

EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF INTRODUCING *GENRE*-BASED APPROACHES TO TEACHING WRITING

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Abstract

Genre has a great impact on how language teaching is understood (Derewianka, 2003). On the one hand, from the perspective of the research aims, this article is intended to offer a brief overview of how genre is understood in linguistics, as well as of several genre-based approaches in applied linguistics, with special reference to language teaching. On the other hand, from the perspective of teaching aims, this study attempts to investigate the students' awareness regarding various genres that are relevant for their age group and language proficiency level, prior to explicit genre teaching. The results of this small-scale study have confirmed that genre-based approaches to teaching help raise the students' awareness of genre features and are conducive to more effective reading, in preparation for purposeful writing.

Keywords: Genre, genre-based approaches, writing, the product approach, the process approach

DOI: 10.24818/SIC/2021/02.01

1. Introduction

Globalization has been the major cause for the use of English throughout the world. However, for a person to be able to actively participate in the global market, that individual must fluently write and speak in English. Developing writing and speaking skills has proven to be one of the most challenging tasks in second language learning as a result of the great variety of the co-existing *genres* that students have to master in order to become successful writers and speakers.

The main challenge that students encounter when they have to write something is how to generate ideas on that topic, organize those ideas, use a specific vocabulary and how to put those ideas into an intelligible text. Various methodological approaches to teaching writing used by teachers may present some difficulties for students if teachers just focus on providing students with vocabulary related to the specific topic and some guiding questions in order to help them shape their ideas into intelligible paragraphs. Teaching writing like this benefits the students only up to some point where it assists them in producing error-free texts, but it does not contribute to helping them realize and master features like purpose, audience, context and the linguistic conventions of a text.

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Borchin and Doroholschi (2016) try to raise awareness of the lack of genre-focused teaching in our country. They state that due to the lack of attention to genres, the students are unaware of the writing norms needed for professional and academic mobilities.

Like in many other Eastern European countries, the Romanian educational system underwent a period of rapid change in the decades that have elapsed since the fall of Communism in 1989. This resulted in a dynamic and complex landscape, which is reflected in the academic writing practices and writing genres used at the tertiary level. The genre system is heterogeneous, with genre norms often not consolidated, differing widely between institutions and disciplines and changing rapidly due to external influences or educational reforms. Therefore, it is difficult to paint an accurate picture of genre systems in all Romanian Higher Education institutions, especially since there is still little research in the field of genre (or in the field of academic writing in general) in Romania and little data on genre use. (Borchin & Doroholschi, 2016: 179)

In the case study mentioned above, conducted mainly in Timisoara (“we conducted a series of informal interviews and open-ended questionnaires with faculty in several disciplines at the West University of Timișoara”, Borchin & Doroholschi, 2016, p. 179), the researchers generalise their findings for the whole country without having performed a more meticulous investigation at a national level; there are research outcomes reported by scholars who have successfully introduced genre-based teaching in academic contexts at advanced level, both in Romania (Bardi & Muresan, 2014; Muresan, 2012) and in other countries, e.g. in France (Dressen-Hammouda, 2008), in Turkey (Yayli & Canagarajah, 2018). To our knowledge, however, for lower proficiency levels and secondary school learners, there are fewer studies reporting on genre-based approaches to reading and writing. The existing ones are based on research carried out mainly in anglophone countries, comparing the learners’ familiarity with genres they are exposed to at home versus those typical of the school-environment, from a literacy development perspective (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2014). A further rationale for my study has been triggered by the recent change in format of the Cambridge exam at B1 level, the Preliminary English Test (PET). As of the fall of 2020, both the Reading component and the Writing component include new genre-related tasks with more complex requirements than previous versions (Cambridge Assessment English, 2020).

All the above have prompted my research endeavour, taking a case study approach, in order to explore to what extent the learners in my educational environment (a secondary school in Romania) are familiar with different genres relevant for their age and English language proficiency level and if introducing a genre-based approach to teaching and learning can help them become more effective readers and writers in English (their L2). The current research is, thus, guided by the ensuing questions: To what extent are learners aware of genre differences when exposed to genre exemplars that are relevant for their age group and proficiency level? How can we facilitate the students’ improvement of their academic writing skills through genre-based approaches to teaching and learning?

