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Linking communicative functions with linguistic resources in short stories: Implications of a narrative analysis for second language writing instruction



Vui-Fun Wong^a, Jason Miin-Hwa Lim^{b,*}

^a Labuan National Secondary School, 87021 Labuan Federal Territory, Malaysia

^b Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88999 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Writing short stories constitutes an art that requires considerable knowledge, experience, skills, and understanding of both the generic structure and language resources needed to convey meaning and arouse readers' interest. Previous studies, however, have yet to provide a conclusive approach that shows how language mechanisms can be used to realise writers' wide-ranging communicative intentions in a specific second language context. Based on the argument that second language story-writing instruction needs to incorporate an in-depth study into some texts intended for second language writers in a particular socio-cultural setting, this study investigated the generic structure of short stories written by professional textbook writers for second language learners. Using the Swalesian analytical framework, we analysed a corpus of short stories selected from different education-related sources in a second language context, and subsequently ascertained the language resources needed to accomplish the communicative functions of the stories. We have identified eleven rhetorical steps, each of which has differing and yet inter-connected communicative functions performed by noteworthy language mechanisms. Our findings are useful in helping instructors prepare teaching materials that illustrate how second language writers can comprehend and employ salient communicative resources to write meaningful short stories in a socio-culturally relevant schematic structure.

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1. Introduction

It is widely known that writing short stories constitutes an art that requires considerable knowledge and understanding of both the structure and language used to express meanings; however, the extent to which the writing of stories can be effectively taught to second language learners often becomes a subject of much debate. In the writing of short stories, in particular, scholars appear to have differing emphases on the importance of content and language. For instance, many academics are of the view that paying close attention to language in the teaching of short story writing may lead instructors and learners to favour form over content (May, 2011); nonetheless, Prose (2006) argues that a good reader or writer needs to be knowledgeable about and sensitive to words, sentences, patterns and other details that form the craft of the fiction.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +60 88 320000x5026 (office); +60 16 8298305 (mobile); fax: +60 88 435708.

E-mail addresses: drjasonlim@gmail.com, jasonlim@ums.edu.my (J.M.-H. Lim).

Interestingly, in a language syllabus that incorporates short story writing, focussing on language usage often continues to constitute an essential part of the instructional practice in the classroom. In this regard, our paper argues that a genre-based analysis of short stories would reveal some valuable information on how a content-related generic structure can be meaningfully linked with the language mechanisms in an instructor's preparation of teaching materials that take into consideration some socio-cultural expectations of story writing.

The relevance of genre analysis in story writing, however, needs to be explained with reference to a genre-based approach to writing in general, and the circumstances under which stories are produced in a specific socio-cultural setting. It is widely known that instructors and learners need to develop some genre awareness that requires them to examine the connections among texts, their rhetorical purposes and general contexts in which the texts under a genre might appear (Johns, 2011). It is by analysing the texts which they ask their students to write that “teachers become more attuned to the ways meanings are created and more sensitive to the specific communicative needs of their students” (Hyland, 2007, p. 151). Hence, prior to the teaching of these exemplars selected by practitioners, instructors and researchers may need to conduct sufficient research into the commonalities and distinctions among related texts in the same genre and analyse the rhetorical functions of the various parts of these texts. In relation to such a need, the ultimate goal of this study is to generate results that can be used to inform instruction in the writing of short stories.

2. Short stories and cultural context

In the context of this study, appeals of short stories (as a localised genre) to the audience can be comprehended if we elucidate (i) the socio-cultural context in which this study was conducted, and (ii) the characteristics of the socio-cultural context that has called for the study. As this study is set in Malaysia, some information on the socio-cultural background of the country needs to be presented here. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation, in which three dominant ethnic groups, namely Malays, Chinese and Indians, constitute the vast majority of the country's population (Hashim, 2009). In this nation, moral values, especially love for peace, integration, harmony, cooperation, justice and unity, are generally considered universal noble values to be highlighted not only in the social life of Malaysians (Deraman, 2000), but also in the Malaysian school curriculum (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2000). In the English Language Syllabus (under the ‘Integrated Secondary School Curriculum’ (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2000), in particular, one of the general objectives is “to show an awareness and appreciation of moral values and love towards the nation” (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 2). Our preliminary survey of previous public examination papers (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013), has shown that these formal assessments generally incorporate at least an essay question on story writing in which moral values can be embedded. The extent to which such an emphasis on moral values has a bearing on the rhetorical moves and their linguistic realisations in short stories written for school students, however, remains an unexplored domain that merits attention, particularly if the pedagogical implications of the study are taken into consideration. While making such a decision on what need to be included in a short story, instructors teaching in the second language context might need to (i) consider the aforementioned socio-cultural assumptions which are inherent in the context, and (ii) examine the prevalent expressions which are readily acceptable to practitioners in the context.

3. The short story as a genre

In this study, the short story is considered to be a genre which exhibits regularity in the language used by participants sharing similar goals in a discourse community (Swales, 1990, 2004). Swales (1990, 2004) first pointed out the need to consider (i) genre as a collection of communicative events in which the language plays the main role in negotiating meanings in different situations, (ii) the communicative events involved as a genre when interlocutors share some sets of communicative purposes, (iii) examples of genre as being able to differ in their prototypicality (given that the properties of the members of the same genre may bear some resemblance), (iv) the underlying principle behind a genre as an entity that sets restrictions on allowable content, positioning, and form, and (v) the nomenclature for genres of a discourse community as a vital source of insight. This concept can be explained by looking at stories collectively as a genre. To be specific, short stories in a second language context is referred to as a class of communicative events, which conveys meanings using specific lexis and grammatical structures in a specific socio-cultural setting, while teachers and learners, being members subscribing to the genre, share the same communicative goal to extend their knowledge and proficiency for classroom use.

From a language learning perspective, it would be useful to conceptualise genre as a body consisting of a series of moves (Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Swales, 1990, 2004). A move could be seen as a part of a text which serves some specific rhetorical functions by achieving a particular purpose within a text and contributes to the overall purpose of a genre (Swales, 1990). Generally, genre analysis aims to identify the moves and strategies of a particular genre, the allowable order of moves or steps, and their key linguistic features (Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Lim, 2012).

4. Conceptualisation of narratives

As the stories analysed in this study constitute a form of narratives, we need to consider narratives in relation to the concepts of genre. Although narratives generally show a chronological sequence of events, some are only about a single event (Levin, 1995; McCabe & Bliss, 2003). The word ‘narrative’ has been defined differently in different contexts. First, it generally

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