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Genre-Based Approach in L2 Writing Classroom

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Abstract

This conceptual paper is aimed at examining the application of genre theory to an L2 classroom in a local university in Malaysia in the learning of specialized vocabulary in a food writing course. All three types of genre theory will be discussed, namely literary, rhetoric and linguistic genre theory to give a holistic understanding of genre. This will allow the coverage of both similarities and differences through all disciplines, and subsequently inform the richness of these theories, how it can be applied, and the significance of using these genre theories in the ESL writing classroom. This paper will also discuss the relationship between genre approach and genre writing and its application in the food writing classroom.

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Introduction Of Genre Theory

In the last thirty years the application of genre in the teaching and learning of language has received a great deal of attention in the second language classroom. Hyland (2002, p. 113) derives two purposes for this; which are the “desire to understand the relationship between language and its context of use” and “to employ this knowledge in the service of language and literacy education”. Therefore, a lot more concern of the context in which students will use the language is emphasized in the classroom. This takes into account the social aspect in communication.

Genre theory has developed significantly and is spread out indefinitely through literary, rhetorical, and linguistic theories. Although there are overlapping similarities between these genre theories, there are also significant differences. Even so, it is important that each area be discussed to give a holistic understanding of genre. Thus, the literary and rhetoric genre theory will be discussed briefly before focusing on the linguistic genre theory. This will allow the coverage of both similarities and differences through all disciplines, and subsequently inform the richness of these theories, how it can be applied, and the significance of using these genre theories in the L2 writing classroom.

Literary genre theory

The genre theory within the literary discipline emphasizes the functionality of genre as a classifying device; where genre is seen to differentiate poetry from fiction, and these from drama or what separates ballads from lyrics, and these from haikus. The literary genre theory however, has evolved as many linguists revealed the genres from the past no longer resonate with the generation of the twenty first century. For instance, genres such as poetry and prose are something of the past and have been replaced with dialogue and journal, narrative or discursive modes. It does not however, put genres of the past as irrelevant, as it is what shapes the genre which exists today. Tzvetan Todorov, a literary theorist asserts that the origin of genre is simply from other genres:

“A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination. Today’s “text” (which is also a genre, in one of its senses) owes as much to nineteenth-century “poetry” as to the “novel,”... There has never been a literature without genres; it is a system in constant transformation” (1990, p. 15).

Although genres within literary studies may develop concurrently to the here and now, however, these genres were assigned and bounded by critics; those with specialized knowledge in literature and are considered qualified to determine a genre. Within the literary field these literature are based on text which already exist, which is why it is defined by experts familiar with these text. As Rosmarin (1985) puts it “genre” exist only in the critic’s mind and in the critic’s use of them. “The critic, not the writer, defines the genre” (p. 29). Thus, this theory places a high importance in the reader, but dismisses the role of the writer. Literary genre approach has also given the least amount of value towards instructions and development program in writing. In addition, literary theory does not consider other discourse outside the literature such as speech (formal or informal). Although, more recent literary scholars are arguing the relevance of everyday speech in literary genre, however, literary text “is the study and valuing of what are considered extraordinary texts” (Devitt, 2000, p. 698) which is worlds apart from everyday speech. To overcome these limitations, a genre should place more importance on the context and action, as well as the triangulation between writer, reader and text (Devitt, 2000), which is an important aspect in rhetoric genre theory.

Rhetoric genre theory

The genre theory within the rhetoric discipline mainly concern the way recurring situations produce recurring rhetoric responses. In other words, how individuals uses language in similar ways when they are faced with similar situations. From the rhetorical genre studies point of view, the use of recurring language in certain situations is associated to cultural and social actions and expectations. The definition of genre in rhetoric studies have been expanded and build to suit contemporary issues. In regards to contemporary definitions, Carolyn Miller’s was sought as an initial position to what rhetoric genre is today, which identifies genre as “typified rhetorical action based in recurring situation” (1984, p. 159). This definition was later build and described as “types of rhetoric actions that people perform in their everyday interactions with their worlds” by Devitt (2004, p. 2). It was further elaborated by Bwarshi and Reiff (2010, p. 4), which adds the term agency to genre as follows:

“Genre has come to be defined... as a powerful, ideologically active, and historically changing sharper texts, meanings, and social actions. From this perspective, genres are understood as forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and typically act within various situations.”

