Effects of Genre-Based Framework on Students' Writing

Chitra Varaprasad
University of Singapore (Singapore)
elcvarap@nus.edu.sg

Abstract

According to Hyland [1] genre has become "one of the most important and influential concepts in language education (p 5). There have been several approaches to genre Hyon [2], Paltridge, [3], Johns [4], however the ESP approach has been widely used, especially with advanced L2 graduate students Johns [5]. Even though, one of the important goals of genre analysis is to improve students' writing, few studies have focused on how students analyze and produce genres in genre-based writing classes Cheng [6]. The studies by Henry and Roseberry [7], Pang [8], Swales and Lindemann [9] did examine students' writing performance. However, they did not provide in depth insights into how the students analyzed the target genres before they engaged in the writing tasks Cheng, [10)]

The objective of this presentation is to explain a genre-based framework for teaching thesis writing, particularly the introduction, and to explore its effect on graduate students' writing performance. A modified version of Swales' ESP genre analysis framework formed the basis for students' engagement with the target genre. In addition, students engaged in tasks from the course textbook "Research Writing: A Workbook for Graduate Students" by Lee, W.Y.; Ho, L. & Ng, E.T.M. [11] for a further application of the concepts taught. Besides, students in their discipline–specific groups also analyzed extracts of thesis introductions for a further reinforcement of these concepts. Students then went on to write the components of the introduction chapter, as part of their writing assignments.

The presentation will be in two-parts. The first part will present the genre-based framework used for teaching and its application to tasks and texts with reference to thesis introductions. In the second part, using the same framework, samples of students' writing will be analyzed to show how students applied these concepts in their own writing. The presentation will conclude by discussing the implications for teaching and learning

1. Introduction

Introductions, which are an integral part of research papers and thesis chapters, are the most challenging to write for international students, especially in terms of organization due to their 'hierarchical and linear pattern of organization' Gupta,[12] (p 51). Flowerdew [13] identified inappropriate structuring of the introduction section of research papers as one of the main problems of these students. If these students have problems writing the introduction section of research papers, it can well be assumed that writing the introduction chapter in their thesis (the focus of this study) can be equally challenging.

Genre analysis, as a form of discourse analysis, has been effectively used by classroom teachers in the contexts of both English for specific and English for specific academic purposes. This study will explain one such approach used on an Advanced Writing Module (ES5002) at the Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore to raise international graduate students' awareness of the organizational and language features of the introduction section of a thesis. It will also explore its effect on students' learning and writing.

2. Genre-based framework

The pedagogical concept of Genre Analysis provided the basis for this study. Swales' (14) CARS (Create a Research Space) model which segments the introduction section into sub-units called 'moves' based on their communicative functions provided the ideas for pedagogy.

3. Modified teaching/learning (TL) pedagogical approach

For the purpose of classroom teaching and learning (TL) of thesis introductions, Swales' CARS model was modified to the acronym CRGP i.e. Context, Review, Gap and Purpose. Swales move of 'establishing a territory' was identified as providing the 'Context', 'establishing a niche' as referring to the 'Review' of literature, while 'occupying the niche' as representing the 'Gap and Purpose' of the study.

4. Rationale and objectives of the study

There have been several approaches to teaching genre Hyon [2] , Paltridge [3], Johns [4], however the ESP approach has been widely used, especially with advanced L2 graduate students Johns [5]. Even though, one of the important goals of genre analysis is to improve students' writing, few studies have focused on how students analyze and produce genres in genre-based writing classes Cheng [6] and provided in depth insights into how the students analyzed the target genres before they engaged in the writing tasks Cheng [7].

This teacher researcher decided to explore the effect of a genre analysis teaching learning (TL) approach used in the classroom to raise students' awareness about organization of thesis introductions. Towards this end, the objectives of this study were:

- to explore students' awareness of the organization of the context, review, gap and purpose sections of the introduction before and after the TL approach
- to obtain insights into students' learning
- to discover if their learning was represented in their writing.

It must be mentioned that though language aspects formed part of the classroom pedagogy, the focus of this study is mainly on organizational aspects.

5. Methodology

The module

This advanced level writing module (ES5002) is designed for international students who are pursuing their doctorate at the National University of Singapore. It is a 48-hour module taught over 12 weeks with 2 two-hour tutorials per week. The focus of the module is on the organizational structure and academic conventions of thesis writing. A text book produced by the previous lecturers of the module at the Centre titled 'Research Writing: A workbook for Graduate Students' [11] provided samples of tasks for classroom activities.

Participants

The 37 participants in this study consisted of students from diverse disciplines such as Engineering, Science, Medicine, Math and Pharmacy. They were all in the fourth year of their 5-year PhD candidature. Students from similar disciplinary backgrounds were assigned to the same group for class activities. 37 students from three tutorial groups participated in this study.

