

The Genre Approach to Writing: A Socially Contextualized Pedagogy for Effective Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the genre approach to writing pedagogy, which emphasizes writing as a social activity shaped by conventions and purposes specific to different genres. Unlike process-based approaches that focus primarily on cognitive processes, the genre approach highlights how writers use particular genres to fulfill social functions and communicate effectively with distinct audiences. The article explores the theoretical foundations of genre theory and its application in writing instruction, comparing it with process-oriented models. It explains how the genre approach shifts the focus from individual writing processes to the external conventions that govern textual production across various contexts. The article also provides an overview of three key genre-based pedagogies: the Sydney School, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and the New Rhetoric Group (NRG). Each pedagogy offers a distinct perspective on how genres should be taught, from analyzing discourse structures to focusing on social contexts and purposes. Practical classroom implications are discussed, including strategies for genre-based teaching cycles, text analysis, and collaborative writing activities. The article concludes by advocating for the integration of genre pedagogy into writing instruction, emphasizing its potential to enhance students' writing skills, raise genre awareness, and help learners adapt to diverse communicative contexts. Despite critiques of its prescriptiveness, the genre approach is seen as a valuable tool for fostering effective writing and critical thinking.

Keywords: Genre Approach, Writing Pedagogy, ESP, Sydney School, New Rhetoric, genre-based teaching

INTRODUCTION

Writing instruction, particularly in second language (L2) contexts, has evolved significantly in recent years. Traditionally, the focus was on the cognitive processes involved in writing, such as idea generation and organization. However, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of social context in writing, leading to a shift towards viewing writing as a communicative act shaped by the conventions of specific genres and the expectations of particular audiences. This shift is at the heart of the genre approach to writing pedagogy, which emphasizes that writing is not just a cognitive task but a purposeful social activity. In this framework, the structure, style, and content of a text are determined by its social function and intended readership. Rather than focusing solely on individual writing processes, genre pedagogy highlights how language functions within specific contexts, helping students navigate the complexities of writing for different purposes and audiences.

The genre approach offers a comprehensive method for teaching writing, particularly in L2 settings, where students often struggle with both language proficiency and genre conventions. By addressing both the formal and functional aspects of writing, genre pedagogy aims to equip students with the skills they need to write effectively across diverse academic, professional, and everyday contexts.

The Genre Approach

Despite the multitude of answers that different approaches, especially the process one, have provided, research into writing continued relentlessly. Researchers shifted their focus from content, processes and forms to writing as an attempt to communicate with readers (Hyland, 2003a). Hence, the genre approach emerged. One writes for a particular audience to achieve a specific purpose. For that end, we use a typical style. Hyland (2003a) explains the essence of genre approach in the following terms:

We do not just write, we write something to achieve some purpose: It is a way of getting something done. To get things done...we follow certain social conventions for organizing messages because we want our readers to recognize our purpose. These abstract, socially recognized ways of using language for particular purposes are called genres. (p.18)

Our writing is always purposeful and abides by the shared social norms to make the writer-reader process of communication smooth. Achieving different purposes or different social functions in writing requires different “writings”. A type of writing that suits a particular purpose might prove to be a failure when tried for other purposes. That is why the genre approach puts more emphasis on the reader and the conventional norms writing has to successfully go through before the readership can accept it. Swales (1990) highlighted the features of genre. He maintains that each genre has a set of typical traits that distinguish it from other genres. It has its own rules of content, layout and belongs to a certain discourse community.

As shown in Table 1 below, Hyland (2003a) outlines a significant comparison between genre and process approaches. The comparison draws on the main idea, the teaching focus, and the pros and cons of each approach.

Table 1

A Comparison of Genre and Process Orientations (Hyland, 2003a, p. 24)

Attribute	Process	Genre
Main Idea	Writing is a thinking process Concerned with the act of writing	Writing is a social activity Concerned with the final product
Teaching Focus	Emphasis on creative writer How to produce and link ideas	Emphasis on reader expectations and product How to express social purposes effectively
Advantages	Making processes of writing transparent Provides basis for teaching	Makes textual conventions transparent Contextualizes writing for audience and purpose

Disadvantages	Assumes L1 and L2 writing are similar Overlooks L2 language difficulties Insufficient attention to product Assumes all writing uses same processes	Required rhetorical understanding of texts Can result in prescriptive teaching of texts Can lead to over attention to written products Undervalue skills needed to produce texts.
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Genre Based Pedagogies

Hyon (1996) classifies genre pedagogies into three types: the ESP genre, the Sydney school genre and the new rhetoric group (NRG). While the ESP pedagogy draws on the ideas of Swales (1990) on genre analysis, the Sydney orientation is an interpretation of Halliday's (1984, 1994) notion of functional grammar. On the other hand, the New Rhetoric Group, which is a non-linguistic school (Flowerdo, 2002), is viewed as a mere product of the post structuralism in North America.

