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Genre-based Approach to Academic Writing for Iranian Post-graduate Students

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Abstract

Writing in English is playing major roles in Iranian academic community. While research paper publishing (ISI papers) is increasingly becoming a graduation requirement for Iranian post-graduate students, no course is offered to prepare learners for these requirements. This study aims to examine the effect of genre-based writing instruction on Iranian post-graduate students' writing ability. The instruction drew on ESP school of genre pedagogy that exploits explicit instruction of needed genres through analyses and deconstruction of samples. To attain reliable information both qualitative and quantitative data were used for data analyses including: 1) questionnaires, 2) the students' genre analyses of English abstracts, 3) students' own writing and annotations, and 4) post-instruction interviews. The findings indicate that genre-based writing instruction (GBWI) can improve Iranian post-graduate students' English writing proficiency and increase their genre-awareness, metacognitive genre awareness, and academic criticism.

Key Words: Genre-Based Writing Instruction, ESP School, Genre Awareness, Metacognitive Genre Awareness, Academic Criticism.

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List of Abbreviations

ESP: English for Specific Purpose

GBWI: Genre-based Writing Instruction

NE: New Rhetoric School

RA: Research Article

Chapter I
Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Everyone would agree that writing is an indispensable part of twenty-first century's modern and technological world especially scholarly community. Soon after entering to school, children start to learn the rudiments of writing skill and to realize its importance in their knowledge development. The most primary training from the elementary school concerns teaching learners how to grow and exploit their writing skills to achieve their desired future communicative needs. As they grow up they would find out that its influence is not confined to school and that a good writing skill can affect their personal, out-of-school life as well and its influence can rich beyond school. Especially, those who decide to continue their studies at university keep working on this skill which is inevitably related to general performance and mark in exams, projects, reports, etc. Academic writing is nowadays opening an important stance in academic world and started to be recognized as an independent field of study at the universities all over the world. The diversity and growing number of the research which has taken place in different parts of the world to probe into the nature of writing and to find effective theories or writing method is the living evidence that writing plays a significant role in our world.

1.2. Background of the study

Writing turns into a seriously important issue, when it is supposed to be performed in a foreign language. What makes this more challenging is the fact that English is a foreign language for most of the writers or to-be-writers. Cho (2009), also, after studying writing problems of Korean graduate students and faculties found out that low English writing ability of graduate students were due to EFL setting of Korea:

> Scholars in EFL setting, like Korea, are likely to suffer more difficulty writing and publishing research papers in English than those in ESL and L1. (p. 237)

There would be no doubt that gaining academic writing skills in a foreign language needs lots of effort, fund, time and sources. Salager-Meyer (2008) refers to formerly mentioned problems of academic publishing as "discursive factors" which concerns difficulty of writing and publishing papers in English, and the latter ones "discursive factors". What she is wisely aware of is the fact that ",firstly, non-discursive factors very frequently go hand in hand with poor linguistic skills … and, secondly, that poor linguistic skills frequently go hand in hand with paper rejection " (p.125). She considered center-periphery dichotomy, the role of nation state, and world power structure as other major factors playing significant roles in academic publishing. Other similar studies on publishing have also counted several barriers, whether discursive or non-discursive, to academic publishing in English. Jaroongkhongdach, Todd, Keyuravong, and Hall (2012) summarize the problems:

> lack of time; lack of resources or fund; lack of connection with academic community in core countries; bias against scholars from peripheral countries; parochialism (i.e., "failure to show the relevance of the study to international community" Flowedew, 2001, p.135); problems with language; and problems with literature review and discussion sections of research articles. (p.195)

Duszak, A. and Lewkowicz, J. (2008) considered different language patterns as well as language external factors (such as lack of access to up-to-date publications and technology or insufficient funds) and "the growing interdisciplinary of research in general" as main barriers facing academics.

Academic communities do not make any effort to hide the significant role writing has played in universities' development and acknowledge the role of academic writing by prompting research-oriented scholarships and funds. The number of the published research in international academic journals may be used as a criterion for judging the rate of particular university among other competitive ones and more possibly can earn academic recognition for the staff of the given university. Therefore, it is understandable why faculties place such a great emphasis on international publication and English academic writing courses for post-graduate students all over the world. English, the lingua franca of scientific world, is the dominant language of publication and most of the research which has been done in different countries tends to be published in English to attract wider readership from different parts of the world.

1.3. Statement of the problem

As already mentioned, writing and publishing in English is a hard task for those students whose native language is not English. The lots of research have taken these problems into consideration and have confessed that the ability to write in English is the passport to enter successfully to academic world:

> Publishing in English seems to be increasingly important, with even some of the respondents whom have not yet published in English aspiring to do so in order to enter the supranational community of the academic world. English is thus seen as the key to success, to becoming recognized as an academic of worth. It is also seen as avenue for enhancing one's resume and gaining promotion. (Duszak, A. & Lewkowicz, J., 2008, p.115)

Salager-Mayer (2008) sees poor English writing ability as the main reason behind the shortcoming developing countries are facing:

> Understanding the reasons for the dearth of scientific productivity from developing countries is not only of academic interest, but essential for promoting the economic and social development of these marginal regions of the world for which the 'culture of science' must be one of their prime objectives if they want to have a chance to overcome hunger, poor sanitation, and illiteracy stop being the victims of exploitation (see Nehru's quote at the beginning of this paper). Indeed, the strong correlation between science and technology development, on the one hand, and economic development, on the other hand, is very well documented (e.g., King, 2004; Man et al., 2004). Furthermore, science, technology, industrial development and power (political, military, and economic) form a circle whose individual components stimulate the others. (pp. 122-123)

Having in mind all the impacts of international scholarly writing and publishing on well-being of developing countries necessitates a solution which could bolster these countries out of this disadvantaged situation. A well-though, appropriately chosen course of English Writing may prove helpful in preparing EFL learners appropriately for future science distribution.

