

A Reflection on the Challenges for Teaching Genres in University Settings

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Introduction

For almost thirty years, genre has increasingly been a central issue for both first language and second language writing studies and teaching. Scholars recognize that contemporary genre theory goes beyond descriptions of text types to the consideration of a more complex social construct which shapes and is shaped by human activity (Tardy 79-101). With a large body of descriptive studies, writers have now an understanding of the ways in which different elements like textual forms, goals, and elements of situation interact with individuals, communities, and institutions to give rise to forms of communication we call genres. We teachers have witnessed an emergence of genre perspectives, a profusion of the term in composition textbooks, and a great number of publications on genre studies; and genre has become a concern of writing pedagogy. Genre has therefore become the core of debate among scholars, teachers, and professionals of other areas of knowledge. But despite this increasing interest in genre theory and its applications, it seems that it continues to be a challenge for language teaching.

Genre as a challenge for language teaching implies teachers have an entire understanding of the nature of genre in L2/FL writing including the complexity of genres, the skills for writing genres in the modern world, and some knowledge of genre instruction. On this process of reflection, several questions about how to deal with genres in FL classrooms have come to my mind: What is involved in the production of genres that make them so

complex? What knowledge does a student need to have to write texts recognizable as instances of genres? In what ways do reading and writing genres become a challenge for language teaching?

In an attempt to address these questions, several authors have been looked at, including Swales, Ann Johns, Hyland, Paltridge, Tardy, Silva, Leki, Kei Matsuda, who have focused on L2 writing and generated a large body of studies and comments on a number of relevant theoretical and practical issues on genres in school contexts. This article attempts, therefore, to reflect on genres as challenges for teaching academic writing in English as a foreign language. As it is not possible to cover every issue concerning the theme, the focus of the article will be limited to examining three actual issues deemed of great importance: the variety of genre perspectives and traditions, genre nature and complexity, and finally, genre approaches to instruction.

This article is organized in three parts: 1) a theoretical part in which the three issues about genre knowledge deemed as challenges are discussed, 2) practical applications, and 3) final remarks.

1. Theoretical background

Writing in either first language or second language is one the most difficult tasks a learner can face through situated practice in academic contexts. Many scholars and teachers recognize that writing in any language is a complex task which consists of taking into account components such as purpose, audience, textual features, style, context of writing, content knowledge, and linguistic knowledge. This complexity constrains the production of any text and becomes a challenge especially for novice writers in settings of learning and classroom practice. On starting college and university, both undergraduate and graduate students are asked to participate in complex cultural systems that require them to be literate in different sorts of writing. They are challenged to learn how to write texts according to their specific disciplinary fields in order to fulfill academic expectations and succeed in the courses they take. One challenge of this complex system is that students need to gain competence in how to use language within the fields. In addition to the language, they then need to learn different content, orientation, and methodology in the courses of each discipline in academic

settings. And for every discipline, students must learn to read and write a system of genres (Bazerman 309-39) that follow the conventions and styles according to the culture of the discipline. This is one of the challenges for the teachers: to provide appropriate knowledge for students in such domains in a teaching methodology that allows them to write as expert writers. When teachers look at the whole complexity of the theme, they realize that the challenges are great.

As part of my concerns with reading, writing, and instruction of academic genres in a foreign language in university settings, I have paid attention to the students' difficulties in meeting teachers' expectations when writing the genres that circulate in the university settings such as abstracts, essays, reviews, research articles, and research projects as a response to classroom assignments. In order to write appropriately to the context of use, the students need not only to master the foreign language, but also to be aware of the target audience, the communicative purpose of the genre, the conventions socially constructed by the discourse community that will influence linguistic choices and their effect on the reader. In this article, I discuss at least three kinds of challenges for language teachers: the variety of genre perspectives, the complexity of writing genres, and writing pedagogy.

