SCAFFOLDING LANGUAGE; IDENTIFYING COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSES: A GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO ENHANCE WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an application of a genre-based approach to the teaching of writing. The aim is primarily to illustrate that structural scaffolding leads to a greater schematic awareness of text. By understanding the structural patterns of the target genres, learners will be able to achieve their communicative purpose as they will be aware of the linguistic features of the text type. The linguistic features are associated with the 'moves' as a way to overcome learners' difficulties in writing appropriately and effectively. This paper demonstrates the notion of scaffolding which is represented in the teaching learning cycle by Martin, Christie and Rothery (1987). Sixty five (65) participants took part in this study and they were divided into experimental and control groups. The two groups were required to do a pre and a post test on text sequencing of an adjustment letter and a one-shot-post evaluation on writing an adjustment letter. The control group was taught the usual lecturing style while the experimental group was taught using the genre-based approach. The learners' texts were evaluated using the Multiple Trait Scoring Assessment by Hamp-Lyons (2003) for content, structure and language while the 'moves' were analysed using the moves score designed by Henry and Roseberry (1998). Results indicated that learners from the experimental group exhibited great significant gains from the pre-test to the post test in specific rhetoric moves. The results from the one-shot post-treatment evaluation on writing an adjustment letter supported the findings that learners with explicit knowledge of the genre sharpen the learners' awareness regarding the content, organization and language use to generate the target genre. Their knowledge of the moves associated with the target genre has enhanced their skills to write better.

INTRODUCTION

An ability to write appropriately and effectively is a task that most ESL learners find difficulty in despite the years spent learning and developing the skill. They struggle with many structural issues like selecting the appropriate choices of words, constructing proper sentences, organizing and developing the ideas. These factors, apart from many other obstacles have adversely affected the learners' writing and kept them from developing more active learning in their writing. There is a pressing need for teachers to help learners develop

the linguistic resources necessary for them to use the language as well as to understand the knowledge of contexts in which writing happens and to link these linguistic choices with the social purposes and situations.

Writing is complex and multifaceted in nature. Tribble (1996, p.57) poses a question pertaining to writing as what makes one piece of writing more acceptable than another. He feels that the solution to this practical problem of writing lies in the concept of genre which provides learners and teachers with a way of tackling this problem. Using genre based instruction is one way of responding to this writing issue as it increases learner's awareness of conventions of writing to enable them to write effectively which conforms to the expectations and norms of the discourse community. Tribble (1996) adds that in actual writing, writers will have the readers in mind and will think about the needs of the readers and the purpose of their writing. In their minds, there is a 'map' to guide them which encompasses the message, audience and purpose. Swales (1990), in his definition of genre, advocates that the genre-based approach can complement writing to a very powerful effect:

> "*A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some sets of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale of the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse as it influences and constrains the choice of content and style.*"
>
> (Swales, 1990)

In other words, for our words to carry out our acts, these words must be said by the right people, in the right situation with the right set of understanding. In order to being active participants in any communicative events, Bhatia (1993) adds that learners need to know certain rhetorical procedures which are commonly used by the specific discourse community in order to become 'informed users' of the discourse of their chosen field. Hence, it is good for learners to equip themselves with genre knowledge. Genre knowledge entails the established patterns of organization of a communicative event, whether spoken or written, which are made clear to the learners in a plausible manner. Once they have the knowledge, they will know how to modify and blend their choices of words according to the contexts.

A genre-based approach enables the learners to be more aware of the concept of genre and the way it affects and increases their ability to differentiate their language and text structures through the use of greater linguistic range. It is obvious that this present study is not a one-off investigation which can account for the issues compounding the obstacles in the learners' writing as mentioned earlier. However, it is hoped that the study can bring about greater value to the learners by looking at this genre-based approach as an additional perspective to the existing ones in understanding the complex reality of writing as well as providing some in-depth understanding of the roles of key genres in the discourse community.

