

Understanding learners and learning in ESP genre-based writing instruction

An Cheng *

Department of English, Oklahoma State University, 205 Morrill, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA

Abstract

ESP genre research has generated numerous descriptions and explanations of discipline-specific genre exemplars and has produced various pedagogical proposals. However, what learners learn from these genre descriptions and the resulting pedagogical proposals and how they develop as learners and writers of genres in ESP genre-based writing pedagogy is still a less-developed area of research. In this paper, I first examine previous studies and theoretical debates to argue for the importance of closely examining learners and learning in the ESP genre-based writing classroom. I then uncover two deeper issues that may be holding back this area of research: the need for more attention to the full intricacies of being a learner in ESP genre-oriented classroom and the lack of theories of learning that are sensitive to the unique conceptual framework and pedagogical realities of ESP genre-based writing classroom. I explore, with examples, how these two deeper issues can potentially transmit changes to the current ESP genre-based research agenda.

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1. Learners and learning as underdeveloped areas of research in ESP genre-based writing instruction

Recently, genre-based approaches to writing instruction have become “the main institutionalized alternative to process pedagogy currently on offer” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 11; Hyland, 2002a, 2002c, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2002, 2003; Paltridge,

* Tel.: +1 405 744 9474; fax: +1 405 744 6326.

E-mail address: an.cheng@okstate.edu.

2001; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000). As both a cognitive and a cultural concept, genre is often defined as the abstract, goal-oriented, staged, and socially recognized ways of using language delimited by communicative purposes, performed social (inter)actions within rhetorical contexts, and formal properties (structure, style, and content) (Bahktin, 1986; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Bhatia, 1993; Halliday, 1994; Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990, 2004). Many writing teachers, especially those working in the domains of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and/or English for Academic Purposes (EAP), believe that explicit attention to genre in teaching provides learners a concrete opportunity to acquire conceptual and cultural frameworks to undertake writing tasks beyond the courses in which such teaching occurs (e.g., Johns, 2003).

Among the various schools of interrelated but distinct genre theories and their pedagogical proposals (for detailed analyses of these schools, see Belcher, 2004; Hyland, 2004; Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2002, 2003; Paltridge, 2001), the ESP School, which is the focus of this paper, is arguably the most influential in the teaching of the specialist varieties of English to L2 users and the most familiar one to ESP researchers and practitioners (Bhatia, 1993, 1999; Flowerdew, 1993, 2002; Hyland, 2003a; Johns, 2003; Swales, 1990, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2000, 2004). Indeed, to many English language teachers and researchers, ESP genre studies are often identified with ESP itself (Belcher, 2004; Hyland, 2003b).

In the ESP tradition, genre is often defined as “structured communicative events engaged in by specific discourse communities whose members share broad communicative purposes” (Swales, 1990, pp. 45–47; 2004). The most famous ESP genre analytic framework has been established by Swales (1990, 2004). Swales’s original framework is characterized by the analysis of “moves”, or the “defined and bounded communicative act that is designed to achieve one main communicative objective” (Swales & Feak, 2000, p. 35). The framework is later enriched by socially informed theories of language and has generated numerous descriptions of the “regularities of purposes, forms, and situated social actions” (Hyland, 2003a, p. 27) of various discipline-specific genres, part genres, and the rich features (Barton, 2002) in them (see, for example, the numerous genre-analysis articles in this journal, *English for Specific Purposes*). ESP genre-based researchers and teachers have also been consistently attempting to translate the analyses of discipline-based genre exemplars into various pedagogical proposals as well as tasks for generating genre-based teaching materials (e.g., Bhatia, 1993; Flowerdew, 1993, 2002; Jacoby, Leech, & Holten, 1995; Johns, 1997, 1999, 2002; Parkinson, 2000; Swales, 1981, 1990, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2004; Swales, Barks, Ostermann, & Simpson, 2001; Weissberg & Buker, 1990; among others).

Surprisingly, however, few of the detailed and, often corpus-based, descriptions of genre exemplars or the resulting pedagogical proposals cited above contain substantial discussions of how these genre descriptions and pedagogical proposals have actually interacted with learners in classroom settings. Studies that reported on, for example, the effects these genre descriptions or pedagogical proposals have on learners’ development of generic awareness are few and far between and are often constrained by various limitations which will be discussed in detail below. It seems that the ESP genre-based approach to writing instruction, as some genre-based theorists have noted (e.g., Johns, 2002), still remains an approach which privileges the analysis of learner’s target genre needs and the preparation of teaching materials but has relatively little to say about the actual learning by the learners who are consigned to learn in such an approach.

This paper, therefore, calls for more learner-focused research that examines learners’ learning of genre and their development of generic/rhetorical consciousness. It calls for

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