A Generic Awareness Study of L2 Writing in College

Wu Zhonghua

Abstract

Writing is an essential part of college English teaching, but as far as its result is concerned, most teachers feel unsatisfied or even disappointed. Part of the reason is related to students' understanding of "genre". This paper has investigated what attitude L2 learners adopt towards genre in the EFL context through an empirical research, conducted in Zhejiang University, People's Republic of China. Research data include authentic student writing samples, questionnaires and face-to-face interviews with both students and the course instructor. The author finds that college students in the EFL context lack the necessary generic awareness which exerts much influence on L2 writing in light of organization and output. Three suggestions are offered to improve the writing instruction. Teachers should place more emphasis on genre in the text, while students should do more practice after class. Without generic awareness, writing proficiency is hard to enhance; therefore, it is also strongly recommended that writing courses should be set up independently for the sake of college students in the long term.

Key terms: genre analysis; generic awareness; L2 learners; EFL context; writing

1. Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that writing is an essential part of college English teaching in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context. The Comprehensible Output Hypothesis proposed by Swain (1995) claims that language output is helpful in examining the syntactic structure of target language and in promoting language acquisition. Vivian Cook (2005) also suggests that writing plays such an important role in language teaching that we cannot afford to neglect it.

In fact, Second Language Writing has been mushrooming in non-English speaking countries since the 1960s and researchers spare no effort in gaining insight into this field. From the classification, researches on writing consist of four components (Archibald & Jeffery, 2000; Atkinson, 2003; Matsuda, 2003; Matsuda et al., 2003): writing process, writing product, writing context and writing pedagogy. Hyland (2007) notes that the last decade or so has witnessed increasing attention given to the notion of genre and its application in language teaching and learning. Genre pedagogies promise very real benefits for learners as they pull together language, content, and contexts, while offering teachers a means of presenting students with explicit and systematic explanations of the ways writing works to communicate (e.g. Christie & Martin, 1997). By making explicit what is to be learnt, providing a coherent framework for studying both language and contexts, ensuring that course objectives are derived from students' needs, and creating the resources for students to understand and challenge valued discourses, genre approaches provide an effective writing pedagogy (Hyland, 2007). However, compared with the popularity of genre studies, researches on what attitude L2 learners adopt towards genre have not deeply been explored.

2. Genre Analysis

"Genre" originates from the Latin word *genus* with the meaning "kind" or "class", and its root derives from classical philosophy. Since its first appearance, it has been prevailing in such fields as literature, sociology and rhetoric. According to Freedman and Medway (1994), genre is "primary literary" (p.1). The definition of genre can be found in literary theory (e.g. Fowler, 1982), but genres are not simply classes of texts, instead they are 'codification of discursive properties' (Todorov, 1976, p.162) promoted by social, ideological changes and individual experiences, which means genres form an open-ended set. Another case in point is Miller's perspective. He claims (1984) that "a rhetorically sound definition of genre must focus not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish". (p.151)

Ever since the genre movement in the 1980s, there have been three main streams. In her widely quoted article, Hyon (1996) distinguished three "worlds" of genre scholarship: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), New Rhetoric School and Australian school, categorized according to the different theoretical and pedagogical orientations of their proponents.

Swales is a key figure in the ESP school with his pioneering masterpiece *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Other major representatives include Bhatia and Dudley-Evans. These scholars emphasize the communicative purpose as the key defining features of a genre. After Swales (1981, 1985 and 1990), Bhatia (1993) notes that:

> Genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognized purpose(s).

ESP practitioners seek for not only linguistic features but also generic organizations of a particular genre. The Create A Research Space (CARS) model proposed by Swales has had a remarkable impact on genre analysis in ESP and on the teaching of writing in English for Academic Purpose (EAP). For instance, he notes that there is a regular pattern of "moves" and "steps" that appears in a certain order in the majority of introductions investigated. A "move" is a unit that relates both to the writer's purpose and to the content that he or she wishes to communicate. A "step" is a lower level text unit than the move that provides a detailed perspective on the options open to the writer in setting out the moves in the introduction. As Hyland (2003) comments, "ESP genre approaches have perhaps had the greatest influence on L2 writing instruction worldwide, grounding teaching in a solid research base and drawing strength from an eclectic set of pedagogies and linguistic theories."(p.22)

To sum up, genre analysis is text-based. Through exploring student writing, we can roughly estimate the degree of students' generic awareness and give some pieces of valuable advice on writing pedagogy in the EFL context.