The Sydney School Pedagogy

This pedagogy is viewed as the most influential of the three orientations because it is clearly and plainly articulated and pedagogically successful (Hyland, 2007), and it targets a wider population. Unlike the ESP pedagogy which is applicable just in the English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for professional communication contexts (EPC), this pedagogy reaches out to students at the primary school and secondary school levels and adults (Hyon, 1996).

The theoretical underpinnings of the Sydney pedagogy are traced back to Halliday's theory (1994) of functional linguistics. This theory stresses that there is a strong bond between the language and the social functions it performs. Language provides its users with "language use options" to choose from. They are different means of expression. Depending on the purpose they want to achieve, the writer chooses the relevant option or "a very specific way of using language" (Halliday, 2003, p. 19). Halliday affirms that we use certain ways of writing to achieve certain goals. Therefore, texts and social contexts are tightly related. By extension, texts written to serve the same end demonstrate the same structural format and, hence, pertain to the same genre (Hyland, 2003a). Hyland (2003a, p. 19) contends that "we all have a repertoire of appropriate responses we can call on for recurring situations, from shopping lists to job applications".

This pedagogy considers genres as social purposes that are purposefully oriented and sequenced into well-orchestrated stages (Martin, 1992). The prime focus, then, is on the description of various structures of rhetoric to which members of a culture have recourse to achieve their communicative purposes. For that end, the Sydney school pedagogy to writing explicitly instructs students on how to develop a 'writing capital'. Learners at a certain level are provided with an inventory of elemental genres with detailed descriptions. Genres such as recount, narrative and procedure are described in terms of their social purposes, social locations where they are used and the their stages (Hyon, 1996)

As a methodological option, the Sydney school pedagogy adopts the 'genre-based cycle of teaching and learning'. In this cycle, which is an implementation of Vykotsky's ideas (1978), the teacher plays a central facilitative role. The subsequent stages of the cycle are as follows:

Building the context: at this stage, the teacher contextualizes the target genre by highlighting its purposes and the social contexts where students are likely to encounter them. Prediction tasks and problem solving activities can be used at this stage.

Modeling and deconstructing the text: with the assistance of the teacher, students study and analyse text models of the targeted genre to have a clear understanding of their purposes and stages. Comparing texts and sequencing are appropriate activities for this stage.

Joint construction of the text: students collaboratively do some guided writing activities including completion tasks, information-gap activities and role plays.

Independent construction of the text: this stage witnesses the complete withdrawal of the teacher, whereas students embark on the task of writing independently.

The ESP Pedagogy

ESP researchers consider genre as empowering for learner writers. Through this pedagogy, teachers equip learners with various types of writing that will enable them to write and function properly in different academic and professional contexts. Inspired by the findings of John Swales' analysis¹ (1990) of a number of academic research articles, this pedagogy considers genres as communicative situations that are structured, communicatively purposeful and demonstrates certain patterns with regard to “structure, style, content and intended audience” (Swales, 1990, p. 58).

The focus in this pedagogy is on the detailed study of the traits and organisational patterns of the different genres learners might encounter in their university and work lives. ESP analysts clearly delineate the recursive characteristics of each genre and study them closely. Such a thorough study of the traits of a genre is believed to help learners have a clear understanding of its structural requirements and enable them to write and reproduce such a genre in real life settings. For that end, teachers are encouraged to involve learners in linguistic awareness and consciousness raising tasks (Hyejeong, 2012). Academic essay writing, for instance, is characterized by the high frequent use of impersonal statements and prepositional phrases (Hyland, 2004).