From this view, genre is a mix of the old definition of genre as a way to organize text with current ones which relates with social factors and context. In this way, rhetorical genre is similar to linguistic genre, which looks at the association between genres and how they relate to social life. Through this new lense, Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) suggest that the teaching and learning of genre go beyond formal features:

“Such a dynamic view of genre...calls for understanding genre knowledge as including not only knowledge of formal features but also knowledge of what and whose purposes genres serve; how to negotiate one’s intentions in relation to genres’ social

expectations and motives; when and why and where to use genres; what reader/writer relationships genres maintain; and how genres relate to other genres in the coordination of social life" (p. 4).

Although, the rhetoric genre may be similar to linguistic genre in terms of association of texts to context, and that both genres takes into account the recurrence of written text in the classroom. However, the main difference is that rhetoric genre studies are targeted to tertiary level native speakers of English, whereas linguistics genre studies; under the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) focuses more towards the needs of tertiary level non-native speakers of English. Thus, making the rhetoric genre approach less appropriate in the ESL context, in which the recurrence of written work by L2 students at the tertiary level is observed.

Linguistic genre theory

Linguistic genre theory informs reason in understanding genre as contextually situated and in understanding its versatile nature, where genre presents the link between structure, social function, and context. This makes it appropriate in the analysis of this study, where the text under analysis is distinct in its own genre, has its own structure and is based under a particular social function and context such as the culinary arts and journalistic discipline.

There are two approaches to genre in applied linguistics, mainly (1), Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics, and (2) English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) or commonly known as the "Sydney School" of genre was initially intended to assist immigrants with approaching different types of genre in order to equip them with secondary education and in workplace informal communications (Martin, 1993). Linguist, Michael Halliday is one of the first theorists within the Sydney School of thought which integrate language use with society. The basis of Halliday's framework is the connections between language patterns in differing situations. In this way, "Systemic" refers to the structure or organization of language and "Functional" is the function of language within particular contexts (Bawarshi & Reiff 2010, p. 29). Halliday argues that a person becomes social with others through context of situation, which often reoccurs as situation types, which then become conventionalized over time and will "specify the semantic configurations that the speaker will typically fashion" (1978, p. 110). These semantic features are what Halliday calls as "registers" (p. 68). Halliday's take on Systemic Functional approach to genre has influenced many linguists, such as J. R. Martin in the effort to aid in the effectiveness of student-centered and process-based teaching of literacy, which emphasizes "learning through doing" (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010).

Within the SFL approach, the instruction model which is most recognized employs genre in three phases; modeling, joint negotiation of text and independent construction of text (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993, p. 10). These stages inform students how to learn a text through context and social purpose, and then students will go through a negotiation stage with their teacher and finally students will be able to come up with their own version of the text. However, according to critics, these stages seem artificial and teach students only how to reproduce recurring forms and does not encourage critical and analytical thinking (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). The second approach to genre within the linguistic field and the most relevant to this study is the English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The person responsible for making genre and ESP synonymous is John Swales, through his groundbreaking book "Genre Analysis: English in academic and research settings" written in 1960; which emphasizes the social form and function of spoken and written language in academic and research settings. Genre as defined by Swales (1960, p.58):

"comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style...exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience."

