

Genres in English Language Course Books: Teaching Words and Images

Barbara Hemais

Pontifícia Universidade Católica-Rio

Introduction

The notion that genre awareness can help learners gain a solid awareness of language and prepare them to be successful in communicative practices in everyday, professional, and academic settings underlies the belief in a genre-based approach to EFL teaching. It is thought that, from the exposure to genres through teaching materials, learners will build knowledge of linguistic features, genre purposes, audience expectations, and discursive practices preferred in discourse communities.

One important classroom genre is the EFL course book, which contains a number of genres, or sub-genres, such as letters, advertisements, postcards, forms, news articles, and Internet pages. Some of the sub-genres are primarily in written form and some are images. In fact, even the primarily written genres have graphic features such as font type, size and page layout, and these features have become more and more visually appealing in recent course book publications. It can be said that the visuality in course books reflects the visual nature and meanings in much of the academic, professional and everyday practices in our modern life. The perception of the importance of visual knowledge has prompted the argument by Terry Royce that learners need to develop a multimodal communicative competence (192) in order to be enabled to deal with the demands they encounter in the use of English.

Although it seems to be the case that our society is “an increasingly image-saturated society where paintings, photographs, and electronic

images depend on one another for their meanings” (Sturken and Cartwright 11), we need to understand more fully the meanings of images in settings of language learning. One way of doing this is to examine genres that have strong visual characteristics and that are present in the materials used in English language teaching-learning. The study presented in this paper investigates the visual characteristics of genres in an English language course book and seeks to address the question of how genres are presented in a course book and in particular how the visual features and meanings of genres are explored. I will also discuss the challenges that teachers face in a genre-based approach to language teaching.

In this paper, the term “visual” is used to refer simply to advertisements, Internet pages, postcards, and other genres where the image (photo, drawing, icons) appear with or without written text and where meaning depends to large extent on the image. “Written genre” will be used to refer to reproductions of forms, letters, news articles, for instance, where verbal text accounts for much of the meaning in the genre. This perspective on genres in teaching materials is multimodal in the sense that both graphic and iconic modes of meaning are analyzed; other semiotic systems such as sound, gesture, and color are beyond the scope of this paper.

A genre approach to English language teaching: understanding course books

Course books tend to have a number of genres that serve as secondary support for teaching and learning and others that are used in direct relation to a language topic. Postcards, news articles, and forms, for example, may illustrate a topic for discussion (travel or occupational needs) or they may be used to allow learners to identify and practice language items.

But there is the question of not how genres are handled in the process of teaching and learning, but of their importance as part of the process that enables learners to become active participants in discourse practices for academic, professional and social purposes. Genres are taken to be fundamental in our social actions: “What happens in society in terms of interaction is by means of genres” (Biasi-Rodrigues 1). In relation to culture, “it is the plane of Genre that organizes our social actions and interaction into meaningful wholes” (Ventola and Kaltenbacher 2).

If communication happens through genres, then genre knowledge needs to be a part of teaching and learning in foreign language situations. But what is genre knowledge? According to Bhatia, knowing a genre actually includes genre recognition, understanding of genre structure and linguistic code, awareness of genre context, and knowledge for producing the genre for professional, academic or social purposes (136).

One of the fundamental genres in many language classrooms is the course book, and knowing this genre involves understanding its function in the context of teaching and learning. From the perspective of first-language learning in formal educational settings, where the main genre is the textbook, research has brought some insights that may be pertinent to the foreign language course book. The textbook is seen as an element that is integrated into the process of education, and it is identified as a genre that functions communicatively as a source of instruction and information about how people do things in society (Davies 1).

From a socio-historical view of the textbook, it is a genre that assures that learning actually happens in school (Soares 55), where knowledge undergoes a process of selection and organization for the purposes of teaching and learning. The textbook is the tool for teaching the knowledge that is understood to be necessary for learner participation in society. The case of the ELT course book would seem to be similar to this. What needs to be learned about language is organized and sequenced in the book, in other words, "didacticized" (Soares 62), in language topics or grammar points (verb tense or adjective order, for example). The material to be learned is arranged and illustrated in a series of sub-genres composed of postcards, forms, and news stories, for instance, and also vocabulary exercises, grammar explanations, tests and other classroom genres that are part of foreign language materials. Here the focus is on the genres represented in the course book, not the course book itself as genre.