After setting the scene with the help of conceptual and terminological clarifications regarding *genre* as understood in linguistics (chapter 2), chapter 3 proceeds with a brief overview of different approaches to developing writing competencies in English Language Teaching (ELT). Chapter 4 offers details on the methodological approach employed and the participants in this study, chapters 5 and 6 present a pilot case study, illustrating a process-oriented genre-based approach, followed by findings and their analysis. Chapter 7 concludes.

2. ‘Genre’ in linguistics

Etymologically, the word *genre* is derived from French, and it means form or type. It was originally used in Biology in order to classify the flora and fauna (Stokes, 2003). Thus, the early concept of genre was used to categorize the various species into different classes due to their similar features (Dirgeyasa, 2015). The term *genre* developed overtime and was applied to various fields. In linguistics, the word *genre* was defined as a communication event in which members have a specific communication goal (Swales, 1990). In other words, *genre* is a communication event adapted to a specific context, and

because there are numerous social contexts, this leads to the co-existence of different *genres*. In addition, Hyland (2003) stated that:

This theory addresses the relationship between language and its social functions and sets out to show language as a system from which users make choices to express meaning. Halliday argues that the language users have to use and develop specific ways of using language to accomplish goals, which means that texts are related to social context and the other texts. Broadly, when a set of texts share the same purpose, they will often share the same structure, and thus, they belong to the same genre. (Hyland, 2003: 19)

Thus, *genre* can be simply defined as a type of text, either oral or written, in which there is a specific relation between language and its social function. In other words, because language is used in different contexts, it has to have its own form. *Genres* are, thus, linked to certain communication patterns that the members of a discourse community use and reflect the specific characteristics of the discourse community they belong to (Swales, 1990).

3. ELT approaches to developing writing competencies

3.1. The product approach

The product approach was first described by Pincas in 1982. She sees writing as being the most important part in linguistics. In the product approach there are four steps in learning to write: familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing and free writing. In the familiarization stage learners are made aware of the certain features of particular texts. In the second two stages, the controlled writing and the guided writing, learners are allowed time to practice skills having increased freedom to write until they are ready to pass to the next stage, the free writing stage. According to Badger and White (2000) the drawback of this approach is that process skills, such as planning a text are given an insignificant role and the knowledge and skills that students bring to class are unappreciated. The advantage of this approach is that it recognizes the need for students to be given linguistic knowledge about texts and that one way of learning is through imitation.

3.2. The process approach

Although there are many types of process approaches, they share one common feature and that is they move learners from the steps of generating ideas, collecting data to publishing of finished texts (Tribble, 1996). In this type of approach, writing is seen as predominantly to do with linguistic skills, such as planning and drafting. However, there is less emphasis on linguistic knowledge, such as grammar or text structure.

While producing a piece of writing in this type of approach, there are four main stages: prewriting, where students brainstorm for ideas on the specific topic, composing or drafting, where learners select and structure the results obtained through brainstorming, revising, where learners discuss what they have written and maybe change some things, and the last stage is editing, where learners would edit or proof-read the text (Tribble, 19). According to Badger and White (2000), the teacher's job is to focus mainly on how to facilitate the learner's writing. Thus, providing stimulus or input is not considered as important. The most important aspect in this approach is the writing, regardless of the subject or of the person who does the writing. However, Hedge (1988) classifies four elements of context that a student should focus on before writing: the audience, the creation of ideas, the organization of the text and its purpose. Gee (1997) states that "[t]he process approach generally represented a reaction against the product-based approach whereas the genre approach represented a reaction to the so-called progressivist curriculum" (25). The disadvantage of the process approach is that it mostly shows all writing as being done by the same set of processes, they do not give sufficient importance to the kinds of texts which are produced, and why they are formed (Badger and White, 2000). Thus, this type of approach does not give learners enough input in terms of linguistic knowledge, for the students to be able to write successfully. Its advantage is that it recognizes the importance of having skills involved in writing, and

also acknowledges what learners bring to the classroom which contributes to the development of their writing ability.

3.3 The genre-based approach

Genre-approaches present strong similarities with the product approach, and, to some degree, they are perceived as an extension of the product approach. From a genre based perspective, writing is considered as mostly linguistic, but unlike the product oriented approach, it also emphasizes that writing varies according to the social context in which it is produced. Since not all students know how to operate in different social contexts (Flowerdew, 1993), they have to become aware of which genre goes with which situation or context and how genre exemplars are influenced by various factors in a given situation, such as the subject matter, or the relationship between the writer and the reader. In this approach, learners go through various stages: modelling the target genre, where they are exposed to different examples of the genre they have to produce, the construction of a text with the help of the teacher and, eventually, the independent construction of a text (Cope and Kalantzis, 1993). In short, this type of approach sees writing mostly concerned with knowledge of language, which is tied with the social purpose. In addition, the development of writing is largely based on the analysis and imitation of input in the form of texts provided as examples by the teacher (Badger and White, 2000).

