Can genre-based instruction be *'promising'* for transferability?

Wen-hsien Yang

Department of Applied English

National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism, Taiwan

yangwenhsien@mail.nkuht.edu.tw

Abstract

The application of genre-based writing instruction (GBWI) has increased many ESP practitioners' interest in the teaching of writing. The effectiveness of GBWI is starting to be acknowledged. However there is a gap in the research as to whether ESP writers are able to build genre awareness and transfer this awareness to the writing of other genres. Hence, this study investigates whether 24 ESP learners in an EFL setting can build contextual and linguistic awareness of genre. It also explores whether or not learners were able to compose another genre, drawing on their previous knowledge of genre analysis after completing a genre-based writing course on hospitality and tourism. The results confirm these ESP writers' acquisition of genre knowledge and the transferability of such knowledge to other genres, when provided with 'scaffolded instruction'. The study suggests that ESP writing pedagogy can be genre-based and conducted through explicit instruction on genre analysis.

Introduction

Genre analysis, according to Hyland (2004a), is a school of discourse analysis that explores specific uses of language. It focuses upon describing how people use language to engage in specific communicative events with members in discourse communities (Swales 1990). Such analysis may indeed be helpful for language education. Genre analysis not only studies how a text is structured at linguistic and rhetorical levels but also attends to the social factors which determine its particular rules and conventions at a contextual level. In other words, genre analysis connects language with contexts, which "has practical relevance for teachers by offering useful ways of handling conventionalized aspects of texts" (Hyland 2004a: 195). Furthermore it offers language educators opportunities to design activities to raise learners' genre awareness and potentially make them better writers.

Genre-based approaches could also be beneficial to writing pedagogy as some authors (e.g. Hyland ibid; Paltridge 2001) propose, in the following ways:

1 They stimulate writers' interest: enhancing their confidence to cope with specific genres.
2 They offer student writers explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts.
3 They help writers acquire the specialist culture of a particular genre.
4 They provide writers with the knowledge and skills they need to communicate successfully in particular communities, providing access to socially powerful forms of language.

In sum, genre-based writing instruction (GBWI) is targeted, relevant and supportive for ESP writers, helping them to achieve communicative purposes in social contexts. Additionally GBWI also gives language educators a central role in preparing them to teach L2 writing: providing advice for them on the development of curriculum materials and activities for writing classes (Hyland, 2007).

The effectiveness of GBWI

GBWI has been used to research aspects of both EAP and EOP. This has led to suggestions of its positive effects upon the teaching of writing in terms of both *quality* and *quantity* (Lee and Chen 2009). Moreover, in response to any critique of GBWI being overly-prescriptive, issue for researchers remains as to whether learners can transfer their genre knowledge to other writing tasks. The results are rather equivocal. In L1 settings, some research on college compositions has found that the transferability of knowledge generated in the earlier writing courses to the next writing tasks is either difficult or inhibited (James 2009). Furthermore, GBWI does not teach students *how to write* but teach them *about writing* instead (Wardle 2009). Other studies like So (2005) argue that in L2 settings genre transferability can truly happen if writers' linguistic awareness of genres is developed with explicit instruction. Additionally Yayli (2011) reports of learners at a Turkish university building cross-genre knowledge by developing re-contextualization, and thus becoming became increasingly positive about GBWI.

'Transferability' in EFL settings

It is difficult to draw any conclusions about transferability following GBWI from these divided results. Nevertheless, most previous studies have been in English, in L1 and L2 settings. Conditions in Asian EFL countries like Taiwan are still rarely investigated. It is possible that GBWI is still not popularly implemented in English classrooms in those settings; accordingly, any discussion about genre transferability after GBWI has been somewhat limited. In addition, due to the apparently low writing achievement of polytechnic university students in Taiwan, as shown by the statistics (LTTC 2011), the educational authorities concerned have been encouraging the implementation of ESP to replace EGP in these vocationally-orientated higher institutions. This change motivated me to implement GBWI in my writing course, in order to examine its claimed effectiveness and the likelihood of transferability in such an under-exploited setting. The following reports the findings of this project.

The study setting and procedures

Twenty-four final-year EFL undergraduates had previously enrolled for an ESP course, 'Practical Writing for Hospitality and Tourism' at the National Polytechnic University of Taiwan. The university is one of the few national polytechnic universities where the disciplines are more profession-orientated: largely different from the traditional research-orientated ones. Compared to the English learners in the latter universities or in high schools, the proficiency level of the polytechnic university students' English writing has always been the lowest (LTTC 2011). However, the participants in this present research project were all English majors with experience of learning English for at least ten years or more, and who were training as English professionals to work in the hospitality and tourism (H&T) industries after graduation. This university is also renowned for its specific curriculum structure i.e. the requirement to do a job placement either domestically or abroad for one year in the third year. Half of the participants had their placements in the UK while the rest had theirs in Canada, Singapore, Macau and Taiwan.

