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Learning to write for publication in English through genre-based pedagogy: A case in Taiwan



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ABSTRACT

There has been a debate between explicit instruction and implicit acquisition of genre regarding genre-based pedagogies. However, relatively few studies have investigated the extent to which explicit instruction shapes students' genre knowledge development by scrutinizing their learning trajectories. This study examined a Taiwanese Ph.D. student's genre knowledge development in a genre-based research writing course. This study collected and analyzed students' oral interaction data and their multiple drafts, and found that explicit genre instruction on rhetorical moves and linguistic features helped the student gain formal knowledge, process knowledge, and rhetorical knowledge, albeit to different degrees. The findings of the study support explicit genre instruction in shaping novice EFL scholars' knowledge of writing for publication in English. In contexts like Taiwan, where publishing articles in indexed journals has become a Ph.D. graduation requirement, a genre-based research writing course featured by explicit and systematic instruction may be highly beneficial.

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1. Introduction

Genre is defined as a shared social practice recognized by a discourse community in which its members engage with the shared genre to mark their membership (Swales, 1990). When writers master a genre, they learn to take up the ideology, conventions, and values carried by the genre as well as by the discourse community (Devitt, 2009). Research articles, for example, are a value-laden and ideology-laden genre. The publication of research articles has been a major criterion for evaluating the academic performance of university faculty and has also become a graduation requirement for Ph.D. students in many non-native English speaking (NNES) countries, such as China and Taiwan (Huang, 2010; Li, 2007). Writing for publication is thus an important task for both faculty and Ph.D. students under the pressure of “publish or perish.” However, at the same time, it is a daunting task, because writing a publishable manuscript requires not only an understanding of what is valued in the respective research field but also a demonstration of the writers' ability to write in ways that conform to disciplinary expectations.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) genre pedagogy, characterized by explicit teaching, has been proposed to familiarize NNES writers with target genres (Byrnes, 2009; Costinao & Hyon, 2011; Gentil, 2011; Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2011; Lee & Swales, 2006; Swales, 1990, 2004). The ESP approach aims to help students build their membership in their discourse community by guiding them to construe the interaction between genre and the discourse community, to understand how language

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functions in the context of communication and what is expected of them to successfully participate in the context, and ultimately, to master the valued genres that will add to their cultural capital (Paltridge, 2001). It has been argued that the ESP approach with explicit and systematic instruction can make students aware of textual regularities of genre and rhetorical functions of language, in turn marking their membership in the discourse community (Cheng, 2011).

However, the ESP genre pedagogy is not without criticism, much of which is centered on its explicit instruction of generic features and the feasibility of transferring genre knowledge learned in the classroom to authentic writing tasks (Haneda & Wells, 2000). Opponents question whether explicit teaching familiarizes students with the complex social, cultural, political, and pragmatic dimensions of the genre; in addition, they argue that when genre is taught in the classroom, it has been separated from its meaningful context, and such decontextualized learning is ineffective (Freedman & Richardson, 1997).

The debate over the effectiveness of explicit genre instruction remains unresolved due to insufficient empirical research (Carter, Ferzil, & Wiebe, 2004). Therefore, this study investigated the extent to which explicit ESP genre instruction shaped a NNES doctoral student's genre knowledge in Taiwan. Research articles were chosen as the target genre because almost all Ph.D. students in Taiwan are required to publish English research articles in indexed journals before graduation, yet they find writing the genre particularly challenging (Huang, 2010). As a result, there is an urgent need to provide pedagogical support for these students and to examine how well genre-based instruction functions in contexts where little exposure to English makes implicit linguistic rules more occluded (Yasuda, 2011). Therefore, this paper reports on an inquiry that examined a Taiwanese Ph.D. student's genre knowledge development in a genre-based research writing course and the inquiry was guided by the following research question:

To what extent does explicit genre-based instruction develop NNES students' genre knowledge of research articles?

In what follows, I will review relevant literature and introduce Tardy's (2009) framework of genre knowledge before describing how data were collected and analyzed to reveal the participant's learning of genre knowledge through explicit genre instruction.

2. Literature review

2.1. Explicit instruction vs. implicit acquisition in genre-based pedagogies

Researchers have debated the effectiveness of explicit genre instruction (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). Freedman (1993) questioned its benefits by arguing that genre is shaped by cultural, political, and social factors and that it is impossible for teachers to explicitly explain these shaping factors in the classroom. Freedman (1993, 1994) believed that genre knowledge is tacit and unconsciously acquired, and held that explicit instruction of genre was not only unnecessary but actually harmful if teachers were not members of the discourse community that uses the target genre. Another restricted version of her hypothesis held that explicit instruction might be effective only "for those students whose learning styles are appropriate, but only when such discussions are presented while students are engaged in authentic reading and writing tasks involving the targeted genre" (Freedman, 1993, p. 244). In other words, explicit instruction alone (without students engaging in the genre) does not lead to successful genre performance (Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Mitchell & Andrews, 1994). For example, Dias (1994) showed how engaging with authentic texts rather than learning formal features helped history students internalize the belief system of the discipline. Purcell-Gates, Duke, and Marineau's (2007) comparison of authentic reading/writing practices and explicit instruction of genre found no significant growth in students' writing abilities following explicit genre instruction but a positive relationship between the authenticity of reading/writing activities and students' writing development.

In contrast, other research supports an explicit focus on generic features (e.g., Henry & Roseberry, 1998; Mustafa, 1995). Williams and Colomb (1993) argued that explicit teaching can still improve tacit genre knowledge, as learning the forms of a genre may entail learning the genre's social context. Empirical studies also suggest that genre instruction may enhance students' awareness of audience and improve their cohesion and organization in writing (Yasuda, 2011). In addition, genre instruction was found to have both immediate and extended effects on students' genre knowledge (Hyon, 2001, 2002).

Other studies that examined the effects of explicit genre instruction on students' research writing support the potential of explicit instruction (Cargill & O'Connor, 2006; Chang & Kuo, 2011; Lee & Swales, 2006). Swales and Lindemann (2002) found that international students in their class became more aware of the interrelationship between disciplinary culture and the genre structure by arranging different abstracts in the literature review section. Students also developed genre awareness by analyzing genre exemplars, from which they observed conventional patterns and non-prototypical features (Cheng, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2011). In other words, students do not merely memorize a set of linguistic rules but learn to exploit linguistic resources to satisfy their rhetorical purposes and meet readers' expectations. Tardy (2009), for example, found that ESL graduate students developed rhetorical knowledge by interacting with other texts and practices that spurred them to make sense of language in its context. As they engaged in writing disciplinary genres, they no longer perceived language as a set of abstract linguistic rules but as resources that helped them achieve their purposes by persuading readers of the value of their texts. Therefore, it is suggested that explicit, systematic genre instruction is especially helpful to NNES writers with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds may have different expectations about the target genre and therefore need more explicit guidance (Hyland, 2007).

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