THE STUDY

Writing in business communication has undergone some radical changes (Eustace, 1996). Brevity has become a much prized virtue, and as a result, there is a need to write precise and concise communication. Improving business writing to meet these demands for greater effectiveness and less bulk can proceed by addressing these two elements: structure and the use of language. These two elements can be clearly achieved by taking advantage of genre analysis.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the effect of using a genre-based approach as a way to help learners make their choices in deciding what kind of information should be put in their writing so as to create meaningful and purposeful texts. A genre-based approach to L2 writing is to help them address their language needs by offering them discourse knowledge of the way language functions in a social context. It is essential that they do not just know how to write grammatically correct text, but also know how to apply their knowledge for particular purposes and contexts. Learners are introduced to genre-based approach through scaffolding where they learn how to identify their communicative purposes in their writing. In this study, the genre chosen for their writing task is an adjustment letter.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants were sixty –five Business Major undergraduates from a private University College in Malaysia. To ensure that all of the participants have acquired a certain level of English proficiency, they were asked to sit for the English Placement Test. Prior to this pedagogical intervention, the majority of the participants had little or no formal instruction in writing the adjustment letter as indicated in their responses to a pre-test study that was carried out.

Research Design

All participants were required to write an adjustment letter. The writing task designed was aimed to measure the following dependant variables: Context of Participants' Text (CPT), and Written Recall of Salient Points-The Moves (WRSP). In this research design, one experimental and one control group were used. The participants were asked to do a pre-test on a text sequencing of an adjustment letter, a one-shot post evaluation writing and a post-test on the same text sequencing of the adjustment letter. The learners' texts were evaluated using the Multiple Trait Scoring Assessment by Hamp-Lyons (2003) for content, structure and language while the 'moves' were analysed using the moves score designed by Henry and Roseberry (1998). The study was conducted over a period of eight weeks.

The workshops for the adjustment letter were conducted based on the teaching learning cycle by Martin, Christie and Rothery (1987). The notion of scaffolding is represented in the teaching learning cycle. The teaching learning cycle is based on the theory drawn by Russian psychologist, Vygotsky (1978) that learning is most effective when the learners are engaged in tasks that are within their Zone of Proximal Development (Hyland,

2003). In this situation, the teacher plays a crucial role in 'scaffolding' the knowledge needed for their development.

Every genre has its own rhetorical structure to effectively communicate its communicative purposes to the relevant discourse community. A content analysis is needed to identify the communicative purpose of the genre. As for this adjustment letter, the communicative purposes were as follows:

1. To rectify the wrong, if one exists
2. To regain the confidence of the customer
3. To promote future business and goodwill

Based on the communicative purposes, a five-move structure was identified. The five moves were presented with their definitions as shown in Figure 1. below:

Analysis of Moves	Definitions
Move 1	Acknowledgement
Move 2	Acceptance
Move 3	Accountability
Move 4	Action
Move 5	Assurance

Figure 1: Analysis of Moves-The Adjustment letter

For pre and post text sequencing of the adjustment letter, the evaluations were based on the series of 'moves' that the students managed to get correct. As for the one-shot post-test on the adjustment letter, the evaluations were carried out on the content, structure, and language and the 'moves'.

RESULTS

The results for the pre and post tests for the text sequencing indicated that both groups performed better in the post tests which indicated that they had gained some knowledge on the rhetorical structure. However, upon close analysis of the post tests using the move analysis, it showed that the experimental group managed to have more full moves (5 Moves) as compared to the control-group. There was a marked significance in their writing of the text sequencing. The big difference in the mean score; Control: 2.94 and Experimental: 4.29 explicitly indicated that the experimental group had performed very well as compared to the control group. The results show that post-test of the two groups, control and experimental differed significantly at $p = 0.00$, thus allowing the null hypothesis of no difference to be rejected.

Another interesting finding was revealed when the experimental group showed how closely their writing conformed to the acceptable structuring of information of the adjustment letter. From the data summarized in Table 1, there was a clear indication that within the groups, there was improvement in the learners' writing.

Table 1: Frequency of Correct Moves for Text Sequencing – The Adjustment Letter

Moves	Control Group (Frequency) n= 31		Experimental Group (Frequency) n=34	
	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test
M1,M2,M3,M4,M5 (Maximum)	3	8	6	22
One Move (Minimum)	9	5	8	0

However, the experimental group showed a marked improvement as compared to the control group. Based on the pre-test and the post-test, the control group managed to have an increase of 16.1% of the learners (from 3 t0 8) who had all the fives moves in the writing while the experimental group had a substantial increase of 47% (from 6 to 22). The huge difference in the number of learners having all the five moves between the groups could only imply that the experimental group had the rhetoric knowledge to enable them to reorganize the sentences better in the text sequencing task. From Table 1, it was interesting to note that all the students in the experimental group managed to get at least two moves or more moves correct in their writing. In other words, the experimental group's writing conformed more to the obligatory moves identified in the letter.