Classroom pedagogy

For the convenience of classroom teaching, the CRGP organization structure of the introduction chapter was divided into three components: (1) Context, (2) Review (3) Gap and Purpose. For each of these components, one two-hour tutorial was devoted to explaining the underlying organizational elements. For teaching the 'Context' component, students were shown through sample texts how information was organised in terms of the 'General area', the 'Sub area' and the 'Key topic'. In the case of 'Review', the teaching focus was on how writer's organized their research review in terms of chronology, or comparing research in terms of methodology or materials used, citation conventions such as information prominent or author prominent. The analysis of sample texts also looked at the use of critical language for evaluating literature. For the 'Gap and Purpose' component, students were taken through the different organizational

elements such as beginning with a 'summary of gaps', followed by the objectives of their study, its significance and scope, and the overall organization of the thesis.

The teaching/learning (T/L) cycle

As a first step in the pedagogy, students were introduced to these different organization elements through a mini lecture, followed by application tasks from the course text book. Next, in groups consisting of 3-4 students from similar disciplines, students analysed an introductory extract of a thesis for all the organizational elements that they were introduced to for each of the three components. Students were given a set of guiding questions for this purpose in the form of a worksheet. This would be followed by a group discussion of their analyses in the classroom in a two-hour workshop. The session generated a lot of discussion and also raised their awareness about the conventions specific to their discipline. They then moved on to writing the first draft of the required assignment.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected at the beginning of each of the 3 mini lectures before students were given any pedagogical input on Context, Review, Gap and Purpose components and after they wrote their first draft, in the form of questionnaires. Students were asked to rate their awareness of the organizational elements on a scale of 1-5 (very poor, poor, average, quite good and very good respectively). Similar post-training data was collected after they had written the first draft of each of the assignments. Students were also asked to comment on the learning they had acquired. Students' draft of their assignments for the three components were also analysed to see if their understanding of organization was reflected in their writing. Of the 37 students who participated in this study, two students did not answer the post-training questionnaire. Data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Students' identification of their levels of awareness before and after training was analysed quantitatively. It addressed the first research objective. Students comments and writing samples provided qualitative input and addressed research objectives two and three respectively

Findings and discussion

To address the first research objective of exploring students' awareness of the organization of the context, review, gap and purpose sections of the introduction before and after the TL approach, students' answers to pre- and post-questionnaires indicating their levels of awareness was computed as percentage scores.In was found that for the 'Context' and 'Gap and Purpose' components of the introduction, almost all students (except 2 students for Context and none for Gap and Purpose), had indicated that they had improved by two or one level. The numbers for the first two levels are similar for both. This confirms that the TL approach had succeeded to a large extent in raising their awareness about the organization of the two components of the introduction. These findings augur well for the approach. However for the 'Review' component, though the overall improvement was 80%, the numbers in terms of improvement by two levels was almost halved (29%), while the numbers had almost doubled (51%) for improvement by one level. Seven students indicated that they did not improve. This could be because for the analysis of this component at the workshop, the literature review section of the thesis extract for the introduction may have been rather brief for them to fully comprehend the organization of this component. Secondly this assignment may have been a bit massive for them as they have to cover extensive ground to survey the literature as opposed to the Context and Gap and Purpose assignments which are more manageable and narrower in scope. It must also be stated here that in spite of the disparity in numbers for the literature review component, students' comments about their learning were generally quite positive.

In answer to the second research objective about students' learning, a comparison of the pre- and post-TL comments showed that students' confidence had been raised after the TL approach. Positive comments such as "Now I have a better idea" (Context; post TL), "Now I know I should include critical evaluation" (Literature Review post-TL) as opposed to "….put down all studies relating to research" (Literature Review Pre-TL), from not being sure "where and how to bring in gap and purpose " (Gap and Purpose Pre-TL) to "I have a clear idea of organization structures" (Gap and Purpose: Post-TL) – all provide ample evidence

of the learning that has taken place. As for the answer to the third objective as to whether the learning is reflected in students' writing, students' writing samples included the organizational elements showing that their understanding had filtered into their writing.

Implications for teaching and learning

Genre as a concept, in particular the ESP approach has been widely used as a pedagogical tool. This study too has shown that the T/L approach used has been an effective tool at the graduate level. Getting students to analyse thesis extracts for their organizational features seems to have enhanced their understanding of how to organize their own writing. In addition to the quantitative figures, students' comments and their writing samples are evidence of the impact such an approach can have. As for the 'Review' component, getting students to analyse an extract of a stand alone chapter of a literature review can perhaps give them a better grasp of the organizational elements. This can perhaps provide the basis for another exploratory classroom-based study to assess its impact.

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