a specific text, so that they can identify the common patterns. When students become aware of these patterns and linguistic conventions, it may help the novice student writers to form a type of background knowledge that they can activate in a similar future learning situation (Kim, 2012).

As at the tertiary level, students majoring in different disciplines need to learn English for specific purposes (ESP), the ‘move’ or constituent analysis can be extensively adopted to describe the rhetorical patterns of a genre. Studies (e.g., Swales 1990) reveal that a particular genre uses a conventional genre structure or in other words a sequence of moves each of which has a particular function in the communicative process. Analysis of this conventionalized organizational structure of a particular genre, according to many researchers (e.g., Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004) can be of considerable help to the tertiary level L2 learners in the classroom. This analysis can also help to find out the salient text features like the use of tenses, modality, etc. Gustafsson (1975; cited in Bhatia, 1993) after analyzing syntactic aspects of the legislative genre found that legislative documents normally have more subordinate devices (e.g., relative or adverbial clauses) than any other genre. Swales’s (1990) CARS (‘creating a research space’) model or its slightly different adaptation can be used extensively by the practitioners to find out the rhetorical construction of different kinds of academic report writing (Dudley-Evans, 1994).

Again, one of the major problems of Bangladeshi student writers is the lack of confidence and motivation in writing. The classes here are teacher-centred and students take teachers as the ‘knowledge givers’ and tend to rely on them for instructions. To solve this problem, teachers can adopt the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) of the genre approach to writing. In TLC construction of new knowledge happens when learners collaborate and reflect on the ways to form new knowledge. In the context of Bangladesh, the application of TLC can help novice writers overcome the initial mental blocks they are likely to face when they start a writing activity. The shared knowledge of the group members of linguistic features, content and ideas will enable students to shed off their feelings of isolation also.

The ESP pedagogy also focuses on how genres form what Swales (2004) calls “constellations”. The idea is that genres are not found in the real world in isolation. Therefore, if a full array of genres is dealt with in a given social context, it can prove to be useful in tertiary L2 writing instruction (Hyland, 2007). Hyland further mentions that some genres can often be found in a predictable order and if teachers can instruct them to students, they will be familiar with the language resources they need to communicate. The following figure illustrates linear events of genre sequence normally needed for job seeking.

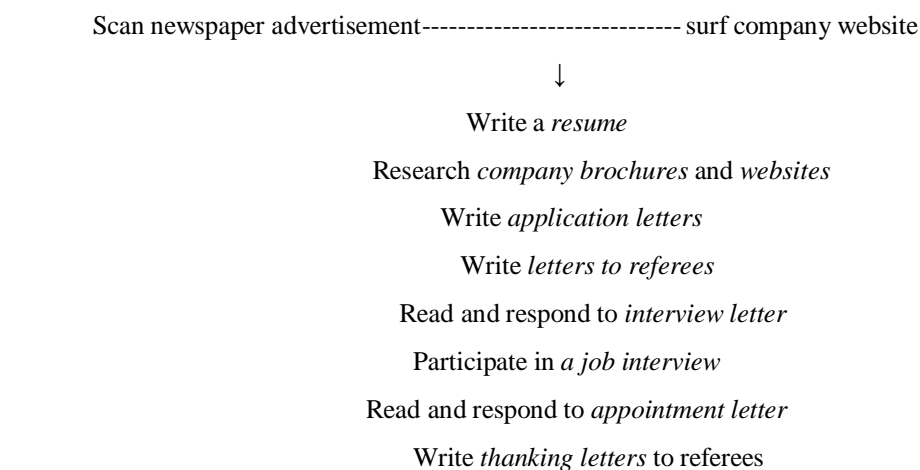


Figure 1: A linear sequence of genres for job seeking (genres in italics) (Hyland, 2007)

c. Criticisms of the Genre-based Writing Instruction

Genre approaches to second language writing instruction in the classrooms have been subject to criticisms, especially by the proponents (e.g., Dias and Pare, 2000) of the ‘New Rhetoric’ approach to the genre. It has been argued that writing is always an integral part of the context that brings about it and so it should not be learnt in the classroom situation which is unauthentic. However, it should be remembered that the Bangladeshi or most such L2 learners hardly get opportunities to learn writing in naturalistic settings. It is true that a classroom cannot replicate the real-life situation, but formal learning takes place in the classroom and in the case of L2 writing instruction, GA actually helps learners to discover and follow the conventions that are compatible with their academic and professional writing needs.