Schneuwly and Dolz have a similar view of genres in school. These authors understand that the classroom genres such as narratives, reviews, summaries, and dialogues are not just ways of communicating but also objects of teaching and learning (76). For students, genres are language practices, with learning objectives. The authors further argue that in the classroom there is an inversion in which communication nearly disappears and the genre becomes a linguistic form to be mastered (76).

A similar perspective on genres in classroom settings comes from studies of systems of activities. In a paper that offers an application of activity theory to a classroom setting, David Russell analyzes secondary and university courses in cell biology. Russell explains that classroom genres are “genres that develop in educational activity systems to operationalize teaching and learning” (15). For students and professors, classroom genres carry out activities in the genre system of the university. Students see themselves as being involved in the goals of formal schooling, translated as receiving grades and eventually a diploma. In a similar manner, the course books used in an EFL classroom could be said to do this: they help realize the activity of language learning.

One concern that is often voiced about teaching with genres is that classroom materials do not prepare learners for social activity outside the classroom, as for example the composition that is only written to be corrected by the teacher. Classroom exercises have been criticized for not allowing learners to understand the production of genres in social and professional use. However, Russell makes a distinction between the purposes of a classroom genre and a professional genre: “A classroom genre is a translation of some professional genre, a way of changing its direction (motive) from that of the research lab or professional application to a pedagogical use, a means of redirecting or pointing (some) students toward (and sometimes some away from) the activity system” (16). Thus the purpose of a classroom genre is not to help learners perform in professional capacities; instead, a classroom genre should help learners become involved in the language learning system or in recognized language learning practices used in a discourse community of teacher and learners.

This perspective on genres in classroom settings may help us to rethink the perception that genres are presented inadequately in classroom materials. From some studies of EFL course books, it seems that the knowledge that is selected, organized and sequenced for the genres may not reflect their full range of characteristics. Format and linguistic conventions may be adapted so much that the genre shown on the page is not very representative of the genre used in a social or professional situation. Genres may also be presented in an incomplete form in course books, for example, doctor-patient interview dialogues that fail to include the greeting or the thank-you, or the customer-salesman dialogues that lack the discourse elements

about the payment for goods or the goods handover (Ventola and Kaltenbacher 5). With this kind of representation of genres, it may happen that the learner will not understand the structure, purpose or linguistic features of the genre and will perhaps not realize how people handle the genre in social practices. It can also be imagined that the learner may grasp that something is missing and, at this point, begin to lose confidence in the book, in the teacher, or in the institution.

In essence, the criticism is that classroom activities can be unrelated to “real life” practices, and the apparently decontextualized teaching materials lose some of their meaning since they are removed from their original social or professional contexts. However, Russell again points to an application of activity theory concerning texts in the classroom. “Activity theory suggests that students do not perceive texts as context-free; it is schooling that is the ‘context,’ the activity system that these genres primarily mediate” (23). In other words, learners understand that the classroom setting is the appropriate context for texts, since this setting provides a reason for the texts being studied, exercised, and perhaps tested.

A multimodal approach to using EFL course books

Just as an awareness of the functions of genres can serve the teaching and learning process, an awareness of the meanings of the varied languages in course books can reveal the complexity of meanings and meaning-making that has become a prominent part of teaching materials and of many of our contemporary social practices. The perspective of multimodality helps us observe the characteristics that formatting, photos, graphics, colors, drawings, and layout all have for making meanings. This paper will be limited to dealing with images and visual awareness, as other languages such as sound and gesture are beyond the scope of the paper.

Multimodal awareness is thought to be more and more important in contemporary society; it is part of what needs to be learned in foreign language education, one of the competencies that need to be mastered. Images are related to written text, as there is an interface of visual and linguistic meanings in contemporary media. So, just as learners are led to understand the purpose and rationale behind a written text, they also need to understand the intentions that inform visual representations and meanings in course

book images. This includes an awareness of the purposes of images such as text boxes and illustrations, just as much as adapted genres such as menus.

