

**AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF THE GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO
THE TEACHING OF EXPLANATORY WRITING**

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ABSTRACT

AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF THE GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF EXPLANATORY WRITING

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The introduction of Science in English in Malaysia has made it important for students to learn how to write effective explanation texts in English. The genre-based approach can be used in teaching students explanatory writing. However, the effectiveness of this approach to explanatory writing has yet to be determined in an ESL context. The aim of this study was to find out the effects of the genre-based approach to writing explanations on students' performance in an ESL secondary school. The samples used in this study were 19 form four engineering students of Sekolah Menengah Teknik Kuching. Participants were taught explanatory writing through the genre-based approach for a period of one month. They produced the explanation genre before and after the experimental treatment. It was found that students' scores increased significantly after undergoing the experimental treatment. An analysis of the written explanatory texts showed that participants made improvements in the areas of generic structure, information structure, field focus, formality and 'cause and effect relationship'. The indication is that the genre-based approach had a significantly positive effect on students' performance. The results of this study have implications on teaching students to cope with the language of science.

ABSTRAK

PENDEKATAN “GENRE-BASED” DALAM PENGAJARAN PENULISAN BERBENTUK PENERANGAN: KAJIAN EKSPERIMEN

Macrina Francesca Stephen Yap

Abstrak. Pengenalan Sains dalam Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia telah menjadikan pembelajaran penulisan berbentuk penerangan penting. Pendekatan “genre-based” boleh digunakan dalam pengajaran penulisan berbentuk penerangan. Walaubagaimanapun, keberkesanan pendekatan ini belum lagi ditentukan dalam konteks ‘ESL’. Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk menguji kesan pendekatan “genre-based” dalam penulisan berbentuk penerangan keatas prestasi pelajar di sebuah sekolah menengah ‘ESL’. Sampel yang digunakan didalam kajian ini ialah 19 pelajar kejuruteraan tingkatan empat dari Sekolah Menengah Teknik Kuching. Pelajar-pelajar didalam kajian eksperimen ini diajar penulisan berbentuk penerangan melalui pendekatan “genre-based” selama sebulan. Mereka telah menghasilkan penulisan berbentuk penerangan sebelum dan selepas “treatment” kajian. Didapati bahawa markah pelajar-pelajar telah meningkat selepas melalui “treatment” kajian. Berdasarkan analisis yang dibuat keatas teks-teks penerangan, didapati bahawa pelajar-pelajar telah menunjukkan penguasaan yang lebih baik didalam aspek-aspek berikut: struktur asas, struktur maklumat, fokus bidang, “formality”, dan ‘perhubungan sebab dan kesan’. Kesimpulannya, pendekatan “genre-based” mempunyai kesan positif keatas prestasi pelajar-pelajar. Keputusan eksperimen ini memberi implikasi terhadap pengajaran bahasa sains.

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

On 6th May 2002, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad announced the possibility of the reintroduction of English as a medium of instruction in Malaysian schools if the general public wanted it. It was later decided that this was unnecessary and English should only be used as a medium of instruction in Mathematic and Science. The proposal was implemented in 2003 and began with students in primary one, form one and lower six. The aim was to improve the English language proficiency of Malaysians in order to keep up with the global technological developments (Noor, 2002) thus upgrading the individual and improving the economy of the country. However, there were worries of whether the introduction of English as a medium of instruction in Mathematic and Science would increase students' proficiency in English or would have a negative effect on students' performance in the Mathematic and Science subject (Lim, 2002). It is crucial for students to have some amount of proficiency in the language if they are to understand the subject matter (when English is used as the medium of instruction). This not only includes the receptive skills but also the productive skills. Students are required to

produce comprehensive factual genres in English, for example, explanations and information reports, in which they are expected to explain phenomena and classify and describe things or living entities. This is not an easy task for many second language learners who have not been immersed in a print-rich environment of factual genres, which have been written in English. Therefore it is fundamental for students to learn how to write these genres effectively in English in order for them to excel in the Science subject. Teachers are the experts that play an important role in teaching students how to write effectively.