The acceptance of genre as a teaching tool is also not uncontested. Swales (1990) cautions that although prototypical structures exist, students should not imitate blindly the rigid generic structures. In fact, the prescriptive nature of the approach has been strongly criticized by the adherents of the process approach (e.g., Dixon, 1987) claiming that it inhibits the writer’s creativity and freedom of expression and some even got to the extent of calling in a “recipe theory of genre” (Freedman, 1994, p. 46, as cited in Hyland 2007). To solve this problem, students should be introduced to varied examples of a particular genre and they should also get familiar with the current rhetorical situation. Moreover, learners should be encouraged to think critically by reflecting on the finer features of move structures. Flowerdew (2000) suggests a suite of exercises that will help students to focus on how the content is organized by dividing the text into move structures based on finer features. The table that follows is based on Flowerdew’s (2000) suggestions on exercises on project reports. Teachers can

devise such exercises on other genres to help students examine and analyze the key features of the text.

Table 4

Types of exercises in analyzing move structures.

Type of exercise	Activities	Purpose
Reconstructing a text	Groups of students are given a set of jumbled paragraphs and they reconstruct a text by noticing the salient move structures	To help students identify move structures.
Comparing texts	Students are presented with a variety of examples (e.g., the introductions of report). Students are then instructed to compare a number of examples, find out the move structures, and give their opinions on the organizational dissimilarities, and how the move structures are included, excluded or embedded.	To help learners notice the different move structures.
Locating content	Students are provided with possible move structures from Swales' (1990) list for discussion sections. Students are also provided with examples of texts with similar move structure or/and brief glosses.	To encourage students examine the type of information presented in each sub-section of the Result Analysis.
Relating content in different sections	Students are instructed to use the sub-headings of the activities for clues. Then they are asked to locate items in the result analysis that were mentioned before in the scope move of the Introduction. They are then instructed to comment on any dissimilarities.	To help students realize how important a text's relationship is with other text for the purpose of understanding a genre.
Identifying the problem-	Students are asked to fill in a flowchart representing the chain of issues and	To help students

solution pattern	incomplete responses in the introductory paragraph.	identify the pattern of problem-solution
Creating a topic for discussion	Students are asked to 'talk around' the topic.	To create less text-based lessons and also reduce teacher-centeredness.
Language focus	Students examine how the vocabulary has been used for the organization of discourse. They locate expressions which present casual relationships. They also identify typical phrases used to make deductions.	To provide students with the clues for decoding the moves.

5. Conclusion

The paper has made a tentative attempt to show the theoretical as well as practical relevance of the genre approach to the instruction of second language writing, especially in the context of Bangladeshi students. There are considerable justifications for adopting the genre approach as the major institutional alternative to the process approach, as it provides L2 learners with the opportunity to undertake writing in an informed way especially by knowing not only the linguistic features of a particular academic text but also the conventions of that specific academic context which are imperatives for L2 learners coming from very different academic and cultural background to know. In practical terms genre approach also seems to fit well in the Bangladeshi EFL context as these students are teacher dependent yet very good at following a model because of their long tradition of rote learning. Albeit, the approach has its limitations as it may turn out teaching into a template approach preventing students from thinking critically. The teacher educators need to keep this in mind when implementing it in the curriculum and design it in such a way that it combines both discipline-specific writing instructions and some elements of critical thinking.

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