

# The role of genre in language syllabus design: The case of Bahrain

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of genre in English language syllabus design, with reference to a project in Bahrain secondary schools. It attempts to show how, through a carefully devised and conducted qualitative study in ethnographic mode, a syllabus was developed which placed genre at its centre. It also attempts to illuminate how issues relating to the sequencing and choice of genre can be determined ecologically, and how a focus on genres in this way could usefully impact on other central areas of pedagogy including the teaching of skills, and assessment.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years genre has become an increasingly significant concept in language education. The value of focussing on genres in various areas of the profession has been convincingly demonstrated by, for example, Swales (1990), and more recently by contributors to Johns' edited collection (Johns, 2002), and elsewhere in the educational literature (e.g. Christie, 1987; Cope and Kalantzis, 1993). Paltridge (2001), citing Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), and drawing on Dudley-Evans (1989) reminds us of the benefits of giving genre a more central classroom role when we teach language:

a genre-based perspective focuses on language at the level of the whole text while at the same time

taking into account the social and cultural context in which it is used (Paltridge, 2001, p. 4, citing Dudley-Evans, 1989).

In addition to such arguments for using genre-based approaches in daily classroom practice (see also McCarthy and Carter, 1994), attempts have been made to place genre more centrally in the development of language curricula and syllabus design, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Swales, 1990). The reason for this is that a focus on genre

enables curriculum designers to group together texts that are similar in terms of purpose, organization, and audience (Paltridge, 2001, p. 4).

Paltridge goes on to summarise the arguments for adopting a genre-based approach not only in these

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specialist contexts but also in syllabus design in general language education. These arguments suggest that even though the term itself and the role of genre in education are to some extent contested (Johns, 2002), the case for attempting genre-based approaches in general language education, as well as in ESP/EAP, has proved to be convincing in principle.

For these reasons the literature on using various aspects of genre in the classroom is growing. It is not the aim of this article to review these in detail, but one could cite numerous authors who have worked in recent years to develop genre approaches in education—among them Henry and Roseberry (1998), Hyon (1996), Feez (1998), Martin (2001) and others. However, attempts to focus on genre in general English language syllabus design are relatively rare in the literature. One reason for this may be the difference between specific needs and general ones; much of the research and practice in ESP/EAP contexts is based on our knowing relatively clearly the kinds of texts which students will need to deal with when they finish. In Bhatia's terms ESP teaching "has a much narrower focus on the specificity of genres" (Bhatia, 2002, p. 283). By contrast, curricula such as those followed in most primary and secondary schools around the world do not share this specificity, since they have "a clear focus on the *generality* of genres" (Bhatia *Idem*, my italics). As a result, procedures deriving from Special Purpose contexts such as that offered by Burns and Joyce (1997) and recommended by Paltridge (2001) are not easily applicable in general language teaching situations.

How then are we to develop a genre-based approach when designing language programmes in non-ESP English language educational contexts, for example in primary and secondary schools in developing countries around the world? Is it useful to do so? Clearly a good starting point when addressing these questions would be to gather more evidence, preferably based on empirical research, as to how precisely genre might guide the construction of English language syllabuses in the developing world and elsewhere. Such research could assist us with such issues as whether a genre-based syllabus is appropriate in such contexts, how exactly to select and sequence the genres on which such language programmes could be based, and how to manage the issues of face-validity and context-sensitivity (Bax, 1997), which includes

taking account of the ways in which a genre-based approach might mesh with the expectations of teachers, learners, governments, parents and other stakeholders in these environments.

In short, the language education profession would benefit from more examples of research-based empirical investigations into the ways in which genre-based approaches to syllabus design have been devised and developed in General English language education settings, and how the kinds of obstacles outlined above have in practice been tackled in such contexts.

Such thinking underlies the current article. It describes and discusses a project carried out in secondary schools in Bahrain, which resulted in a draft syllabus based in various ways on genre. One of my aims in presenting this research, and describing it in some detail, is to facilitate the efforts of practitioners in other contexts around the world to research, and then attempt to implement, their own genre-based syllabuses in general English language education settings, possibly avoiding some of the pitfalls identified in the project under discussion, and perhaps benefiting from some of the solutions which emerged. In addition, this project consisted of an unusually interesting example (in my view) of a small-scale quasi-ethnographic syllabus evaluation, and since the professional English language education literature contains few detailed accounts of such ethnographic approaches to evaluation, it is hoped that this aspect of the project will also be of value.

The article follows this structure:

Part 1: I begin by describing the background to the project, its research design and research methods, in order to demonstrate how the syllabus design derived from a researched study of the particular needs of the context. This description is necessarily rather detailed, as my aim is to discuss the process of researching and developing the syllabus as much as the product, namely the draft syllabus itself;

Part 2: I then go on to explain how and why genre came to occupy an important place in the design of the Bahraini secondary syllabus;

Part 3: Finally, I address issues of defining genre for use in this syllabus. In addition, the relevant parts of the syllabus itself are presented and discussed, along with consideration of how some of the obstacles in the design and design process were overcome.

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