The one-shot post evaluation task on the adjustment letter written by the control and experimental groups were assessed by three independent ratters using the Multiple-Trait Scoring. The letters were graded based on three criteria: Content, Structure, and Language.

Table 2: Results in Relation to Content, Structure and Language –
The Adjustment Letter

Criterion	Group	Mean Rating			Significance (p)		
		Rater 1	Rater 2	Rater 3	Rater 1	Rater 2	Rater 3
Content	Control group (n=31)	2.35 (0.798)	2.23 (0.884)	2.39 (0.761)	$p=0.019$	$p=0.003$	$p=0.017$
	Experimental group (n=34)	2.94 (1.127)	3.03 (1.193)	3.03 (1.267)			
Structure	Control group (n=31)	2.00 (0.816)	2.42 (0.807)	1.71 (0.783)	$p=0.016$	$p=0.016$	$p=0.004$
	Experimental group (n=34)	2.56 (0.991)	3.03 (1.141)	2.53 (1.354)			
Language	Control group (n=31)	1.84 (0.779)	2.13 (0.957)	1.84 (0.820)	$p=0.028$	$p=0.054$	$p=0.009$
	Experimental group (n=34)	2.42 (1.209)	2.65 (1.152)	2.62 (1.415)			

The results show that the writing task of both groups differed significantly at 0.05 level, thus allowing the null hypothesis of no difference to be rejected. The results from the three ratters with regard to their markings on the three criteria; content, structure and language show (except from Ratter 2 on Language) that there were significance in the writing between the control and experimental groups.

The same letter written by the two groups were also analysed to see how well the learners conformed to the allowable moves structure. It was calculated using a Move Score Formula as introduced by Henry and Roseberry (1998).

Viewing the statistical data from Table 3, all the three raters' results show that the groups differed at the 0.05 level, thus, allowing the null hypothesis of no difference to be rejected. This implied that the experimental group tended to produce texts that were conformed more closely to the allowable move structure.

Table 3: Comparison of Groups' results in Move Analysis – The Adjustment Letter

Ratter	Group	n	Mean/(SD)	t value	Significance (p)
1	Control	31	0.3253/(0.15419)	-2.028	p=0.047
	Experimental	34	0.4265/(0.23549)		
2	Control	31	0.3737/(0.20623)	-2.138	p=0.036
	Experimental	34	0.5000/(0.26352)		
3	Control	31	0.2339/(0.24288)	-2.103	p=0.039
	Experimental	34	0.3824/(0.31724)		

Both results from Table 2 and Table 3 show the experimental group performed better in their tasks in terms of content, structure, language and move analysis. From the scripts of the students in the experimental group, there was a clear development of recycled vocabulary and structure as they were more aware of the linguistic features contained in the adjustment letter. The results also indicate that the experimental group tended to produce texts that conformed more closely to the allowable move structure. Their writing included more relevant information than the control group. These findings were very much in line with what researchers Ellis (1990) and Schmidt (1990) had to say on understanding the role of explicit instruction because it helps the learners to focus attention on forms and meaning in the input. Both researchers Ellis (1990) and Schmidt (1990) through their empirical studies advocated that learners learn better through formal instruction as they become more aware of the particular features of the target language and form explicit representations of what they are taught.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that the explicit provision of rhetorical knowledge increased the opportunity for the learners to be more aware of how the language worked in the context of genre. The research evidence from this study was suggestive that providing explicit knowledge of schematic structure of the genre enables the learners to have the mental

framework of what to expect when they write. With this knowledge, it facilitates the flow of organizing information in specific stances.

Furthermore, with direct instruction on the genre, it enhances the learners' ability to understand the text better because it provides a scaffold for the learners to learn from others. Through modelling session in the Teaching-Learning Cycle technique, learners have learned to internalize what they have seen in previous models and to be aware of the generic features and to incorporate this understanding in their subsequent writing task. Through modelling, learners can fall back on their content schemata as a source of retrieval cues where they had a selection of genre-specific structural patterns to follow. In a way, they provide bridging platform for those who face problems like not knowing where to start and what to write. In sum, it can be said that explication of genre based instruction certainly has vast potential benefits to L2 learners in ordering, organizing and producing their texts.

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