3. Research Questions

This paper attempts to investigate the application of a genre-based approach to Chinese college student writing in English. Specifically, it aims to answer the following three questions:

(1) Does genre have any influence on student writing in English; if so, to what degree?

(2) How can students improve their writing skills with the help of generic awareness?

(3) What kind of wash-back effect can writing in the quiz have on writing pedagogy in the EFL environment?

4. Participants

The participants that the researcher chose are university students of English Level IV from four classes in Zhejiang University. There are 40 students in Class One, 43 in Class Two, 39 in Class Three and 40 in Class Four. These students come from different majors, such as Mechanical Engineering, Architecture, Medical Science and some branches of liberal arts, but none of them are English majors, so they are not often exposed to specialized training on English writing. According to the organization of syllabus, they need to take the compulsory course of comprehensive English (IV) in this semester.

From our survey, most of them have passed the CET-4 (College English Test), which is a nationwide English test among Chinese university students; hence, their overall English literacy fits into the intermediate level quite well.

5. Methodology

5.1 Data Collection

College students in Zhejiang University are required to take part in quizzes on a regular basis. Altogether they have two quizzes every semester and these scores will be a part of their final scores. Each quiz is composed of five testing items, including multiple choices (10 points), translation (10 points), reading comprehension (10 points), cloze (10 points), short answer questions (10 points) and writing (15 points). Our focus of attention lies on the last part. If the writing task had been given as an assignment, students would not have taken it seriously and simply gone through the motions. Based on this consideration, the researcher made it part of a quiz.

A questionnaire (see Appendix) involving 162 college students was conducted after the quiz in an attempt to obtain some qualitative data for further study and detailed analysis. Questionnaires were filled in by 130 test takers with a return rate of 80.25%. They were designed to get data regarding students' perception of the writing part of the quiz, genre influence as well as their opinions about writing pedagogy in the current college curriculum. Alderson (1985) argues for the use of introspective data and retrospective data from the candidates. He contends that such data would provide valuable information about the ways in which test takers deal with test items. To evade the interruption to students, this research mainly takes retrospective data in the form of questionnaire responses as its target; however, retrospection has been criticized by a number of researchers (see, for example, Nisbett and Wilson, 1977) on the grounds that the gap between the event and the reporting will lead to unreliable data. It has also been claimed that if subjects know they will be asked to provide a retrospective account, their performance on the task will be influenced. In order to avoid these weaknesses, the researcher did not tell the students that questionnaires would be distributed until the end of the quiz; furthermore, they were given out shortly after all of the test papers were collected.

In addition, interviews were also conducted to seek more information about different perspectives of both the course instructor and students in terms of generic awareness in writing.

All in all, triangulation is made great use of in this research because different methods used in the data collection can help to ensure the credibility of a research as a whole to a large extent.

5.2 Research Procedure

After negotiating with the course instructor, the researcher determined the topic of the writing task in the quiz:

The future is in our hands, which belongs to the "argumentation" category — one popular genre in L2 writing. The students were expected to write at least 120 words. The reason why the researcher chose this topic was that it was related to the text these students were studying, and they had acquired some basic knowledge about this writing style and could be predicted to produce some articles of the same genre.

At the initial stage, four classes, two in the morning and two in the afternoon, participated in this study. During the quiz, students could allocate their time according to their capability during the one and a half hours provided. In order to guarantee the authenticity of data, the researcher informed students that the writing task had better be allotted 30 minutes, or else the time could be inadequate. They were fairly cooperative because these scores in this quiz would be an indispensable part of their final scores. Soon after students submitted their papers, the researcher gave out questionnaires. In this way, the credibility of data collected could be ensured. At the same time, subjects were provided with sufficient contextual information when the researcher made the point clear that this was a study on L2 writing and improvements on the writing task could be made based on students' real needs and responses. Under this anonymous investigation, most participants offered their true feedback.

In the following three days, the researcher, an experienced teaching assistant from the School of International Studies, did the scoring according to the norm adopted in the CET-4 under the help of Ms. Zhang, an associate professor in charge of these four classes; thus, the rating consistency was guaranteed.