Although the term genre and ESP is considered synonymous, ESP is defined by Dudley-Evans & John (1998, p. 4) through absolute and variable characteristics as follows:

Absolute characteristics:

1. ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;
2. ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;
3. ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

Variable characteristics:

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at secondary school level;
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

The term ESP is classified with a myriad of sub-divisions; however it is mainly divided into English for Academic Purposes

(EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). The former focuses on learning a language for secondary and tertiary level students, and the latter being designed especially for working professionals. Although both EAP and EOP are catered for different subjects, their aim is similar which is to enable L2 learners to communicate efficiently within a particular discipline or field. In order to do this, students will need to familiarize to the language or “code” (Bhatia, 1997, p. 2) in that particular discipline or field. This code will derive from within a certain discourse community. Thus, students must be taught the code to be able to communicate with the members of a particular discourse community. For this study, as the students are within the discourse community of food writers or food critiques, students are expected to be proficient with the language of food writers/critiques. In order to be fully proficient within this field, students must master both the discourse of chefs and that of a journalist. It is very important that students’ are accepted within the discourse community of food writers to excel in the academic realm as well as in their future professions. The future in food writing also pose a promising one, where both fiction and non-fiction food writing makes up a big and growing number of books written, published, sold and read each year in all parts of the English speaking world. Similar growing proportions of food writing are produced in magazine, newspaper and journal articles, internet weblogs and other non-fiction written texts. Moreover, Brien (2007, p. 2) adds:

“Food writers not only write and produce significant amounts of the concept design, content and spin-off product that is driving the expansion of the already popular and profitable food related television (network and cable) programming sector, they are also finding their way onto the big screen as writers and consultants for cuisine-related fiction and non-fiction films”.

Although there are a myriad of ESP courses being offered presently at all private and government sectors in the institution of higher education, there has been incongruity towards the best way to teach genre. However, many researches in L2 learning have found genre-oriented pedagogy to be effective and important, especially in the reading and writing classroom (Bhatia, 2004; Hyland, 2004; Bawarshi, 2003; Johns, 2003; Hyon, 2002; Paltridge, 2001). Swales (1990,p. 83) informs the relationship between genres and schemata toward genre acquisition, where genre is achieved through prior knowledge of experience and prior text encountered. Figure 1 illustrates these relationships.