Many teachers in Malaysian schools have adopted or adapted the traditional approach or the process approach in their teaching of writing. The traditional writing lesson involves giving students a topic, telling them what is expected in their composition, marking their finished product and telling them to make the necessary changes based on the given comments (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 1991, p.1). The process approach involves making drafts, expanding brief notes while organizing the text and checking for punctuation, grammar and spelling inaccuracies (p.2). Both the traditional approach and the process approach have their flaws. Many students are still unable to produce written texts of a good quality. Some teachers merely ‘test’ instead of ‘teach’ writing thus students do not benefit fully from the writing lessons - the teacher selects a topic and instructs students to write a composition independently based on the selected topic which is then marked and returned to the students for amendments, hence the concept “testing writing”. Little or no emphasis is placed on

the interpersonal relationship between the writer and the reader which actually affects the type of language used in the written text (formal or informal). In addition, the differences between spoken texts and written texts are rarely taken into account (Cullip, 1997, p.3). By neglecting these differences, texts produced lack sophistication and maturity. With these weaknesses, it is not surprising that many students fail to produce good quality compositions. Those that excel are students who are exposed to a print-rich environment of different genres (Cullip, 2000, p.6).

The Genre-Based Approach was developed based on Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional model of language. In this model of language, language is viewed as a resource for making meaning rather than for transferring content (cited in Cullip, 2000, p.4). In the Genre-Based Approach, field (subject matter), tenor (interpersonal relationship) and mode (channel of communication) are taken into account when producing a written text. This is important in writing as when the field, tenor and mode are realized, the writer is conscious of the meaning that is being made and is able to construct an effective text that achieves its purpose.

The Genre-Based Approach to writing that was developed in Australia was introduced to TESL and ESL undergraduates of Unimas. The researcher feels strongly about this approach as it creates awareness of the language used and the meaning made when producing a written text. With the introduction of Science in English, it is important that students learn how to write effective explanation texts in

English. Thus, the aim of this study was to find out if the Genre-Based Approach is effective in teaching students how to write well. This study focuses explicitly on the effects of the genre-based approach to writing explanations on ESL students' performance.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study aims to examine the effects of the genre-based approach to writing explanations on students' performance in an ESL secondary school.

1.3 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to:

- Compare students' performance in explanatory writing before and after the teaching of the genre-based approach, as measured through scores given by the assessors
- Find out the difference in major areas of language used in the students' writing, if there are any.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The main aim of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the Genre-Based Approach in the teaching of writing. The information obtained from this study is significant to TESL and ESL undergraduates of University Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) as it will help them to decide on the approach to adopt in their teaching of

writing. Currently, these undergraduates are exposed to the genre-based approach of teaching and learning as one of their core courses in Unimas. This is a new and a foreign approach to these undergraduates thus they are not certain of its effectiveness in the typical Malaysian classroom scenario. Therefore, the information obtained from this study will help them in the evaluation of this approach.

The outcome of the study will provide a basis for other local universities in Malaysia to consider including this approach as one of their core courses for TESL undergraduates. They will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach in comparison with the approach that is introduced to their undergraduates. By weighing the pros and cons of the different approaches to teaching writing, the selection of an effective approach is made possible.

The introduction of Science in English has made it difficult for many students to construct the intended meaning in their written explanations. Students are dependent on teachers to help them succeed in producing good quality compositions. Consequently, it is vital for teachers of English and Science to teach these students how to produce good quality compositions so that these students will be able to excel, both in the English language and the Science subject. This study may help teachers of the English language and the Science subject to see how they can help their own students in writing explanations. They could adopt or adapt the approach in their teaching and learning sessions if this approach is effective in teaching students

explanatory writing.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Genre:

“The ways people make meaning with one another in stages to achieve their purposes” (cited in Hunt, 1996, p.1)

Explanation:

A factual genre that explains phenomena and how things work. There are two basic types of explanations:

- a. Explaining how
- b. Explaining why (Derewianka, 1990, p.60).

The explanatory texts produced in this study are explicitly focused on how airplane wings help the airplane fly.