A week later, when the researcher returned all papers to the students, he conducted face-to-face interviews with 2 respondents, one boy and one girl randomly selected, using questions he had carefully pre-established. Ms. Zhang was also involved in a teacher-researcher interview.

6. Findings and Implications

Most students' writing samples are not clearly organized. Some writings look like stream of consciousness writing with a chaotic framework. Topic sentences are not clear, sequence markers missing and different parts (introduction, body and conclusion) mingled. The macro-level of writing is not in line with what teachers argue for. In other words, "move" in their writing is hard to detect and often leads to some misunderstandings.

Answers to Question 1 on the questionnaire show that 73% of the students think the topic of the writing assessment is difficult or very difficult to deal with, which can account for their lack of relevant writing skills. In responding to Question 2, 80.8% view genre important or very important, but most students (67.3%) admit they do not have a clear mind about genre, even though they have a little basic knowledge of textual modeling (89.4%). The first four questions show the current situation of students' attitudes towards genre, as is indicated in table1. With regard to writing strategy, 65.4% often write while thinking so this thought-processing approach during writing can reflect students' inadequacy of generic awareness. When asked about how long they usually spend in organizing their ideas in Question 5, 50% say some time between 3 and 5 minutes. Because of time pressure, they cannot think out a clear outline. Interestingly, an overwhelming majority (86.5%) tick the first choice, "argumentation", for Question7, what kind of article do you write most. As a matter of fact, enough weight should be given to such kind of writing as practical writing which may be more useful in daily life. For the last three questions, it appears that over 90% students do not practice writing after class but they (92.6%) still think the writing course is helpful and important. The average self-assessment score of their L2 writing proficiency is 6.48, which runs parallel with the teacher's predicted score of around 6 (total score=10 points), but the course instructor told the researcher that these students might have had higher expectations in respect of their writing ability.

Table1. PERCENTAGES OF GENRE UNDERSTANDING

Question	Percentage1		Percentage2	
Q1	73%	difficult	27%	less difficult
Q2	80.8%	important	19.2%	less important
Q3	89.4%	a little	10.6%	a lot
Q4	67.3%	no	32.7%	yes

Figure 1. PERCENTAGES OF GENRE UNDERSTANDING
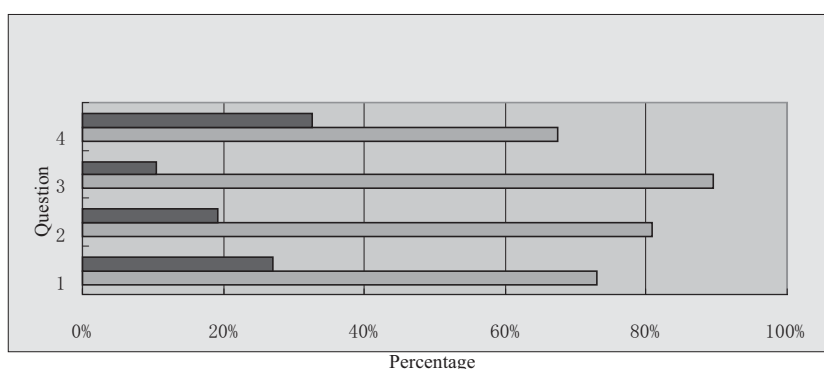
Since the researcher analyzed students' "move" patterns, which are essentially options open to the writer who builds his or her argument through the careful choice and ordering of these moves into cycles, he mainly concentrated on why they could not produce a well polished article.

Excerpt 1:
    Researcher: Did you have a clear mind when writing an argumentative composition on this topic?
    Student A: Err...No.
    Researcher: Why is that the case?
    Student A: I don't know how to organize my words and thoughts.
    Researcher: Does your teacher talk about "genre" in class?
    Student A: ….ah.., a little.
    Researcher: Do you know how to put it into practice?
    Student A: No, I still write a composition according to my own understanding.

Excerpt 2:
    Researcher: Do you like writing in English?
    Student B: just so so….
    Researcher: How do you deal with different kinds of writing?
    Student B: As usual, I begin writing without thinking too much.
    Researcher: Not to mention the genre?
    Student B: No, no, no…
    Researcher: Do you have awareness of generic features shared by most texts you learn?