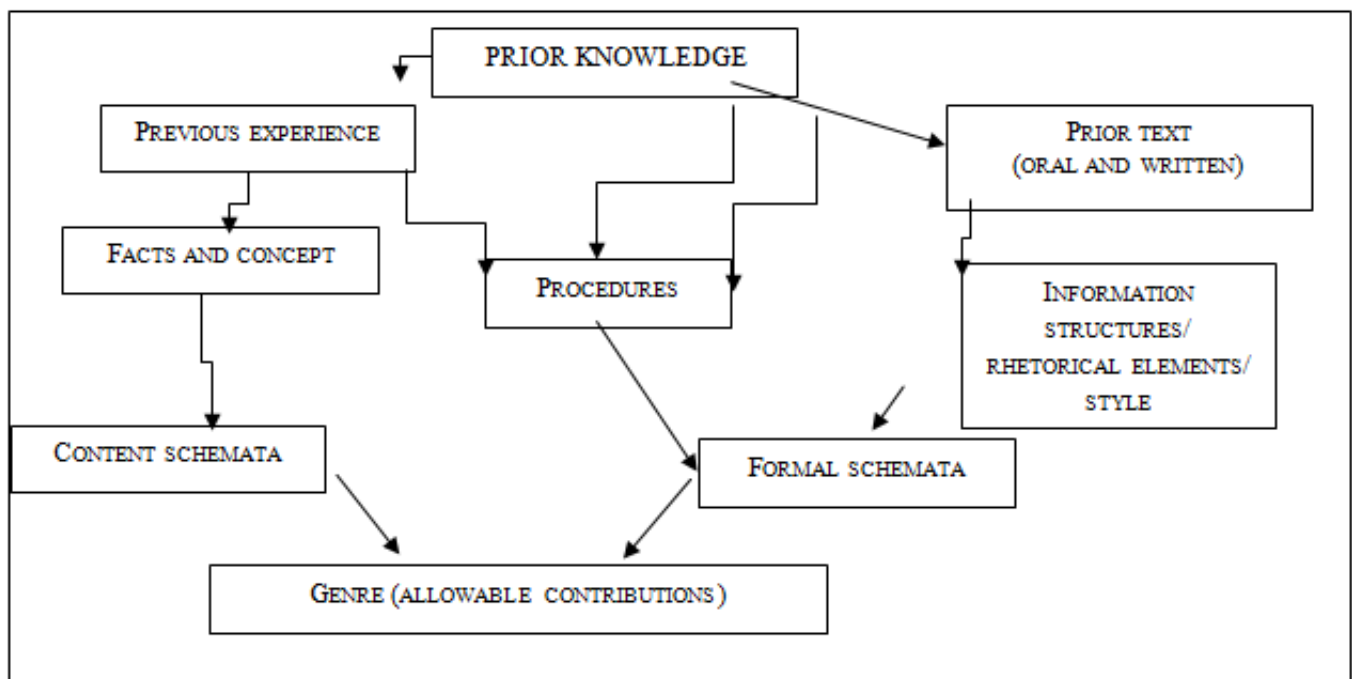


Figure 1. Relationship between genres and schemata in genre acquisition

Figure 1 Relationship between genres and schemata in genre acquisition

Source: Swales 1990, p. 83

As shown in Figure 1, the relations begin with our prior knowledge which consists of previous experience; our assimilated direct experiences of life and its manifold activities, and our assimilated verbal experiences and encounters and prior text. As the arrow indicates both experiences lead to a storage of facts and concepts, which will then provide background knowledge of the content area known as content schemata. Prior encounters of texts, on the other hand, may lead to sufficient recognition of informational and rhetorical structure to invoke a formal schema. Both content and formal schemata can contribute to a recognition of genres. It is thus important to consider the previous experiences and prior text students may have encountered, which provide the formal and informal schemata of the genre, thus it is of high importance that students have been exposed to texts with the structures and contents within the discourse, to be able to fully recognize and

subsequently be able to write skillfully in that genre.

GENRE-BASED WRITING

The application of genre theory has been used as an important resource for teaching writing in ESL contexts especially in English for Specific Purposes studies (Nueva, 2016; Derewianka, 2003; Martin, 2001). The approaches in genre-based writing have been varied for different educational contexts. In the school of thought of ESP, pedagogies initiate by assuming that students' present norms and literacy skills differ broadly to the abilities that they actually need (Hyland 2002, 2003). Thus, genre-based learning can build on students' awareness of the various types of discourses. Clark (2005:1) explains "a genre approach to writing assignments can foster teacher awareness of unexpressed expectations in the writing they assign and that such awareness can help students complete writing tasks more successfully." Bawarshi (2003) proposed that it should go beyond genre, in which the genre should influence the people, context and purpose of the class. Some compositionists even believe that writing assignments are a genre and approaching them in such a way may benefit both instructors and students (Clark, 2005; Bawarshi, 2003; Hagemann, 2002). However, the implementation of genre-based writing programs is not an easy task as the findings of Siti Hamin & Ismi Roha's (2005) study revealed. It was found that the current English language programs enrolled by the samples under study were not adequate in preparing them for the workplace, particularly when it comes to writing related activities. Therefore, it is crucial that genre-based language programs take into account the skills that will be needed at the workplace so to simplify the transitions from learning to the working environment.

An example of such genre-based writing program is the food writing course, which is a genre within the creative non-fiction; however the discourse focuses mainly on journalistic writing which highlights on the culinary arts. This course is one example which sees the writing assignments as a genre in itself, because it is a discipline which focuses on the writing of food. To be more specific, the course description taken from the food writing course syllabus (2013) for final year students under the faculty of hotel management and culinary in Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) is illustrated as follows:

This course provides an introduction into the field of food writing, in other words, an overview of food journalism. It also introduces students to create ideas to master the writing process for different types of food writing based on cooking from a specific place, experiences or areas that covers relevant topics in relation to food. As an introduction to the world of non-fiction writing style, this course offers students a framework and a meaningful context for their own writing. Students will also be able to look into areas that will help them enhance their writing, reporting, interviewing and editing skills. At the same time, students will also be introduced to areas where food writing is most prevalent (functions of food; developing recipes; health and food; identifying recipes, writing articles for magazines or newspapers, doing historical research and interviewing figures in the culinary world)" (Food writing syllabus, 2013).