1.1 Variety of genre concepts and perspectives for teaching

The first issue is related to the variety of concepts and perspectives of genre that teachers and students should share. The term genre has been interpreted in a variety of ways by experts from a number of perspectives and traditions. The most known and influential perspectives for language teachers and researchers in Brazil are: 1) the *Sydney School*, based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, which has developed research and well-established pedagogies at a number of academic levels (e.g. Christie, Martin and Rothery, Martin); 2) *The English for Specific Purposes* (ESP) and *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP), in which the most famous name is John Swales, internationally recognized for Genre Analysis and for his model for analyzing genres based on "rhetorical moves" (see Bhatia, Dudley-Evans and St John, and others); and 3) *the New Rhetoric* group, mainly North American scholars, for whom genre knowledge has been considered to be

primarily social, embedded in the community and context of writer and audience (see Bazerman, Freedman and Medway, Russell, Prior, among others).

Flowerdew, in an attempt to categorize genre theorists in a simpler taxonomy, distinguished them into two groups: linguistic and non-linguistic ones. The linguistic group is represented by ESP and the Australian school “who apply theories of functional grammar and discourse, focusing on the lexico-grammatical and rhetorical realization of communicative purposes embodied in a genre” (91). The non-linguistic group represented by the New Rhetoric scholars “is more focused on situational context – the purposes and functions of genres and the attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors of the members of the discourse community in which genres are situated” (91). Thus these different traditions become a challenge for language teaching since teaching genre implies the teacher should adopt one or a combination of perspectives they believe in and this perspective will influence the choice of appropriate pedagogy for teaching.

From these perspectives, a well accepted view of genres is that advocated by socio-rhetorical scholars (Miller, Swales, Bazerman, Paltridge, Devitt, Hyland, just to cite a few) on which genres are “ways in which people ‘get things done’ through their use of language in particular contexts” (Paltridge, qtd. in Johns et al 235). Genres are what people recognize to be part of their social practices. Considering the school context, genres are “socially-approved ways in which students show what they know, what they can do, and what they have learned in a course of study” (Paltridge, qtd. in Johns et al 235). So, in writing genres, writers use language in particular ways according to the aim and purpose of the genre, observing the relationship between the writer and the audience, previous experiences with the genre to produce a new text, and the expectations of the context in which the genre is being produced. All these aspects together mean that every instance of a genre does not need to be the same. This explains why genres vary in their typicality. Araújo (forthcoming), for example, found out that academic book reviews written by graduate students in university settings in the same discipline can vary in response to the task that has been assigned by the professor, due to the students’ sensitivity to the situation, values and expectations of those who are judging the effectiveness of the genre in a school context.

1.2 Complexity of genres

The second challenge is related to the notion that genres are complex, especially written genres. This means that although individual researchers need to limit the scope of their studies in terms of studying textual genres, social actions, communities of practice, power structures or the modalities in which genres operate, genre knowledge is multidimensional and includes domains such as formal, rhetorical, process, and subject-matter/topic knowledge, as claimed by Tardy in an article co-authored with Johns et al (see Figure 1).

According to Tardy, for experts, these domains interact and overlap, allowing them to manipulate genres for particular purposes. As for novice writers, they face difficulty in seeing interactions among the several domains and tend to focus on one or two dimensions (such as generic moves or lexicogrammatical features) and exclude others. Once the students become familiar with some knowledge domains, that knowledge becomes automatic and they are able to use other generic components.

