

## Explanations without a purpose? Genre-based instruction and academic writing

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The study examined the structure and language features of explanation texts written by university students who have been taught academic writing through the principles of genre-based instruction. Students enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at a Malaysian university were asked to write an explanation of a natural phenomenon in a text-to-diagram task. The analysis of 100 explanation texts showed that the sequential explanation of how a natural phenomenon occurs inevitably involves an account of the causal connection between the events. Text structure-wise, the students were able to sequence the events and the only weakness was the tendency to omit the statement of text purpose. These results indicate that some elements of conventions of text structure may be more difficult to acquire than language features despite explicit teaching using the genre-based approach. The orderly sequencing of events was achieved through the use of many connectors, predominantly sequential connectors and less causal connectors but the range was limited. The three most commonly used connectors were “then”, “after” and “when”. In their explanations, the students also used some passives as is characteristic of the explanation genre but the construction was often inaccurate. Most of the students used the present tense to show the timelessness nature of the phenomenon but a quarter of the verbs were written in the future tense. The study also found that poor language competence prevents students from writing good explanations.

**Key Words:** English for Academic Purposes, genre-based instruction, explanation, procedural texts.

### 1. Introduction

Mastery of academic discourse is necessary for students to succeed in university education because of the frequent assessment of knowledge and skills in the form of oral presentations and written assignments. In higher education settings, students need to master a number of genres in order to display knowledge and learn the writing norms of the academic discourse community. Working from Biber’s (1988) definition of genre categories, Lee (2001) defined genre as:

a category assigned on the basis of external criteria such as intended audience, purpose, and activity type, that is, it refers to a conventional, culturally recognised grouping of texts based on properties other than lexical or grammatical (co-)occurrence features. (p. 38)