Student B: Yes, but not so clear.   smile
Researcher: If an independent writing course were available, would you take it?
Student B: I think it's good. I would take it.

Although they have a little generic awareness, the conclusion can be safely drawn that they have some difficulty in putting it into practice because of insufficient stimuli and exercises after class. The course instructor informed the researcher that she often mentioned how to analyze a text, functions of different parts in a text and writing skills, but she had to admit the fact that students put more effort into acquiring the low-level knowledge, such as vocabulary, grammar or sentence patterns instead of the high-level knowledge—generic features of a text. Moreover, the duration of Comprehensive English was so limited that she was not able to spend enough time on writing.

Table2. STRENGTHS OF GENRE PEDAGOGY

Explicit	Makes clear what is to be learnt to facilitate the acquisition of writing skills
Systematic	Provides a coherent framework for focusing on both language and contexts
Needs-based	Ensures that course objectives and content are derived from students' needs
Supportive	Gives teachers a central role in scaffolding students' learning and creativity
Empowering	Provides access to the patterns and possibilities of variation in valued texts
Critical	Provides the resources for students to understand and challenge valued discourses
Consciousness-raising	Increases teachers' awareness of texts to confidently advise students on writing

Based on strengths (explicit, systematic, needs-based, supportive, empowering, critical and consciousness-raising) of genre pedagogy (Hyland, 2004), the key to solving this dilemma is to follow Burns and Joyce's (1997) seven steps in designing a genre-based "independent" writing course.

1. Identify the overall contexts in which the language will be used.

2. Develop course goals based on this context of use.

3. Note the sequence of language events within the context.

4. List the genres used in this sequence.

5. Outline the socio-cognitive knowledge students need to participate in this context.

6. Gather and analyze samples of texts.

7. Develop units of work related to these genres and develop learning objectives to be achieved.

In terms of needs analysis, enough attention should be paid to writing, for students can still benefit from it even after their graduation, and for students' sake, it is better to apply various genres of writing to writing practice instead of students' sticking to only one genre, as was found in the survey (See Figure2). On the one hand, teachers need to impress students with different generic features of various texts in class; on the other hand, students need to take the initiative in doing adequate practice after class for internalizing what teachers have imparted during the limited time. Only by getting enough input can students own the real generic awareness, but it takes a long time to carry on with this interactive process. Besides, to achieve the teaching objective completely, credited hours of the writing course are expected to be lengthened.
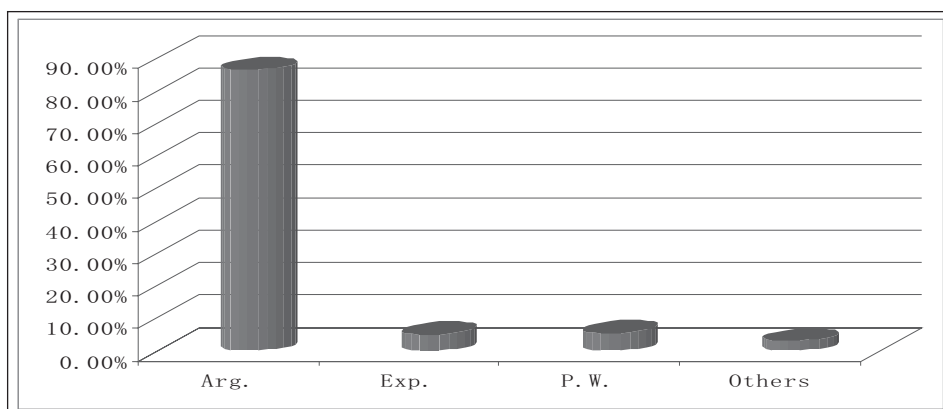
Figure 2. DISTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENT GENRES

7. Conclusion

This empirical research conducted in Zhejiang University indicates that Chinese L2 learners have not fully internalized generic features in their mind so undoubtedly, when writing, they more often than not find some difficulty in organizing and producing an essay, which is mainly influenced by the students' insufficient familiarity with certain genres. Every effort should be made to improve the situation. In fact, the purpose of writing in English for L2 learners is to communicate and express one's ideas or opinions. Without generic awareness, writing proficiency is hard to improve; therefore, it is strongly recommended that a writing course should be set up independently for the sake of college students based on the data we obtained from the last six questions. On the one hand, although generic features embedded in a discourse are hard to extract, teachers should take it seriously because learning them as well as understanding them can help students to better polish their writing. On the other hand, adequate practice can facilitate students' acquisition cognitively, so it is reasonable to have a specialized writing course in college for non-English majors. With explicit instruction and generic awareness, students will surely be able to produce more satisfactory written work.