According to Badger and White (2000), this approach has pros and cons. One of its cons is that it undervalues the skills needed to produce a text and sees learners as being mostly passive than active. A more positive aspect is that it acknowledges that writing takes place in and after a social situation, and it is a reflection of that purpose. It also understands that learning can happen through imitation and analysis (Badger and White, 2000). An effective teaching methodology needs to incorporate all the three approaches in order to improve the learners' understanding and development of writing competencies.

3.4 The process of teaching through a genre-based approach

Martin (1999) emphasizes the fact that genre writing as a process of teaching can be conducted through a number of phases. The three main phases he proposes are modelling, deconstruction and language understanding. These phases are better described by Cope and Kalantzis (1993) and also presented by Badger and White (2000), who state that "this wheel has three phases-modelling the target genre, where learners are exposed to examples of the genre they have to produce; the construction of the text by learners and teachers, and finally the independent construction of texts by learners" (155). This statement shows that in the modelling stage, different examples of genres are given to the students, which they analyse so that they discover the nature of its linguistic features, its structures, and its communicative purpose. This is important to know because every genre has its unique linguistic features, structures and it is used for a specific purpose. In the second phase, learners exercise by manipulating the texts they have received. They also modify them according to the relevant use of language. In the final stage, students try to produce a specific genre type using their previously acquired knowledge and understanding.

4. Methodological approach, context and participants

This is a small-scale study, representing the initial stage of a broader research, aimed at combining insights derived from *genre* studies with possible applications in language education. For this initial component of the research a case study approach has been selected, considering that a case study

provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles. Indeed, a case study can enable readers to understand how ideas and abstract principles can fit together. (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007: 272)

Each lesson has a unique context. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) it is the dynamism and uniqueness of the real-life situation which allow you to take snapshots of the reality presented, to investigate the complex interactions of events and human relationships. Building on the genre-based approach described in Muresan (2012), who applied it successfully in an academic writing context in Romania, this study focuses on trying to raise younger learners' awareness of genre features in a secondary school environment, where they learn English as their L2.

The group consisted of 25 students, the majority of which were girls. The participants involved in this study are 13–14 year-old learners, whose first language is not English. Their level of English varies, because every student has his/her own background and language learning experience, but according to the *CEFR* (2001), they have an A2/B1 level of proficiency. They are able to understand various topics but delivered in standard language at a normal speed, and they usually can perform the tasks successfully. When reading something, they can comprehend the message of the text even if they may encounter some unknown words. However, as compared to the receptive skills, when it comes to the productive skills, their proficiency level is towards the lower end of A2/B1. It is more difficult for them to find the appropriate vocabulary to express their ideas, and they can only produce texts which are on familiar subjects. They can chronologically narrate a story or describe their feelings related to an event which can be real or imagined, but they may not know how to build a text so that it could pertain to a specific *genre*.

5. *Piloting a genre-based approach. A case study*

The study consisted in presenting 25 students with various text types through paragraphs which were purposefully selected by the teacher as exemplars of genres that are relevant to their age and English proficiency level. The paragraphs were introduced via reading and writing followed by a session of discussions. The researcher used two different instruments to achieve the aims of the study. First, a **pre-test** in which the students had to answer at first sights and base their answers on their general knowledge, and a **post-test**, in which they had to complete another questionnaire, taking advantage of their knowledge gathered during the feedback session after the first test.

The study had two phases. The first phase consisted of a quiz in which the students had to rely on their background information in order to complete it. After the quiz finished, it was followed by a feedback session. Analysing the results of the first quiz, the decision was taken to teach and explain the genres used in the first quiz. After the students understood them, another test was given. The results of the test came to emphasize the importance of teaching and making a distinction between different genres.