It was my responsibility, as the course lecturer and researcher of this current study, to design the content of this 18-week genre-based writing course. After carrying out an initial needs analysis in accordance with the university's overall educational aims, the aim was for the students to compose three pieces of informative and promotional texts about the hospitality and tourism industries.

The course was divided into three equal cycles with identical procedures. After each cycle, the students had to submit brochure texts on hotels, tourist attractions and holidays respectively, focusing on providing information and promoting products, with the layouts arranged like authentic ones. In other words, the texts were devised to combine the dual purposes of description and persuasion.

The implementation of each cycle generally adapted Bhatia's (1993) framework for conducting a genre analysis. First of all, authentic hotel brochures, previously collected in the UK, were provided to read in class. Then, the students worked together with me to answer a number of questions about the targeted genre in order to identify its particular contextual characteristics. These questions were adopted from Paltridge (op.cit.) in respect to: the gist; the purpose; the setting; the tone; the author;

the intended audience; the relationship between the author and the audience; the conventions; the assumptions of shared cultural knowledge and the implications of shared understandings of a particular genre. Afterwards, the students read the examples again before being helped to identify the obligatory and optional moves/steps (Swales op.cit.) that a hotel brochure with the purposes of informing and promoting should include.

One week later, the students submitted their first drafts. On the one hand, the students' texts, used as the study corpus, were then imported to 'Wordsmith' in order to generate a wordlist and a keywords list, as related to the reference corpus, composed of a collection from the authentic texts. On the other hand another authentic keywords list for the hotel brochures was generated using British National Corpus (BNC) as the reference corpus and the authentic texts as the study corpus, instead. These latter keywords constitute exactly the lexis applied in authentic hotel brochures. Learners should be aware of this and encouraged to use it for their particular purposes. Then, the differences in the lexis, the grammar, and the moves used, between the students' texts and the examples were explicitly compared and discussed. During the discussions, not only were the keywords used in the authentic contexts examined, but students also learnt about how the hotel industry operates in the UK.

Then, the students revised their first drafts, and re-submitted the following week. The analysis procedure was repeated twice; i.e. each final text had been revised twice before being accepted. The purpose of these activities was to explicitly build genre knowledge about both the language and the context applied to this particular genre and to develop learners' reflections about genre-analysis. The other two cycles followed the same procedures.

Online summative assessment

In the final week of the course, an online test was designed to assess a) whether the learners were fully equipped with the linguistic, content and contextual knowledge about this specific genre, and b) whether they were able to write another genre based on the genre knowledge they had acquired. Thus, the test consisted of two main parts:

The first part included 15 multiple-choice questions identifying the appropriate words used in H&T contexts, together with five open questions involving constructing sentences with the provided keywords, which examined learners' linguistic and contextual knowledge about H&T. Additionally this part also required the students to watch on-line footage of the presentation of a new hotel, in order to identify the obligatory and optional moves of this spoken genre. Then, each student was required to write a similar transcript, briefly presenting a new hotel.

The second part contained to start with a number of multiple-choice questions together with two samples of dissertation acknowledgements. The aim was to elicit learners' previous knowledge in order to prepare them for writing formal academic acknowledgements: expressing their gratitude for assistance received during their university education. Obviously, the aim of this section was to gauge the transferability of previously-acquired genre knowledge. The test was reviewed by one NNS colleague and then piloted by one graduate before being carried out formally. The time allowed for completing the whole assessment was a maximum of two hours.

Findings

As this assessment was intended to investigate students' knowledge of informative and promotional genre and the possibility of transferability, the results are divided into two parts to answer these two questions, and to investigate students' construction of both micro and macro knowledge of genre.

Questions one to five required the participants to identify the *meaning* of the H&T keywords provided. This means the students had to decide in which contexts the words would be used and to show how they are used. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1: Percentages of choices & acceptable constructed sentences

	Hotels	Holidays	Tourist Attractions	None of them	Acceptable Sentences
1 guaranteed	42	35	23	0	50
2 exclusive	36	38	26	0	79
3 precaution	15	43	38	5	71
4 situated	36	29	34	0	67
5 multi-purposes	18	45	38	0	54

Indeed, nearly all the keywords offered could be possibly utilized in the three contexts provided that they make sense to readers. Take the word 'situated' for instance, here are some acceptable examples:

1 The hotel is *situated* in the centre of Orchard Road. (*Hotel or holiday brochures*)
2 The London Eye is *situated* in the centre of London and is one of the most famous landmarks in the world. (*Tourist attraction or holiday brochures*)

Inevitably, the students wrote unacceptable sentences. For example,
1 We have *multi-purposes* to make the tourists [can] have good time in our journey.
2 We *guaranteed* the whole hospitality items in this tour, if not, we can refund it.
The next five questions similarly tested if the learners can identify the non-keyword among four options. With these questions, the students needed to consider whether the words would occur frequently in H&T brochures, relying heavily on their contextual knowledge of the genre.