Student’s performance:

- a) Scores ranging from 0% -100% for producing an explanation genre on how the airplane wings help the airplane fly.
- b) Producing effective texts in terms of generic structure and language features.

Assessment by markers/assessors:

The assessment is based on the assessors’ perception of the written text. Teachers

without the knowledge of the genre-based approach are able to note the difference between a good and a poor quality explanation text thus the validity of the test scores is enhanced with the usage of assessors without the knowledge of the genre-based approach.

Major areas of language:

Generic structure, information structure, technical terms and cause and effect relationship.

ESL secondary school:

Sekolah Menengah Teknik Batu Lintang, Kuching.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the earlier approaches used in the teaching of writing and discusses some of its limitations in terms of theory and practice. This chapter also presents the theoretical framework for the genre-based approach and explains the teaching and learning cycle involved in the genre-based approach to writing. The final section reviews the empirical studies carried out in relation to the genre-based approach and draws out the similarities between these researches.

2.1 The Critique of the Existing Approaches to Teaching Writing

2.1.1 The Traditional Writing Lesson

The earliest approach to writing was the traditional approach. In this approach, students are given a topic (for example, “The Worst Day of My Life”) and are required to write a composition on it (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 1991, p.1). Students are given a general idea of what is expected in their composition and they proceed with writing the text independently within a limited time. The compositions are marked by the teacher with much focus on grammatical accuracy and students are required to make changes in the compositions based on the correction or comments

made by the teacher.

There are many apparent weaknesses in the traditional writing lesson. A communicative function was lacking where the attitude and feelings of the writer are not taken into account (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 1991, p.1). The focus of this approach is on practice, writing mechanics, vocabulary and a bit of grammar. This is not sufficient in helping students to produce good quality compositions. In writing, the writer has to concentrate on the field, organize ideas and use the appropriate language features to produce a satisfactory composition. It is unreasonable to expect much from students within the limited time as even expert writers may not be able to write well under these circumstances (p.1). The whole process of writing is overlooked and communication is restricted between students and the teacher, and amongst students themselves. The end result of this is poor quality work.

2.1.2 Progressivism / The Process Approach

A different approach, which is known as the process approach (based on progressivism), emerged after the traditional approach and became popular (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 1991, p.2). The process approach, which is in line with the Communicative Approach concentrates on the process of writing. It values differences in learners where opinions and feelings differ with each individual (p.2). It acknowledges that writing takes time and a good piece of writing cannot be

achieved immediately. The process approach involves making drafts and each subsequent draft is expected to be better than the previous draft in terms of organisation and elaboration. The written text is checked for grammatical and spelling inaccuracies before the text is finalized. The teacher plays the role of a facilitator and a resource person. The teacher also comes up with different activities to help the students understand the topic and to familiarize them with the related “*vocabulary and structures*” (p.2). The teacher provides assistance to those who need help and emphasizes editing as part of the writing process.

Progressivism had also received much criticism for its dubious theoretical basis. It does not acknowledge the difference between spoken and written language (Cullip, 1997, p.3).

“Their approach assumes that learning to use the written word is essentially the same process as learning to use the spoken word – what they claim is the process of immersion. Writing is, or can be, just speech written down” (Cullip, 1997, p.3).

The social context is not taken into account. Cullip further stated that the problem with progressivism is that it favours middle-class students (p.2). These students have been exposed to an environment that is rich in different genres. Middle-class students use these genres in their daily lives and are familiar with it. For example, middle-class parents talk to their children in certain ways. They may ask them to do something and provide an explanation for it. Thus, the child subconsciously knows how explanations are given. A father who tucks his child in bed and reads a story to

the child exposes her to the way narrative genres are written. The child subconsciously becomes familiar with how the genre is structured, the features of the genre and the purpose of it. Therefore, middle-class students do well because they are immersed in this kind of environment. Progressivists assume that all students intuitively discover things for themselves. This is not so for all students thus progressivism excludes non-mainstream students. Another problem with progressivism is that it conceals powerful genres especially factual genres. These genres are deemed as powerful because it serves as a tool to achieve important purposes in society. For example disseminating unknown facts to society. New discoveries about the human body or nature are made known to society through these factual genres. Progressivism emphasizes recounts and narratives. It is also devoid of a theory of language to explain what language is and how it works to make meaning.