The New Rhetoric

The third position of genre emerged first in North America. It draws its principles from post-structuralism and L1 composition studies and uses “ethnographic rather than linguistic research tools” (Hyland, 2004, p. 37). The NR theorists assume that genres do abide by some conventional norms and regularities, but still they are dynamic rhetorical structures. They evolve and ‘mutate’ over time. This partly explains why these theorists are not keen on the meticulous study of language and text structure. They are, instead, primarily concerned with “the ideological, social and physical surroundings in which genres are produced and also...the ways in which genres evolve” (Johns, 2003, p. 209). So, instead of focusing on genre as a linguistic and rhetorical entity, they would rather investigate the contexts where genres are used and manipulated and trace the evolution that occurs in every ‘genre species’. NR theorists have also extended the notion of genre to the institutional and ideological extremes. They stress that certain genres are more prestigious than others because they are associated with certain privileged groups in the society. Training students on these genres will not provide them with any chances to achieve social mobility as the Sydney school claims unless the power dimensions of genres are subverted.

¹ John Swales carried out an analytical study to find out about the structure of the research article genre. He analyzed the different ‘moves’ the writers of this genre go through. He found out that this genre consists of a chain of moves and that each move constitutes a “distinctive communicative act” (Hyland, 2007, p.47). It also has a communicative purpose and might subsume several ‘sub-moves’ or steps. In 2002, Yakhontova did something similar but her focus was on conference abstracts in applied linguistics. She identified five moves and the corresponding rhetorical strategies that writers use to realize each move. For instance, the strategies that are used to realize the first move, which is outlining the research field, are a reference to established knowledge and previous research and an assertion of the importance of the area.

With regard to classroom teaching, NRs are doubtful about the learning benefits genre pedagogy can bring about because the classroom context is not an authentic one (Freedman & Adam, 2000). Writing genres are taught in a decontextualized way, stripped off their contexts and social situations. Another reason why they do not invest enough interest in classroom practices is their assumption that genres are blurred, fluid and dynamic (Freedman, 1999). These inherent traits make it extremely hard if not impossible to teach genres to learner writers. It would be nonsensical and absurd to teach them formulae and prescriptions that are constantly subjected to change.

In sum, it seems that these three versions of the genre pedagogy substantially vary with regard to the guiding theories that underlie them. A concise and clear description of the three models is presented by Hyland (2004) in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Perspectives on Genres (Hyland, 2004, p.50)

Orientation	Primary Focus	Intellectual Roots	Pedagogy	Education Context	Sample Genres
The Sydney School Pedagogy	Discourse structure and features	Systemic linguistics	Vygotsky teaching learning cycle (ZPD)	L1 schools, adult migrants	Narrative, report, recount...
NR Pedagogy	Social purposes, context	Post-structuralism	Heuristics, general formats	L1 university composition	Political briefs, patents, medical records
ESP Pedagogy	Discourse structure and features	SFL, CLT, pragmatics	Consciousness raising, needs analysis	Occupational and academic training	Article, memo, sales letter

However, there seems to be a great deal of overlap in terms of their tenets and they seem to agree on a set of principles that underlie their stances (Johns, 2003). For instance, they all conceive of the text as a social construct that has a purpose to serve within a certain community. Other areas of agreement include their view on the social stratification of genres. While some genres are highly valued, others are downgraded. They also do not see genres as ideologically-neutral. They are, on the contrary, loaded with ideological purport that serves the dominant group in the community. Finally, the advocates of these three varieties of genre pedagogy hold concurring views with respect to the relationship between the writer and the text structure. This latter is not the writer's property. It is the outcome of social conventions writers have to abide by.

Evaluation

We conclude from what has been exposed so far that genre pedagogy to writing represents an attempt to embrace the variables that the individual writer has no control on, but still they have a central role in defining the purpose of writing and, hence, determining its format. Put differently, it takes the learner to territories that are beyond the content, the form and the writing processes. The writer is required to deal with writing as a communicative act with the reader. For communication to successfully take place, the writer should take into account the beyond-the-text forces and abide by the norms they dictate.

This pedagogy is seen as complementary to the process approach as it digs into areas the process approach has failed to account for. While process approach centres its theory around the writer's cognition, it fails to consider "how language works in human interaction" and "the ways meanings are socially constructed" (Hyland, 2003b, p. 18). Genre pedagogy addresses this deficiency as it explicitly and systematically provides learner writers with detailed explications of how language operates within social contexts. That is to say, genre pedagogy to writing lays the foundational principles of a theory of language that is socially informed and a pedagogy that emanates from the context of language use.