Akin to other type of writings, food writing also has its own unique and distinct features. First of all, writing for the purpose to inform is considered as news. There are two types of news, which is soft news and hard news. Hard news is more serious, whereas soft news delivers information with the aim to entertain readers. It emphasizes human interests and novelties such as an article of the latest diet trends, a profile of a celebrity or a recipe book. The anecdote presented in soft news is known as a feature, which can be a story on a person, place or other issues relevant to the readers. Food writing falls under the soft news category. Although food writing may be considered to serve only for entertainment purposes, it is a type of writing which highlights facts, accuracy and honesty as it is categorized under non-fiction writings. It is not full of fantasies but relates to the world, highlighting the facts and truth in relation to the people, their surroundings and environments, events and ideas. A feature in food writing follows a pyramid format as shown in Figure 2.

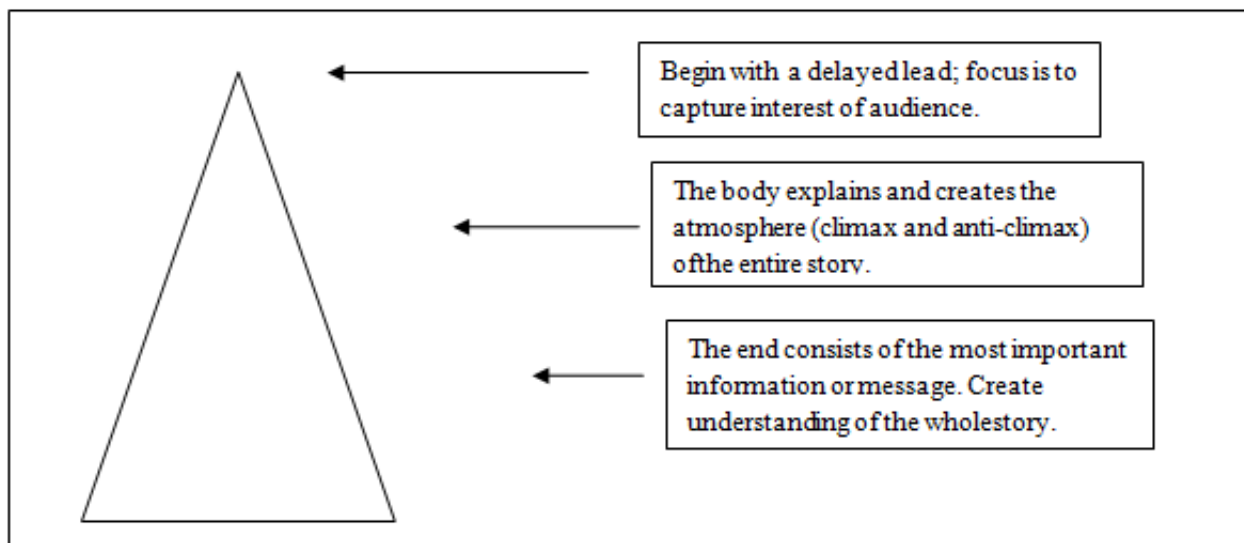


Figure 2. The pyramid style of writing

Figure 2 The pyramid style of writing

A feature is best written using the pyramid structure because it begins with a hook, or sentences which call for the readers' interests. It should act as a seduction technique which captivates the reader to continue reading the rest of the text. The body, which is the middle part of the pyramid will be the details wished to be conveyed by the writer. This may include the 5ws + 1h (Who, What, When, Where, Why and How). The ending should always give a type of satisfaction to the readers, and summarize the overall points of the feature.

Conclusion

The goal for the food writing course is similar to other composition courses in ESP, which is to enable students to write effectively while using appropriate word and sentence structure within the discourse genre. However, not many L2 writing courses under ESP consider writing as a social skill to convey thoughts and feelings to their readers. Which is why the genre-based approach has become one of the most important and influential concepts in teaching second language writing (Hyland, 2007) especially in facilitating learners to better texture their writing and to achieve the communicative goals (Kalali, 2015; Enli, 2015) needed for the workplace.

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