1.4. The purpose of the study

Recently genre theory and pedagogy has been attracting attention of many discourse-concerned researchers from all over the world. For example, Hyon (1996), Hyland (2002, 2003, & 2007), and Johns (1997; & 2011) can be mentioned as few among lots of research done on genre theory and it may not be exaggeration if are called the landmarks of

literature on genre theory. These have tried to show why genre theory is the appropriate choice among other theories and methods. In a similar attempt, this study aimed to investigate whether genre pedagogy can fit the Iranian post-graduate students' needs for being trained in English academic writing task.

1.5. The significance of the study

Not having access to suitable course to improve their writing papers in English, post-graduate students may face a challenge to meet their academic requirements. Although they are aware of the prime importance of publication in English in nowadays world of "publish or perish", they have to make their way out of this arduous situation by trial and error**.** On the other hand, the nowadays impulse of academic publication leaves no other choice but a great effort to keep up with the race of scientific and technological development for peripheral countries like Iran. In order to avoid lagging behind of scientific world, learning to communicate and publish in English is getting more importance day by day, since English, according to Salager-Meyer (2008), is a key which allows chances of connecting two worlds of center (i.e., developed countries like UK, US, and Japan) and periphery (developing countries like Iran, Thailand, etc.). Nevertheless, the dearth of Iranian research publication in English journals can cause great impediments to the development of our academic community. So, considering the current condition and what was mentioned above, it seems that genre-based writing instruction, to a great extent, suits the needs of academics and could be enlightening to Ministry of Science and Education whose main concerns nowadays are competing with and finding a niche in scientific and technological world.

1.6. Research questions and hypotheses

The study tries to find answers to the following Questions:

RQ1: Can genre-based writing instruction improve Iranian post-graduate students' English academic writing abilities in terms of genre awareness?

RQ2: Can genre-based writing instruction improve Iranian post-graduate students' English academic writing abilities in terms of metacognitive genre awareness?

RQ3: Can genre-based writing instruction improve Iranian post-graduate students' English academic writing abilities in terms of cross-genre awareness?

RQ4: Can genre-based writing instruction improve Iranian post-graduate students' English academic writing abilities in terms of critical genre awareness?

And the following research hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Genre-based writing instruction can improve Iranian post-graduate students' English academic writing abilities in terms of genre awareness.

H2: Genre-based writing instruction can improve Iranian post-graduate students' English academic writing abilities in terms of metacognitive genre awareness.

H3: Genre-based writing instruction can improve Iranian post-graduate students' English academic writing abilities in terms of cross-genre awareness.

H4: Genre-based writing instruction can improve Iranian post-graduate students' English academic writing abilities in terms of critical genre awareness.

It needs to be mentioned that RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 are sub-components of RQ1.

1.7. Definition of key terms

1.7.1. Genre-based writing instruction (GBWI)

According to Yayli (2011, pp. 121-122):

> Genre-based writing instruction emphasizes that features of similar group of texts and the contexts in which they are created or used are in close relationship with each other; therefore, teachers and students must always be mindful of the link between those features and the expectations of the reader in any writing activity. Also, in classroom applications, students' writing consists of multiple writing samples, written over time, representing students' abilities and progress (Hyland, 2004).

1.7.2. Genre awareness

According to Johns (2011, p. 57), genre awareness "refers to examining the relationships among texts, their rhetorical purposes, and the broader contexts in which texts from a genre may appear."

1.7.3. Metacognitive genre awareness

Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) defined metacognitive genre awareness as "metacognitive processes that have as their object knowledge of genre, discourse, and rhetorical aspects of academic texts" (p.96)

1.7.4. Recontextualization

According to Cheng (2007), recontextalization means "learners' abilities not only to use a certain generic feature in a new writing task, but to use it with a keen awareness of the rhetorical context that facilitates its appropriate use". (p.303)

1.7.5. Cross-genre awareness

Cross genre awareness refers to "a transfer of skills of recontextualization across different genres requiring awareness of different purposes, different contexts and different lexico-grammatical features." (Yayli, 2011, p.127)

1.7.6. Academic criticism

As cited in Cheng (2006, p.281-282):

> Academic criticism (AC) can be broadly defined as a statement which reflects a discrepancy between the stance of a researcher/author, on the one hand, and that of another researcher or the discourse community as a whole, on the other (Salager-Meyer & Alcaraz Ariza, 2003).

Also, Hyland (2003a) referred to the same concept when he said: "learning about genres does not preclude critical analysis but provide a necessary basis for critical engagement with cultural and textual practices."(p.25)

1.8. Organization of the thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter one, Introduction, starts with a short introduction to the importance of writing and publishing, especially in English, in academic world. Then, there is a statement of problem followed by the purpose and

significance of the study. Finally, research questions and hypothesis were presented followed by the definition of key terms.

Chapter two, Literature review, provides a background of previous studies done in writing and different methods of writing as well as the three schools of genre which were discussed in detail and their similarities and differences were mentioned. The rest of the chapter elaborates on the how genre pedagogy have been studies and what results were achieved in literature.

Chapter three, Methodology, explains the procedure of the study, the way participants were collected, the materials used for the course, the kind of framework for instruction, and, subsequently, the method of data collection and analysis.

In Chapter four, Data analysis and Results were presented and discussed by focusing on three focal students who participated in the study. The tables, figures, and the excerpts from learners' tasks were also included for illustration of learners' progress and supporting the findings. Finally, the findings of the study will be discussed.

Chapter five concludes the thesis and includes the pedagogical implications and the limitations of this thesis. At the end of this chapter suggestions for further research are made.