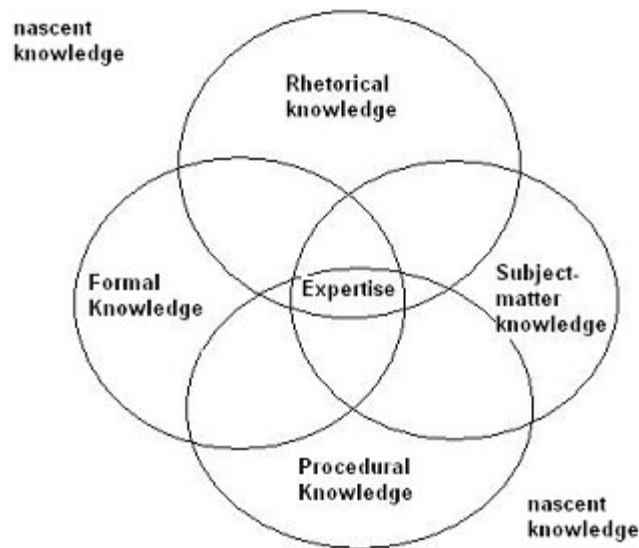


FIGURE 1 - Model of genre knowledge (Tardy, qtd in Johns 234-49).

Another important aspect to be taken into account concerning genre as a challenge for language teaching and linked to these dimensions is the examination of cultural differences in language and communication (contrastive rhetoric). As English is increasingly becoming the main international language of communication, education, travel, and business, there is a tendency to consider the notion of culture and cultural differences as if they were neutral and permanent truths, instead of seeing them as dynamic and situated in relations of power and ideologies, as claimed by Paltridge (“Genre in the Classroom” 119). Paltridge (in an interview given to Johns and cited in “Crossing the Boundaries”) by citing Bloor and Bloor also advocates that cultural expectations and culturally appropriate behavior can not be described in terms of linguistic models. He agrees that teachers should refine students’ cross-cultural awareness in order to help them to be able to express themselves and establish a personal stance as they choose the genres to communicate.

Tardy, in an interview given to Ann Johns for the article “Crossing the Boundaries,” has suggested that her model of genre knowledge may help foreign or second language learners to examine how different genre dimensions interact (239). The challenge for language teachers is to be aware of the four domains and provide activities in the classroom that might help students use the multiple domains simultaneously and build a complex view of genre. As an illustration of the importance of mastering these domains, in a recent investigation conducted in 2006 and 2007 in which a group of fourteen Brazilian graduate students from the State University of Ceará (UECE, Brazil) were observed in their writing of book reviews as assignments to the classroom showed to have difficulty with the writing of this genre, especially from rhetorical and procedural dimensions when compared to eight American graduate students from The University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Brazilian students demonstrated in their texts that they had poorly developed evaluative skills, although they answered in the survey that they were aware of the conventions and interactions among the dimensions.

By examining the compositions of Brazilian students compared to American ones in the writing of book reviews, Brazilian students were divided into three groups. The first group (four students), who seemed to be unaware of a need to be polite in the reviews employed straight critical comments. They did not show any concern for saving the author’s face or

even to show solidarity with the author. The second group (six students), who intermingled praise and criticism, showed much more consciousness of the social purpose of the genre, even when responding to a class assignment, and they presented similar features to those of American students' writing. The third group (four students), on the other hand, seemed not to have understood what politeness means, but they wrote reviews with more praise expressions than criticisms. Their texts tended to be neutral descriptions of aims, organization, content, and a brief and global evaluation at the end. This difference may indicate that although they acknowledge that academic reviews are typifications of actions, there is still a lack of ability and awareness of some dimensions of genre knowledge (rhetorical and procedural) to highlight important aspects of the article in their texts.

For Brazilian students, academic reviews written for the teacher or as task to the classroom are only a way to show content knowledge. Those who expressed straight criticism revealed that academic reviews, even when written for the teacher/classroom, besides showing content knowledge must also show their critical views. Such students seemed not to take into account 'the affective and addressee-oriented meanings' to fulfill the social purpose of the genre (Hyland, "Praise and Criticism" 45). For those who intermingled praise with criticism, their work showed much more consciousness of the social purpose of the genre, even when responding to a class assignment.