Whereas visuals are not new in course books, in the last several decades the design, techniques of production, and quantity and variety of elements have lent to course books a visual complexity and a high visual appeal that goes beyond the images themselves. In relation to images, although books seem to depend on the visual appeal, the purpose of the images is not always clearly defined in the support materials for the book. Since images are predominant in most of our social practice, their presence in course books seems to reflect the post-modern image-laden society.

It is understood that images have their own meaning-making capacity, their own ways of creating meaning; they can support meanings expressed in verbal language and they can realize meanings that words cannot. Words and images can make different meanings, or rather, as Kress and van Leeuwen understand it, the image realizes the same systems of meanings as words do, but the image does so “by means of its own specific forms, and independently” (17). In a similar view, Gillian Rose argues that images need to be taken seriously, since they do not just reflect their context: “Visual representations have their own effects” (15). It is worth examining ELT course books to ascertain whether the same is true of images in this kind of text.

If we are to take images seriously in their pedagogic function, we need to examine what meanings are offered in the images on the pages of the books, whether the meanings are explored in the activities in the book, how the images relate to the meanings in verbal texts in the book, and, finally, what the images actually contribute to the learning process.

Students’ perceptions of genre usefulness

One question that deserves examining is related to students’ perceptions of their own use of genres and their academic and professional needs for genres. In genre studies, one consideration is often whether the course materials attend to students’ needs, which seems not to be a straightforward matter. In an attempt to understand this question better, I examined two genres (a job résumé and a homepage) in a survey of learners’ perceptions of them. The learners, all young adults, were in an upper-intermediate level English course. Table 1 summarizes the learners’ responses.

TABLE 1 - Survey of Learner Perceptions of Genres in a Course Book.

Question	Résumé	Home Page
The genre needs to be learned	11	6
Learning the genre is not necessary	2	7
Activities enhance genre awareness	13	1
Activities do not help genre awareness	1	10

Fourteen students responded to a questionnaire in class, with answers written in English or Portuguese. Some students left some answers blank. The language of the questions did not include the term “genre,” but instead used “résumé” or “homepage” directly. As Table 1 shows, the students showed different reactions to the two genres. Most of them felt that the résumé needs explicit instruction, but only around half of them thought they need to be taught the homepage genre. As for the exercises in the book, nearly all said the exercises help them understand the résumé, whereas almost all the participants said they did not learn more about the homepage from the exercises in the book.

It would seem that what these learners are saying is that a genre needs to be learned if it is related to potential or real professional or academic needs, in other words, situations where there are high expectations about performance and demonstration of genre and disciplinary knowledge. On the other hand, a genre like the homepage may not be helpful, or may not need explicit instruction, if it will not be used for a professional or academic need and if it is already familiar from personal and social practices. This result might be interpreted as indicating that such genres are not perceived as being part of the language learning activity system, as described by Russell.

So far this paper has addressed questions related to English language teaching from a genre perspective, focusing on genres that have strong visual features. An attempt has been made to bring to light the challenges of using genre-based teaching. Next, this paper will illustrate the questions by analyzing two instances of genres in one English language course book.

The genres of advertising and tourist guidebooks

Ads are often used in language teaching materials because they are appealing for various reasons. They are characterized by contemporary language, cultural information, visual presentation of contexts, and brevity; they also can be motivating for students and can lead students to reflect on their own consumer habits (Picken 250). In the course book examined for this paper, there is a unit that deals with ads. The listening and discussion activities are reproduced below.

- 1a) How does each of the advertisements below try to appeal to us?
b) Have you ever bought or would you buy any of the products?
- 2a) Listen to these short extracts from a discussion about advertising. One of these is not referred to. Which is it?
- an advantage of advertising
 - music in ads
 - the kind of people ads are aimed at
 - images that make us uncomfortable
 - the ability of advertising to make you choose a product
- b) Discuss answers to these questions:
1. Is there anything they say you agree or don't agree with? Give reasons.
 2. Think of your three favourite advertisements. Which medium (TV, print, radio) is each in? What makes them attractive to you (e.g., the humour)?
 3. Does advertising make you buy things? If so, what?
 4. Do you mind being manipulated by advertisements? Give reasons.