Another illuminating aspect of genre approach to writing instruction is that most of its practices are derived from the tenets of communicative approaches to language teaching. These approaches approach the communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in its totality. The focus is on both what the learner knows about language and how they can use that language in an appropriate way depending on the social contexts. Coe (2002) highlights the merits of genre pedagogy to writing instruction and contends that "genres embody socially established strategies for achieving purposes in rhetorical situations" (p.198) and "help students become versatile writers, able to adapt to the wide variety of types of writing tasks they are likely to encounter in their lives" (p. 200). Other merits of the genre approach to writing teaching have been attributed to its explicit instruction that addresses texts and context in a systematic way, its supportive and empowering effect on the learners and its concern to respond and meet learners' needs (Hyland, 2004).

Implications for Classroom Practice

At the classroom level, the genre-based pedagogy draws on the tenet that learners should be made explicitly aware of how language functions and, hence, how texts are constructed. Hyland (2003) maintains that "the classroom is characterized by...the development of a linguistic meta-language by which students can describe and control the structure and grammatical features of the texts they write" (p. 21). Accordingly, this approach offers several valuable strategies that can enhance writing instruction in the classroom:

Explicit Genre Instruction

Teachers should provide clear, explicit instruction on the structural and linguistic features of the genres students are expected to write. This may include analyzing model texts to identify key features such as organizational structure, tone, and language use. By understanding these features, students can more easily replicate and adapt them in their own writing.

Scaffolding Genre Learning

In line with the Sydney School's framework, teachers should gradually increase the level of student independence by using a scaffolded approach. This can involve joint construction of

texts, collaborative writing activities, and peer feedback, all of which can help students internalize genre conventions before moving to independent writing tasks.

Contextualizing Writing Tasks

Writing tasks should be tied to real-world contexts that simulate authentic writing situations. For example, students could write business letters, research abstracts, or public service announcements. These tasks will help students understand the relevance of the genre conventions they are learning and see how their writing can serve specific communicative purposes.

Encouraging Genre Awareness

Teachers should encourage students to reflect critically on the genres they encounter and produce. By analyzing the conventions of different genres and considering how these conventions serve specific rhetorical purposes, students can gain a deeper understanding of the function of writing in society and in professional contexts.

Balancing Structure with Creativity

While genre instruction emphasizes structure and convention, teachers should encourage creativity within the constraints of the genre. Students should be allowed to experiment with the form and style of their writing while still adhering to the core expectations of the genre. This balance fosters both technical proficiency and creative expression in students' writing.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the genre approach offers a comprehensive, contextually grounded framework for writing instruction that emphasizes the relationship between language, purpose, and audience. By focusing on the social and communicative functions of writing, genre-based pedagogy allows students to see writing not just as an individual, cognitive process, but as a socially situated activity. This approach helps students understand the conventions, structures, and stylistic features that define different genres, enabling them to produce effective and purposeful texts across a range of academic, professional, and everyday contexts.

One of the significant strengths of genre pedagogy is its ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It provides a structured yet flexible framework for teachers to help students become aware of the contextual factors that shape their writing, such as audience expectations, genre conventions, and the social purposes of writing. Moreover, genre-based instruction can foster a deeper understanding of writing as a tool for communication, empowering students to craft texts that are not only grammatically correct but also contextually appropriate and rhetorically effective.

While there are challenges to the genre approach, such as the potential for an overemphasis on formal conventions or a tendency toward prescriptiveness, it remains a highly effective method for helping students develop strong writing skills. By providing explicit instruction on the functional and rhetorical aspects of writing, genre pedagogy equips students with the tools they need to navigate various writing tasks with confidence and skill.

For teachers, incorporating genre-based methods into the classroom offers a practical way to address the diverse needs of students. By guiding learners through the complexities of genre structures, contextualizing writing within specific social settings, and encouraging critical engagement with texts, educators can cultivate students' ability to write effectively in a range of genres. In turn, this approach not only enhances students' writing competence but also fosters their ability to think critically about the role of language in communication. Ultimately, the genre approach provides a valuable, adaptable framework that prepares students to engage in meaningful, purposeful writing across contexts, contributing to their academic and professional success.

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