Phase I

The students were given a quiz consisting of (a) a selection of text excerpts which belonged to different genres, and (b) a list of genres (Muresan, 2012). They had to guess and match each excerpt to the corresponding genre in the list. The genres represented through brief excerpts, chosen according to the learners' age and proficiency level, were as follows:

- fairy-tale: an excerpt from Charles Perrault's *Cinderella* (downloaded from the internet);
- horror story: a four-sentence-long horror story (by an unknown author);
- newspaper article: a paragraph taken from an article by Robert D. McFadden, published in *The New York Times*, on 3rd December and updated on the 16th December;
- fable: a fragment from "The Lion and the Mouse" (from Aesop's *Fables* adapted for children);
- motivational speech: a brief excerpt;
- mystery story: a short fragment;
- textbook lesson: an excerpt from a lesson about plants;
- biography: an excerpt from a biographic text about the English poet William Shakespeare.

After they finished that quiz, they had to answer a few questions during the feedback session. Among these questions they had to give reasons and explain which genre was the easiest to discover, why, and which was the hardest and why. They gave various reasons, e.g. the fact that they know fairy tales and biographies from their everyday life, or that they can recognize articles because their parents read newspapers. The hardest to identify was the mystery story and the fable.

Phase II

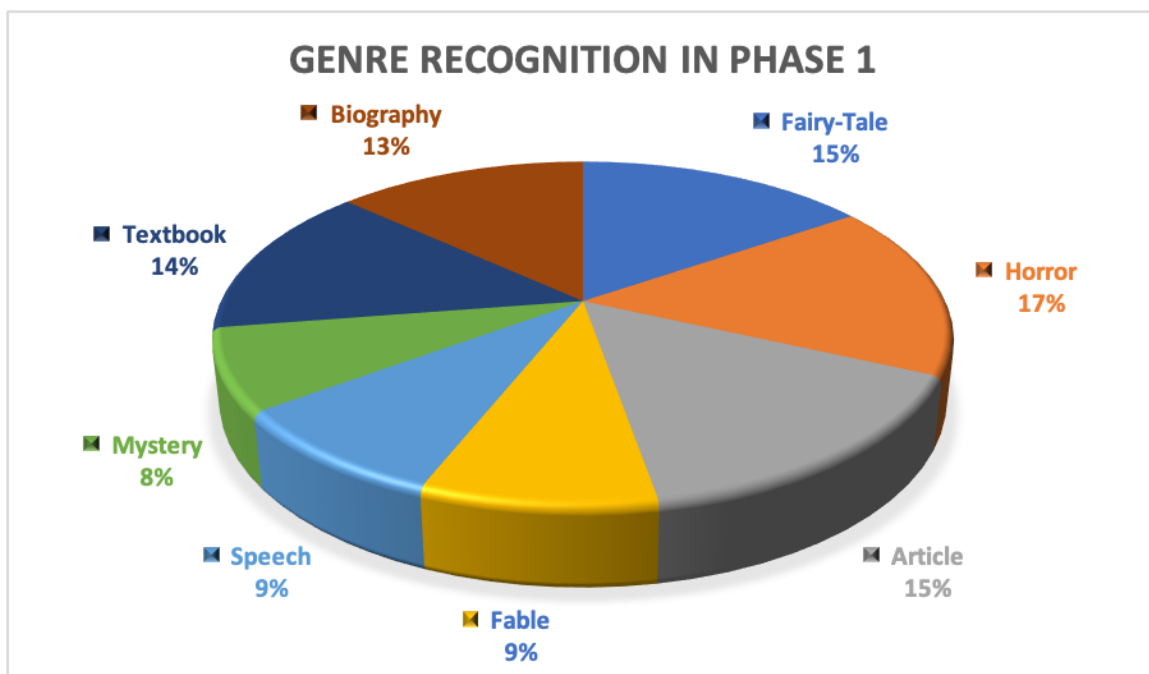
After comparing the results received with the teacher's expectations, the characteristics of the eight genres were presented to the students using genre-based approaches and blended approaches. The genre-based approaches allowed the students to recognize the text as belonging to a family of texts with similar features. Therefore, the students had access to the same fragments and received tips for analysing their structure and establishing their social purpose. After completing this analysis, the students received another quiz in which they had to put into practice what they had learnt. The learning process was thus consolidated by understanding the linguistic rules and consciously applying them.

Phase III

An important activity for their understanding was to build up their own texts. The blended learning approach was used mostly for asynchronous learning because the students were asked to search for more information on the Internet and were given various links where they could work on recognizing the genres.