One of the ads on the page is for a Nissan car model, and its high visual meaning is gained through simplicity. It has a spare visual composition made up of two stylized cars, each outlined with a thick black line, and also the Nissan logo in the bottom right corner. The verbal text includes a phrase describing the model (“The roomy new Micra”), placed next to the logo, and also two single words placed on top of each car. These are the key to the visual meaning. The word “outside” is placed over the small car and “inside” is placed over the large car, conveying the idea that spatial meanings are being inverted, favoring the concept of small cars with large interiors.

The listening and discussion activities seem to focus on knowledge of visuals as social practice, not just as language learning tools. The questions

about the manipulative force of ads (“How does each of the advertisements below try to appeal to us?” and “Do you mind being manipulated by advertisements? Give reasons.”) indicate that learners are positioned as users of ads, not as language learners. Finally, the questions explore the genre by asking students to consider the force of ads from a critical perspective. Thus, curiously, the discussion questions do not draw attention to the use of visual and verbal language in the Nissan ad (“inside” and “outside” and the two cars), although reflection on these two kinds of meaning would help learners understand the manipulative force of the ad.

However, images sometimes seem to merely complement the verbal text. This can be seen in a classroom activity using the tourist guidebook genre. A page from the guidebook shows a picture of an attractive beach resort with a highly appealing verbal description of it. Along side this is a letter written by a tourist that visits the beach. The two verbal texts are reproduced below.

Albufeira, whose beautiful sandy beaches are among the best in Europe, is cooled in the hot summer months by refreshing Atlantic breezes. This favourite destination for the British remains the Algarve's most well known resort, fashionable and utterly charming, and retains a unique fishing village atmosphere. You can stroll around the Old town in the morning when it's quiet, take a leisurely walk past the whitewashed fishermen's cottages nearby, set in narrow twisted streets, or sit in the cafes in the evening, watching street musicians and buskers as the town comes alive.

We like Albufeira a lot. The beaches are fantastic. Very sandy. It's quite hot - I spend a lot of the day sleeping and drinking ice-cold milk-shakes - but you don't really notice the heat when you're on the beach because there's a lovely sea breeze. Last night we went for a walk around the town Very fashionable - everyone was out in their Gucci gear - but even so the town still manages to hang on to its oldy worldy fishing-village atmosphere. We spent a bit of time in a café listening to some absolutely fantastic street musicians and generally watching the world go by. Nadia thought she was in heaven!

The image is not referred to in any of the items in the activities. Instead, what is focused on is the contrast between the two genres: tourist guidebook and personal letter, and in fact the tasks seem soundly thought out. The questions in the tasks draw attention to differences in purpose, audience, genre expectations, language structure and lexical choices. Some of the questions are reproduced below.

- 1 What are the general aims of a guidebook in contrast to a personal letter to a friend describing a place?
 - a) In the extracts below find examples of:
 1. Phrases with adjectives
 2. Intensifying adverbs (e.g., *entirely*)
 3. Different sentence structures (e.g., passives, relative clauses, parenthetical statements – extra ideas added to the main sentence)
 4. Prepositional phrases (e.g., *in the heart of, close to*)
 - b) Compare the extracts. How do they differ in style? Which has more complex sentences?
- 2a) What do you expect a tourist guide description of a place to include (e.g., where the place is, its history)?

In the activities for these genres, what is worth observing are the questions that ask the students to consider the genre contrasts. The questions call attention to the aims of a brochure and a personal letter (question 1), as well as to the linguistic and stylistic features of both genres (questions 1a) and 1b). In other words, students are encouraged to notice and think about the characteristics of the two genres. This may invite genre knowledge in the sense of recognition, understanding of genre structure and linguistic features, and perhaps awareness of the context of each genre. However, the visual feature of the image in the tourist guidebook is excluded, and thus the chance for learning about the meaning of an image is unexplored.

Final considerations

This paper has focused on the understanding of genres in classroom settings. More specifically, it has offered some initial considerations on some

visual features of classroom genres. It has been noticed that, as is true of other kinds of texts, there are various relations between words and images.