On the other hand, Anglo-American students' reviews, in responding to a class assignment, seemed to be more aware of the social purpose of the genre by providing not only an overview of the book, but also by pointing out strengths and weaknesses. Their texts showed a balanced use of strategies to convey personal judgments revealing their awareness of the need to create an interpersonal stake by signaling their positive and negative comments. Their writing correlated to their surveyed responses given to the questionnaire in that they commented on their perceptions and familiarity with the writing of book reviews. Although they were writing book reviews for class, they also had in mind submitting them for publication. Their writing revealed a control of formal, rhetorical, procedural, and content dimensions.

The differences between these two groups of students in expressing evaluations may be related partly to their previous experiences in reading and writing reviews, and partly to the way they were oriented to work through

assignments (here it would be necessary to examine in detail the classroom context, teachers' explanations, and materials provided), and in part to their understanding of how they must respond to their written assignments for grades (see Araújo, forthcoming). The majority of students in both groups revealed not having much experience with the writing of book reviews and also reported that they had learned to write reviews through exposure to systematic instruction in the classroom and by reading and analyzing reviews in journals.

Although the focus of my study was not on the teaching of academic genres, the analyses revealed that there is much more to do to help students to understand what is involved in the act of writing typified texts. They should be aware, as Freedman asserts, that genres “not only respond to specific contexts but also reshape those contexts in the process of responding to them” (“Beyond the Text” 766). But how can we teachers help students manipulate the complex act of writing genres? What pedagogies or strategies of teaching can teachers use to empower students to write appropriate texts recognizable by members of the community as genres? This is the third issue the teachers face when teaching genres in the classroom.

1.3 Approaches to genre instruction

By looking at the literature of ESL writing instruction (Kroll, Leki, Silva, Paltridge, Raimes, Matsuda, among others) we have seen that the historical development of a second language pedagogy includes a variety of writing approaches. Matsuda (17-20) shows that different pedagogical approaches to writing range from *writing as sentence-level structure* (whose focus is on controlled composition with sentence-level grammar exercises that did not help students to produce original sentences), to *writing as discourse-level structure* (the focus is on rhetoric defined as the organizational structure and influenced by discourse analysis and text linguistics, looking at the structures of written discourse in various languages and their possible influences on L2 texts), to *writing as process* (introduced by Zamel, who emphasizes the view of writing as a process of developing organization and meaning through stages such as invention, writing multiple drafts, and feedback), and to *writing as language use in context* (introduced by ESP, Johns and Dudley Evans and by EAP, Jordan) that emphasizes the preparation of students for writing in academic discourse communities, providing an

understanding of the various contexts of writing to be developed. These pedagogical approaches are limited in their focus. They were based on different concepts of writing and on different aspects of second language writing.

In Brazil, there is a tendency of foreign language teachers to adopt the product approach to writing when providing genre-based instruction in the classroom, in that students are exposed to model texts and they are supposed to analyze the rhetorical and language features. Students are asked to imitate the texts in activities without a specific and real purpose and audience. Even the teachers who have focused their teaching on the process approach, they do not take into account the purpose, the audiences and students' needs. These approaches have been criticized by Freedman, Bleich and Bazerman who have claimed among other reasons that genres are studied without considering the complex, dynamic sociocultural contexts that give rise to them, that the study of genres has been located outside of the living situations of their use and that the understanding of genres is limited to discursive features easily recognized by writers at the surface of text.

In addition to these criticisms, another concern by scholars is how teachers can provide good teaching if they are not native speakers of English, if they teach in a community in which the target language is not spoken and many times they do not use regularly the genre they are teaching. How can teachers who believe that genres are social and changing processes provide an instruction without being too prescriptivist, without transmitting the idea of genres as static forms? This is a great challenge for now.