6. Findings and Discussion

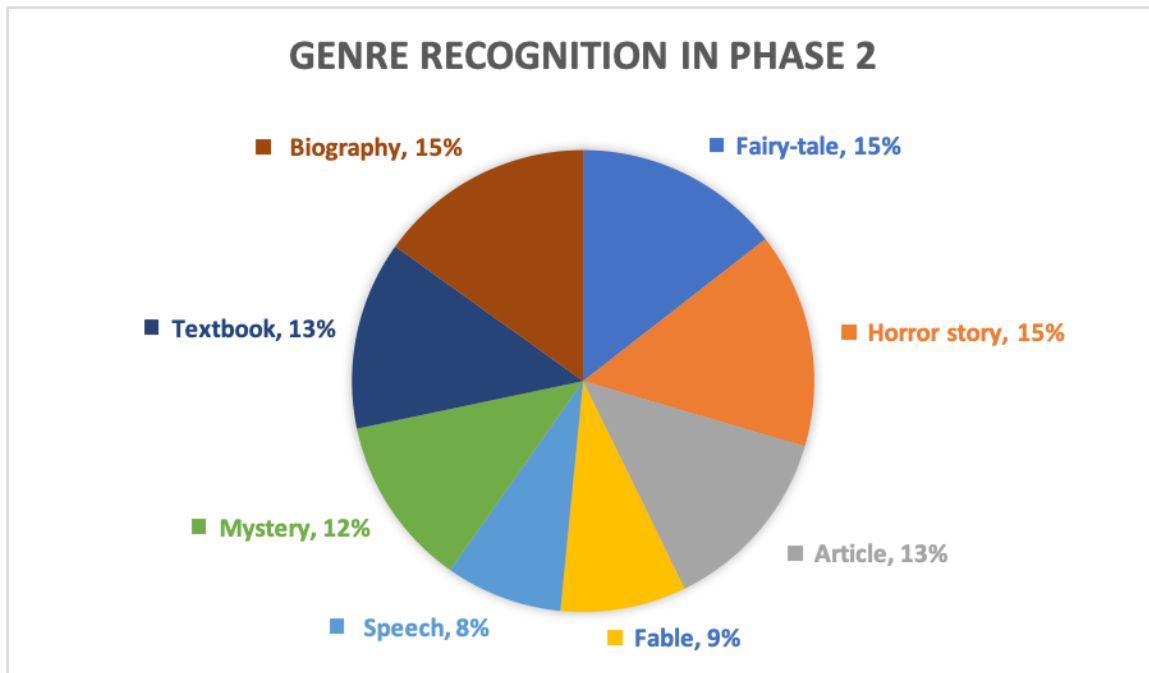
The results of the first phase came to reinforce the need and to raise awareness of the importance of *genre* focused teaching. After analysing the quizzes, the diagram shows the percentage for the recognition of each genre.



During our feedback session, the students explained that the most recognizable genre was the *horror story* because in its 4 sentences it focused on creating a feeling of fear and it also related to supernatural elements such as ghosts. Only 15% of the students were able to recognize the *fairy-tale* and the *newspaper article*. However, the ones who recognized those genres also managed to show that they had

understood their features and what they implied. The *textbook* paragraph was recognized only by 14% of the students. This is possibly due to their educational context and pedagogy adopted by the teacher; these books have different functions and are organized in different ways. The *biography* was recognized by 13% of the students. The last three genres were exceedingly difficult to be recognized by the students because they had not studied them yet. Without prior teaching and learning in this area, the *mystery* genre can easily be confused with the *horror story* genre and this is what happened to most of the students. The *fable* was mostly confused with the *fairy-tale* and the paragraph reflecting a part of a *motivational speech* was confused with a *fable* or a *mystery story*.

The results of the second phase showed an improvement and a better recognition of the genres.



As one can see from the chart, their knowledge concerning the recognition of various genres, has improved. During our feedback session, they stated that the second time it was easier to distinguish between genres, and that they felt confident to construct a text having as a starting point the one that was given to them.

7. Concluding remarks

The results obtained show that genre oriented teaching can help students to become familiar with different genres that are relevant for their age group and level of proficiency. Thus, the more they come into contact with different genres, the better they can recognise them. After those classes, the students had better results at the second quiz related to identifying the genres the texts belonged to. The survey outcomes also suggest that this type of awareness raising activities can help students to improve their productive skills, so as to be able to adjust their writing to the various norms and social rules. There are more things to be taught regarding the various types of genres, so that students would be more aware of them and could improve both their receptive skills and their productive skills. The results presented and gathered in this study must be regarded as suggestive rather than definite, and due to the small scale of the study, they cannot be generalised. The insights derived from this piloting stage are important mainly for my broader research project, in order to help with research design and the planning of the next stages.

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