



# Narrative and expository genre effects on students, raters, and performance criteria



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## ABSTRACT

The effects of genre play an important role in the assessment of student writing. This study examines the effects of narrative and expository genres on student language proficiency, raters, and performance criteria. For this study, EFL students ( $n = 180$ ) from three proficiency levels (novice, intermediate, and advanced) wrote a narrative and an expository essay that were assessed by raters using four performance criteria: paragraph structure, content, form, and vocabulary. A multi-faceted Rasch measurement (MFRM) analysis showed that differences in the students' scores were not statistically significant between genres, but showed a significant difference depending on the writing proficiency level. Novice students received significantly higher scores on narratives, while advanced students received significantly higher scores on expository essays, but there was no score difference for intermediate students. Raters showed greater variance when rating for narratives compared to expository texts. Narrative essays covered a wider range of student writing ability, while expository essays showed more centralization in writing scores. For the four performance criteria, vocabulary showed interactions with narrative and expository genres. Expository essays were given significantly higher scores for vocabulary than for narrative texts. The results of this study have implications for the use of narrative and expository genres for writing assessment.

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## 1. Introduction

Student writing scores are associated with many non-academic factors such as student background (e.g., Breland, Lee, & Murak, 2004; Lee, Breland, & Muraki, 2004; Park, 2006), rater severity (Weigle, 2002), and writing task (Lee & Anderson, 2007). Among these factors, this paper focuses on the effect of narrative and expository genres on students' writing, raters, and performance criteria. The reasons for genre variability in writing assessment stem from different sources. There may be an interaction with raters (Hamp-Lyons & Mathias, 1994; Polio & Glew, 1996) as well as with students (Wiseman, 2012; Yu, 2007). Raters can be biased toward genres that are believed to be easier or more difficult, and students may be more comfortable with certain genres than others, and this can also vary according to students' language proficiency level. Finally, genres can interact with performance criteria (Jiuliang, 2014; Yu, 2007). Expository texts can require writers to use more complex vocabulary (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2004, 2007) and more sophisticated sentence structure in contrast to narrative texts (Malvern, Richards, Chipere, & Duran, 2004; Ravid & Berman, 2010; Reilly, Zamora, & McGivern, 2005).

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**Table 1**  
Summary of narrative and expository genre differences.

Category	Narrative	Expository
Genre Description	Agent-oriented, people-oriented, chronological (Sanford & Emmott, 2012)	Topic-oriented, ideas, claims, and arguments (Britton, 1994; Katzenberger, 2004; Mosenthal, 1985) Persuasive, compare and contrast, argumentative, procedural texts (Beers & Nagy, 2011)
Lexical Features	Personal pronouns, sensory images (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007)	Advanced vocabulary, less frequent vocabulary, abstract, complex, multi-syllabic words (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2004, 2007)
Syntactic Features	Shorter clauses, less complex phrases, more active voice (Malvern et al., 2004; Ravid & Berman, 2010; Reilly et al., 2005)	Longer clauses, more complex noun phrases, more relative and adverbial clauses, more passive voice (Malvern et al., 2004; Ravid & Berman, 2010; Reilly et al., 2005)
Cognitive Load	Less cognitive effort (Beauvais et al., 2011)	More cognitive effort, more planning time, more sophisticated knowledge-transforming strategy (Beauvais et al., 2011)
Age of Acquisition	Younger learners (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007; Bouwer et al., 2014)	Older learners (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2009)

In writing assessment, there has been extensive research involving rater effect (e.g., Eckes, 2005; Kondo-Brown, 2002; Schaefer, 2008) on student writing scores, but the effect of genre on writing proficiency requires more research. It has been reported that genre effects can account for greater variability in writing scores than rater or task effects (Bouwer, Béguin, Sanders, & van den Bergh, 2014). This study investigates genre effects on students, raters, and performance criteria to have a better understanding of how raters and students are influenced by narrative and expository genres.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. L1 genre studies

Genres are socially constructed language practices that serve specific social purposes (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In L1 genre research (summarized in Table 1), the two most widely researched genres in both academic and non-academic contexts are narrative and expository texts (Ortega, 2015). The definitions of narrative and expository genres vary among genre researchers, but in general, narratives consist of characters and settings describing events and actions performed by people (Grabe, 2002; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Sanford & Emmott, 2012), whereas expository writing focuses on ideas, claims, and arguments (Britton, 1994; Katzenberger, 2004; Mosenthal, 1985). The family of narrative texts includes biographies, tales, fiction, and historical events (Grabe, 2002). The expository genre covers a wide range of non-narrative texts such as persuasive, compare and contrast, argumentative, and procedural texts (Beers & Nagy, 2011).

Studies on genre differences between narrative and expository texts have mainly focused on two linguistic features of writing: lexical and syntactic features (Beers & Nagy, 2009; Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2004, 2007; Ravid & Berman, 2010). Genre theorists note that text characteristics differ at the micro-level (vocabulary and grammar), as well as at the macro-level (overall organizational principles and text structures) (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Findings have shown that vocabulary used in narrative writing contains more personal pronouns and words with more sensory images (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007), whereas expository texts display a more advanced lexis (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2004, 2007) with the use of more abstract, complex, and multi-syllabic words. Syntactic complexity has also been proven to be sensitive to genre differences (Beers & Nagy, 2009). Expository texts compared to narratives have been found to have longer clauses (Malvern, Richards, Chipere, & Duran, 2004), more complex noun phrases (Ravid & Berman, 2010), more relative and adverbial clauses (Scott & Windsor, 2000), and more passive voice (Reilly et al., 2005). Genre researchers have shown that writing in different genres requires different linguistic demands (Beers & Nagy, 2011; Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2004; Biber, Gray & Staples, 2014; Nippold, 2004) and different cognitive task loads (Beauvais, Olive, & Passerault, 2011; Kamberelis & Bovino, 1999). Beauvais et al. (2011) found that students used different writing strategies to meet the demands of different writing genres. In their study, students spent more time planning to write an argumentative text because it required a complex and sophisticated knowledge-transforming strategy. Thus, the prewriting stage for argumentative essays required more cognitive effort compared to narrative texts.

In addition to the lexical, syntactic, and cognitive differences across narrative and expository genres, research on the variation of genre effects by age level has been conducted in L1 oral and written language (Beers & Nagy, 2009; Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2004, 2007; Ravid & Berman, 2010). One of the first genres that L1 learners are exposed to is the narrative genre. Speaking in this genre starts at a very early age. Bouwer et al. (2014) state that young learners are more exposed to personal writing and have a “well developed schemata” (p. 13) for personal narratives. The acquisition of narrative occurs at an early age for both L1 and L2 learners (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007; Bouwer et al., 2014), and narrative structural complexity increases with age (McClure, Mir, & Cadierno, 1993). In contrast, the spoken or written expository genre begins within an

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