Based on the critique of the traditional writing lesson and progressivism, it is apparent that these approaches to writing were lacking in terms of theory and practice and a more effective approach with a firm theoretical basis was needed.

2.2 A Systemic Functional View of Language

The theories of language and its implications on classroom practice are discussed by Cullip (2000). Cullip argued for the systemic functional view of language, which is the underlying theory of the genre-based approach.

Cullip mentioned that the ‘common-sense view of language’ portrays language as a way of transferring content (p.2). Its theoretical basis is that ‘content’ and ‘language’ exist dependently of each other. Language is merely a way of communicating existing ideas to one another. The Uncommon-sense view of language, which is known as the “*systemic functional view*” portrays language as a “*resource for making meaning in context*” (cited in Cullip, 2000, p.4)). In this view of language, language, a semiotic system, serves to create meaning through signs (lexicogrammar). Both the meaning (semantics) and lexicogrammar are closely tied and cannot be detached. Language comprises semantics, lexicogrammar and phonology (way of expression). Language is also said to be a social system, in which meanings are built, rebuilt, broken down into smaller parts, negotiated and altered in a social and cultural context. The model of language is illustrated as below:

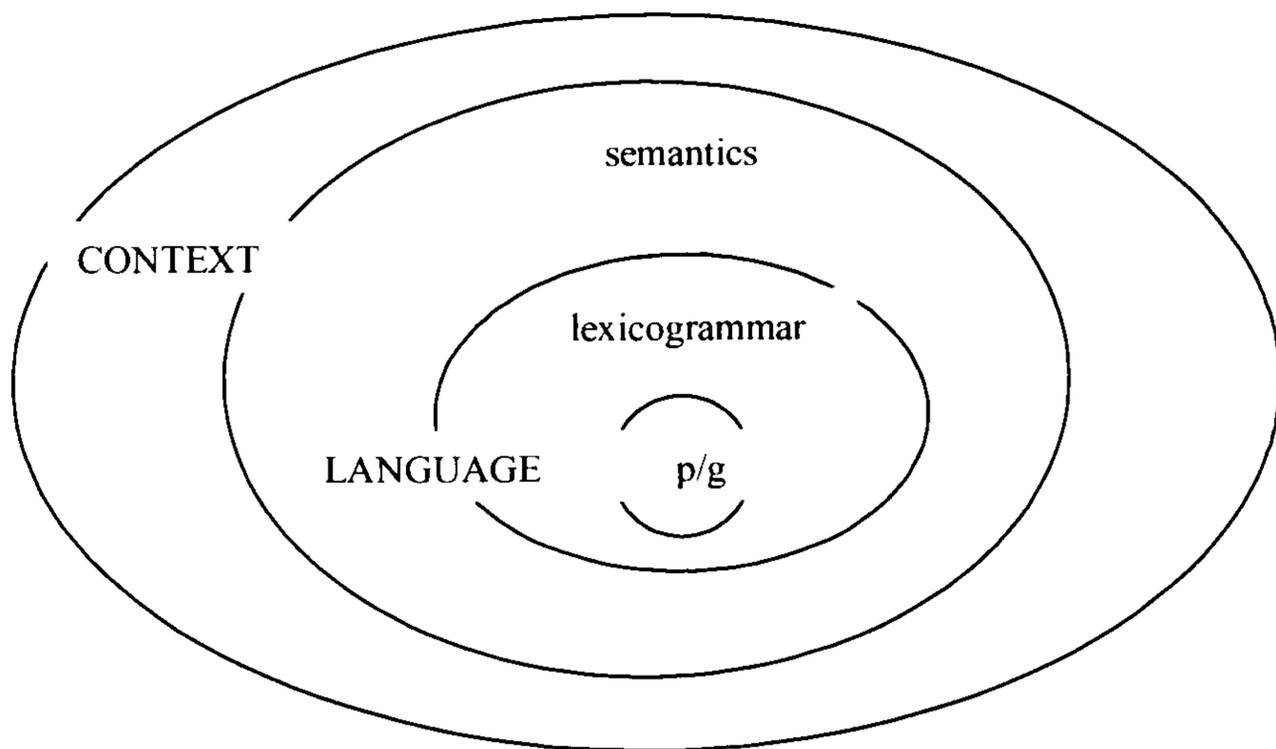


Figure 1: “A model of language in context” (Cullip, 2000, p.4)

The model shows that language is influenced by context.