2. Practical suggestions for teaching genre

The issues raised in this article and the scenario for teaching genre seem still to require much reflection and further investigation. Although some textbooks for teaching genres based on different perspectives are available for international students (Swales and Feak's *Academic Writing for Graduate Students – A Course for Nonnative Speakers of English* – is one example), there is still a lack of good books in this area. It is possible that the solution for language teachers is to engage students into ethnographic activities to genres they need to learn by assisting students in associating communicative actions to their contexts and stimulating students to write

texts within these contexts. Some authors (Swales, Hyland, Paltridge, Tardy, Reiff, Devitt and Bawarshi) argue that ethnographic approaches to genres are beneficial to students because they include an understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which genres occur. Reiff (qtd in Johns et al) in advocating the ethnography use for teaching genres states that teachers may help students to recognize genres as “rhetorical responses to and reflections of the cultures and immediate situations in which genres are used so that the students can have access, understand and write within these cultures and situations” (240).

Tardy’s genre model (see Figure 1 in this article), if applied to ethnographic activities, would involve students first in procedural knowledge, by asking students to collect samples of genres, exploring unfamiliar or new genres and so gaining access to powerful institutional genres they need to read and write in school, work and other social contexts. Then students would move to rhetorical knowledge, followed by questions about subject matter and formal knowledge. This way, following ethnographic principles, students may be asked to observe the linguistic interactions of a group, participate in the group, and interview those experts who read and write in a genre. These activities may give students access to authentic and real contexts for language use and an understanding of the cultural and textual practices.

Devitt, Reiff and Bawarshi in their textbook *Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres* have developed strategies for students of both L1 and L2 analyzing genres through a mix of engaging ethnographic activities outside and inside the classroom. Figure 2 synthesizes a proposal for introducing students into the complexities of genre analysis which includes the four dimensions by beginning with procedural knowledge (students are asked to observe genres in action, interview participants in the situation about their genres and collect possible samples) followed by rhetorical knowledge (students are guided to examine the patterns of language or genres embedded in a group or culture, and look at the conventions), and then subject matter and formal knowledge. At the end, students are asked to write within the genre of the community they have studied or to produce a variation of the genre. This approach seems to me helpful because it allows students to become aware of what is involved in the production of genres within a community, besides developing their critical and thinking skills.

1. Collect Samples of the genre
Students try to gather samples from more than one place for analysis so that they get a more accurate picture of the complexity of the genre. The more samples of the genre they collect, the more they will be able to notice patterns within the genre.
2. Identify the Scene and Describe the Situation in which the Genre is used
Students analyze the larger scene in which the genre is used and seek answers to questions about the genre's situation: setting (where the genre appears), subject (what topics, issues, ideas, the genre addresses), participants (who reads and writes the genre), and purposes (why writers the genre in focus).
3. Identify and Describe Patterns in the Genre's Features
In this stage, students are invited to observe the recurrent features the samples share such as the content, sorts of examples and evidence, rhetorical appeals, rhetorical structure, format, length, types of sentences, diction, writer's voice.
4. Analyze what these Patterns reveal about the Situation and Scene
The last step students analyze the rhetorical patterns about the genre, its situation, and the scene in which it is used.

FIGURE 2 - Simplified Guidelines for Analyzing Genres (Reiff, Devitt and Bawarshi 93-94).

3. Final remarks

In this article, I have attempted to reflect on the main challenges teachers may face when teaching genres for language students. These are varied and complex and this article has not covered all the issues the topic involves. But if teachers are willing to overcome these difficulties, they need to have a clear concept of genre in mind and choose one coherent instructional approach to it that helps students to develop generic competence (knowledge about language, about social context and purpose and skills in using language). According to Bhatia (*Worlds*), this competence will help students to produce texts that respond to both the how and what of particular communicative situations.

It is important to highlight that the advantages of an ethnographically based approach to genres are in its focus on social context and communicative purpose. Hence, teachers should be careful when deciding what genres are important for students to learn in university settings, how to engage them

in activities through the stages of the instruction, and how to expose students to real settings in which they can understand complex social relations, expectations, assumptions in order to produce appropriate exemplars of texts to respond to different rhetorical situations in their social lives.

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