One observation to be made is that, in the examples analyzed here, the pedagogical activities seem to hold a predominant role in organizing the learning that is to happen. Learners are led to see both language and genre through the activities. The activities direct and limit the learners' attention, as they indicate what is to be noticed on the page. In addition, the activities show how the genre fits into the learning context or the activity system of the course. It is true that students may see other things instead – or as well – but what may happen is that students' practices of looking may not be privileged in the teaching and learning setting, in the case that they see something that is different from the pedagogical focus in the book.

This observation has implications not only for the challenge teachers face when using course materials but also for learners development in terms of the recognition and understanding of genres. That is, a course book task may, from what we have seen, guide the learner toward a particular language point, whether it be related to genre knowledge or not, or it may present a reduced version of a genre. Learners, in this case, may (or may not) understand that the language learning experience is more controlled than they imagined and is about tasks rather than about genres.

The English language course book is part of the language education process, and in fact in EFL settings the course book is usually central in course planning and language learning. It is also a source of instruction about discourse practices. It can be said that the course book assures that learning will happen, as the contents of language topics in the book provide a general plan for teaching. In addition, it does seem that what needs to be learned is "didacticized," so that genres, being removed from their original context, have pedagogical functions.

Classroom genres operationalize teaching and learning, as they allow for the learning of vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing, and a number of other language goals. As a result, genres are part of course goals, as they lead to grades and to students' passing (or failing) a course and eventually to a certificate or diploma. But there is still the concern that students move from the classroom into social and professional settings in which they must participate. The challenge for teaching English language would seem to be to identify the teacher's role in the transfer of pedagogical

genre knowledge to social and professional knowledge of genres. It should be mentioned that the teacher would not be alone in this challenge; it is the teacher, though, that would be instrumental in helping the transfer of genre knowledge to happen.

Other questions remain. The present paper has discussed issues and perspectives concerning EFL course books and visual features in genres specifically. But some of the concerns related to visual features are also pertinent to genre questions more broadly, in relation to English language teaching.

- Does the treatment of images in genres favor the building of knowledge of language, purpose, expectations and preferred discourse practices?
- Should we teach images in genres or awareness of the visuality of genres?
- What is the relation between images and verbal language in course book genres?
- What do images in course book genres contribute to learning?
What do genres contribute to learning?

I suggest that a challenge for using genres in EFL teaching and learning is to find answers to the questions above through teaching practices that are based on what we already know about genres in the classroom and that take us beyond this.

References

- Biasi-Rodrigues, Bernardete. "Tratamento dos gêneros textuais na escola." *Formação continuada de professores 3* (2003): 114-28.
- Bhatia, Vijay K. "Applied Genre Analysis and ESP." *Functional Approaches to Written Text: Classroom Applications*. Ed. Tom Miller. Washington, DC: USIA, 1997. 134-149.
- Davies, Florence. "The Language of Textbooks." Unpublished manuscript, 1992.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Picken, Jonathan. "State of the Ad: The Role of Advertisements in EFL Teaching." *ELT Journal* 53 (1999): 249-55.

Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies*. London: Sage, 2001.

Royce, Terry. "Multimodality in the TESOL Classroom: Exploring Visual-Verbal Synergy." *TESOL Quarterly* 36 (2002): 191-205.

Russell, David. "Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis." David R. Russell's personal homepage. 26 July 2003. <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~drrussel/at&genre/at&gener.html/>>

Schneuwly, Bernard, and Joaquim Dolz. "Os gêneros escolares: das práticas de linguagem aos objetos de ensino." *Gêneros orais e escritos na escola*. Orgs. Roxane Rojo and Gláís Sales Cordeiro. Campinas, SP: Mercado das Letras, 2004. 71-91.

Soares, Magda. "Um olhar sobre o livro didático." *Presença pedagógica* 2.12 (1996): 53-63.

Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.

Ventola, Eija, and Martin Kaltenbacher. "Lexicogrammar and Language Teaching Materials – A Social Semiotic and Discourse Perspective." Unpublished manuscript, 2003. (forthcoming; to be published in RELC, Singapore).