

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

Genre variation in student writing: A multi-dimensional analysis

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 February 2013

Received in revised form 3 March 2016

Accepted 8 March 2016

Available online 30 March 2016

Keywords:

Genre

Corpus

Multi-dimensional analysis

Student writing

Disciplinary writing

MICUSP

ABSTRACT

EAP professionals often desire to better understand writing in the disciplines (WID) to inform their pedagogical materials and practices. While genre analysis has increased our understanding of academic writing, quantitative, corpus-based approaches can supplement the area (Biber, Connor, & Upton, 2007). To that end, a multi-dimensional (MD) analysis was conducted using dimensions extracted by Hardy and Römer (2013). Paper types from the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers (MICUSP) were investigated along the following dimensions (1) Involved, Academic Narrative vs. Descriptive, Informational Discourse; (2) Expression of Opinions and Mental Processes; (3) Situation-Dependent, Non-Procedural Evaluation vs. Procedural Discourse; and (4) Production of Possibility Statement and Argumentation. The MICUSP paper types were found to pattern similarly across all four dimensions, with the more personal genres (e.g., creative writing, critiques/evaluations, response papers) and the more objective genres (e.g., research papers, reports) consistently averaging dimension scores on opposing ends of the poles.

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An important tradition in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs is the pursuit of teachers, materials developers, and curriculum designers to better understand the written products expected of students outside of the language classroom. The tailor-made courses and materials associated with EAP, however, can be difficult to create because in many English classes, students have different areas of interest. This heterogeneity can be daunting when deciding what to incorporate. Not only do we have to decide which generic practices to emphasize, those of us who teach these courses may specialize in literature, composition, and/or second language teaching. There is thus a possibility of disconnect between the tasks familiar to and assigned by instructors and the writing requirements across the curriculum. For example, students in a biology course may need to write experimental reports: a task they may never have encountered in composition courses.

It would thus be useful for writing instructors to be familiar with the linguistic and rhetorical demands in their students' other courses, a belief long associated with EAP pedagogy. With this knowledge, instructors can help students build genre awareness and become more aware that the commonly assigned personal and argumentative writing tasks are only one part of the styles that will be expected of them throughout their academic and post-academic experiences. With that in mind, the current study hopes to better understand the multi-dimensional variation among paper types, or genres, of student writing across the curriculum.

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The literacy expectations of English learner students have been the object of many studies, which led to the creation and spread of EAP (Hyland, 2008). While some have advocated that students receive instruction in general academic English (e.g., Spack, 1988), the field has moved in the direction of specificity, emphasizing the need for students (and instructors) to become aware of disciplinary and genre practices outside of the language classroom. Johns (1988a, 1988b) and Hyland and Tse (2009), for example, question and challenge the generalizability of a common core of academic reading and writing practices across disciplines and genres. These arguments have led to the exploration and teaching of specific practices (Hyland, 2002; Johns, 1997). This specificity is seen as crucial to help students raise their awareness of the ways that the quality of one's writing depends on the epistemologies and values of discourse communities. Such awareness is important for new members to enter into specific fields, including disciplines. Even in courses usually associated with teaching how students can write generally, such as first year composition, building genre awareness of more specific literacy practices can also be successful (e.g., Hardy & Römer, 2013; Johns, 1997).

Related to the specific practices of disciplines in EAP, authenticity has been a key component to curricula and materials design. In this tradition, what learners are taught should be based on real-life expectations. This desire for authenticity has led to the frequent use of language corpora in EAP research and genre analysis (e.g., Biber, Connor, & Upton, 2007). Corpus-based methodologies are particularly useful because corpora are large, searchable databases of natural written or spoken language. Using a large corpus to examine one's population (e.g., undergraduate physics research papers), researchers can make more valid generalizations than they can with a smaller sample. Thus, for EAP research, analyzing texts from other disciplines would be more appropriate when studying student populations at large than, for example, analyzing student writing from a single discipline such as composition. For that reason, this study explores successful student writing from 16 different disciplines, attending to the communicative purpose associated with variation of co-occurring lexico-grammatical features.

Not only are multiple disciplines important to include, when designing materials and activities for early undergraduate or composition courses, one should also conduct a needs analysis to better understand the context (Johns, 1997). This will help determine what genres students are expected to read and write. Thus, not only is it useful to use representative genres for a corpus designed to help undergraduates, one should also consider the levels of the authors of those texts. It can be agreed that most published research articles (RAs), for example, are written by or at least supervised by members of the inner circles of their respective discipline's center. Undergraduate students, on the other hand, are at the outermost periphery of any discipline, if at all. Because of this, it may not be realistic for undergraduate students to learn to write like professionals.

For these reasons, EAP high school or undergraduate students might not need to know how to read or write RAs. Instead, one should consider including genres more common in these students' writing (e.g., argumentative essays, reports, research papers, and proposals) when collecting a corpus of representative texts. Many have studied the tasks and skills needed for undergraduate student writing across the curriculum (e.g., Carter, 2007; Gardner & Nesi, 2012). Melzer (2009), for example, found that most student writing assignments are designed for the writer to inform and address an audience of only their instructor, suggesting that writing by undergraduate students fulfills a distinct communicative purpose from the genres associated with professionals even from the same discipline. Thus, discipline can only account for part of the target writing practices.

Another area of interest in EAP is the labels of target genres because they do not always match across disciplines (Johns, 1997). Because of the differences among disciplinary discourse communities, it is useful for one to operationalize these labels (Braine, 1995). Especially in the area of genre studies, which includes no fewer than three (Hyon, 1996) and perhaps as many as five (Swales, 2012) schools of thought, there are many different understandings for how to label or describe groups of texts. For these reasons, the current study explores the variation between paper types, or genres, of student writing. This is an attempt to better understand how writing across the curriculum varies linguistically according to the genre, or rhetorical purpose and audience of the work.

For this study, which is a corpus-based, genre analysis of language, it is useful to start by explaining how the term "genre" is used in this framework. Swales' (1990) classic definition of genre describes it as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (p. 58). Subsequent genre-based research, including Swales' own work, has increasingly included and investigated the social nature of such language use. A text (spoken or written) is not only associated with the purpose with which it is produced, but also the context in which it is produced. For example, although there may be great variation within published research articles (Gray, 2011), writers are often held to generic qualities of their peers. These groups of interlocutors have been described as discourse communities (Swales, 1990) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The corpus in the present study, the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers (MICUSP), was organized and annotated qualitatively to take into consideration the rhetorical purposes and textual features of each text. Römer and O'Donnell (2011) describe this genre-classification process in detail.

Another useful term in the analysis of student writing is *text type*. According to Biber (1989, 1995) text types are categories that are defined only by their shared linguistic features. For example, a newspaper article might be a different genre than a magazine article, having different situational contexts. However these two genres may be quite similar linguistically. Paltridge (2002) offers a further rhetorical extension of the idea of text type. In any given genre, he explains, a student may be required to utilize multiple text types to meet the purpose of that genre.

As other researchers in this field have found, although it is important to recognize what those in discourse communities label their own genres (Swales, 1990), it may be more useful for linguistic analysis for the researcher to operationalize and assign the genre, or text type, label to texts in his or her sample (Braine, 1995; Nesi & Gardner, 2012; Römer & O'Donnell, 2011). That way, we can avoid differences and conflate similarities across disciplines. Because MICUSP developers used an

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