“Meanings are realized, or coded, in the abstract system of wordings known as the lexicogrammar. Finally, the wordings are physically expressed through speech (phonology) and writing (graphology)” (Cullip, 2000, p.4).

The Uncommon-sense view shows that meaning is not transmitted through the use of wordings but meaning is built in wordings. Therefore, learning is enlarging meaning capabilities (p.4).

With this view of language, classroom practices are viewed differently as well. The teacher no longer transmits knowledge but both the teacher and the students build meaning through negotiation and scaffolding (cited in Cullip, 2000, p.4). Computers are merely tools that can be used to support the teaching and learning process but the computer itself cannot teach as it is incapable of negotiating meaning and scaffolding students (p.5). Academic failure is not solely caused by the students as both the teacher and the students share the responsibility of negotiating meaning (p.5). The teacher also plays a huge responsibility in scaffolding students until they are able to carry out the task independently. Teachers tend to deny responsibility for students' failure as there are students who succeed. This is an understatement as those who succeed may have had a good exposure in a *“print-rich environment”* and have benefited from it (p.6). Another important implication to classroom practice is that subject teachers have to become language teachers. This is due to the fact that language and meaning cannot be learnt in isolation (p.3). Different language choices

are to be made when the context of situation is different. Therefore, when the subject matter is different, students need to be taught how to make different language choices. Consequently, every teacher has to become a language teacher (p.6).

2.3 Genre

The genre theory is explained by Delle Matthews (1995) and the relationship between context and language is discussed by Hammond and Freebody (1994).

“All language is embedded in the context of culture and context of situation”(cited in Matthews, 1995).

The cultural context (way of thinking, behaviour, beliefs and experiences of a particular group in the same culture) restricts the text type and language choices in a particular situation (Matthews, 1995). In different contexts, there are different text and language features that are typically used. Written or spoken texts that share the same functions/purposes and attributes are known as ‘genre’. Examples of ‘genre’ include arguments, narratives, recounts, information reports, explanations and so on. Genres have distinguishable characteristics in which the schematic structures are different. The different stages of the schematic structure in different genres help in achieving the purpose of the genre (Hammond & Freebody, 1994, p.426). Genres vary in different cultures because of the different attitudes, beliefs and experiences.

Based on Halliday’s conceptualization, the context of situation also affects the language choices made (Hammond & Freebody, 1994, p.427). The three elements of

a context of situation are field, tenor and mode. Field refers to the subject matter of the discussion and some examples are sports, social issues, war and the weather. The field affects the vocabulary and grammatical choices made (p.427). For example, in regards to the field of sports, vocabulary such as coach, referee, goalkeeper and captain are likely to be used when discussing the subject matter of football. A football player would be less likely to use words such as parenting, movie or typing when discussing football unless there is a connotative (implied) meaning behind it. Thus, the choice of vocabulary is affected by the field. Tenor, on the other hand, refers to the interpersonal relationship between the writer and the reader or the speaker and the listener. Three categories of relationship have been identified; contact, affect/emotion and power/status (cited in Hammond & Freebody, 1994, p.427). Some examples are employer and employee, mother and daughter, friends, strangers, and so on. The relationship affects the type of language used in any situation. For example, informal language is used between a mother and a daughter as they share a close relationship. In contrast, a more formal language is used between an employer and an employee as they are governed by their professional relationship. The third element, mode, speaks of the channel of communication used, for example face-to-face interaction, telephone communication, news broadcast, electronic mail, and so on. The mode determines the formality of the text, whether it is 'more spoken' or 'more written'. For example, a job interview through a face-to-face interaction would be less formal as compared to a job application letter.