References

Alderson, J.C. (1985). Innovations in language testing? In Portal, M. (ed.), *Innovations in language testing.* Slough: NFER-Nelson, 93-105

Archilbald, A .,& Jeffery, G. C. (2000). *Second language acquisition and writing: A multi-disciplinary approach, Learning and Instruction,* 10, 1-11.

Atkinson, D. (ed.) (2003). L2 writing in the post-process era. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12, 1.

Bhatia Vijay K., (1993): *Analyzing Genre Language Use in Professional Settings*, London: Longman.

Berkenkotter, C., & Huckin, T. N. (1995). *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition, Culture, Power.* Hillsdale. NY: Lawrence Erbaum.

Burns, A. ,& Joyce, H. (1997). *Focus on speaking.* Sydney: NCELTR.

Christie, F. ,& Martin, J. R. (eds.) (1997). *Genre in institutions: Social processes in the work place and school.* NY: Continuum.

Cook Vivian. (2005).The Neglected Role of Written Language in Language Teaching, unpublished article.

Fowler, A. (1982). *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Cambridge: Clarendon Press.

Freedman, A. ,& Medway, P. (1994). *Genre and the New Rhetoric.* London: Taylor and Francis.

Hyland, K. (2003). Genre-based pedagogies: A social response to process. *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 12, 17-29.

Hyland, K. (2004). *Genre and second language writing.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 10-16.

Hyland, K. (2007). Genre pedagogy: Language, literacy and L2 writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 16, 148-149.

Hyon, S. (1996). Genre in three traditions: Implications for ESL. *TESOL Quarterly* 4, 693-722.

Matsuda, P.. K. (2003). Second language writing in the 20th century: A historical perspective. In B. Kroll, (ed.), *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Matsuda, P., K. Canagarajah, A. S. Harklau, L. Hyland, K. & M. Warschauer. (2003). Changing currents in second language writing research. *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 12, 151-179.

Martin J. R. (1985). *Factual Writing: Exploring and Challenging Social Reality.* Victoria: Deakin University Press.

Miller, C. (1984). Genre as Social Action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* 70, 151-167.

Nuan, D. (1992). *Research Methods in Language Learning.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swain,M. (1995) Three Functions of Output in Second Language Learning. Cook,G. and Seidlhofer,B.(eds). *Principles and Practice in Applied Linguistics*.Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Swales J.M. (1981). *Aspects of Article Introductions*. Language Studies Unit: Aston University.

Swales, J.M. (1985). *Episodes in ESP*. Hemel Hempstead, England: Prentice Hall.

Swales J. M. (1990). *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Todorov. (1976). The Origin of Genres. *New Literary History.*8, 159-170

Appendix:

Questionnaire

Please tick   before the best choice.

1.   What do you think of the topic *the future is in our hands*?

    1. Easy   2.Very easy   3.Difficult   4.Very difficult

2.   What do you think of the genre influence on writing?

    1. Not important at all   2.Not too important   3. Important   4. Very important

3.   How much do you know about the organization of an argumentative essay?

    1. A little   2. A lot

4.   Did you have a clear mind about this writing task?

1. Yes   2. No
5.   How long did it take before you started writing?

1   More than 5 minutes   2. 3-5 minutes   3. Less than 3 minutes

6.   What is your writing strategy?

1   Think out a clear outline first and then begin to write.

2. Think while writing.

3. Use writing models.

4. Others.

7.   What kind of article do you write most?

1. Argumentation   2.Exposition   3. Practical writing   4. Others

8.   Do you practice writing after class?

1. Yes   2. No

9.   Do you think it is necessary to set up an independent writing course?

1. Yes   2. No   3. I don't know

10.   What would your self-assessment writing score be, if 10 points were the full score? ___

Note

Genre is often understood as an established category of composition, characterized by distinctive language and subject matter. Among these genres would be poetry, drama and the novel, but also the short story and non-fiction genres such as autobiography (usually narrative) and essays (usually non-narrative).