Questions 11 to 15 required the test-takers to identify the appropriate keywords as fitting the sentences. This section aimed largely to assess the students' lexical knowledge with the semantic clues provided. Some sample results are listed in table 2. The average for correct choices is 62 per cent. The responses to question 12 lower the average dramatically, due to its usage having not been explicitly highlighted in the instruction.

Table 2: Percentages of key word choices within sentences

11 The accommodation fare is based on _____.			
p.p.p.n., 68	ATOL, 17	valuables, 13	rebooking, 4
12 _____ you know Alton Tower is the second largest theme park in the world?			
Do, 92	*Did, 8*	Have, 0	If, 0

13 With other experiences on offer at the London Eye, why not _____ yourself and

some friends with a Beauty Capsule with the Powderpuff Girls and ____in a luxurious Green & Black's Chocolate tasting Capsule?			
pamper,	*indulge,* bathe, experience,	include, immerse,	spoil, combine,
79	13	8	0

Note: Italics indicate correct choices. Numbers affixed to words indicate the percentages. Words are ranked from the highest to the lowest choices.

Next, the students had to identify the obligatory and optional moves/steps as well as the possible sequences of the moves in a spoken genre: that of presenting a new hotel, after watching authentic on-line footage of this. In addition, they also needed to write a similar short transcript of their own. This task examined their ability to analyse the same genre but using a different medium. Tables 3 and 4 display their choices.

Table 3: Percentages of identifying the obligatory/optional moves in a spoken hotel presentation

Moves/Steps	Obligatory	Optional
1 The attractive room price	9	10
2 The distinguished history of the property	10	6
3 The good location of the property	6	12
4 The famous chain brand of the hotel	10	6
5 The wide-ranging selection of F&B service	7	9
6 The well-known designer of the property	12	5
7 The world-class chefs in the restaurants	11	4
8 The number of the rooms	4	13
9 The features of the rooms	6	13
10 The outdoor activities nearby the hotel	8	6
11 The highlighted facilities inside the hotel	6	13
12 The ideal choice for a special occasion	11	5

Note: N=24; n1=0.7%, n24=17%

Table 4: Percentages of identifying 'the *impossible* moves/steps structure'

Moves/Steps Sequence	N	%
10. 1. 8. 7. 3.	17	71
2. 3. 8. 11. 1.	5	21
1. 3. 9. 6. 5.	2	8
3. 4. 8. 9. 5.	0	0

Note: Italics indicate correct choice.

Evidently, most students regarded moves 3, 8, 9 and 11 as obligatory and moves 2, 4, 6, 7 and 12 as optional ones. However, there was divided opinion regarding move 1. This suggests that room prices are not usually written in brochures but occur in spoken text due to the immediacy and differing circumstances of enquiries. Students' preferences for the various moves affected their transcripts; e.g. all of them gave information about the location and facilities and promoted the property by highlighting its features and services. In addition, more than 70 per cent of the respondents were able to distinguish unlikely sequences of moves. This reflects students' correct knowledge of the structure.

The students' performances in this first part were satisfactory, especially as this was their first time writing following GBWI. Hence the results can generally confirm the

effectiveness of using GBWI to some extent. This implies that, the majority of the learners are able to exercise their genre knowledge at linguistic and contextual levels enabling them to complete most questions correctly.

Scaffolding learners for transferability

The second part of the online assessment included:

1) 14 multiple-choice questions accompanying two academic acknowledgements, for the test-takers to identify the contextual, semantic, and linguistic characteristics step by step. These purposefully-designed questions acted as 'scaffolded instruction' (Bruner 1966) for students for the next writing task.
2) Participants' own written academic acknowledgements; a genre which had not been taught in their previous writing courses.

The results show that except for identifying the tone and keywords of acknowledgements, the students had no great difficulty with analysing another genre. This implies that they had relied on previous knowledge of how to analyse a genre in order to answer the questions. The issue of whether academic acknowledgements should be formal or personal is not very clear. The students divided choices in their writing reflect this. Next, I adopted Hyland's (2004b.) model for organizing academic acknowledgements to analyse how compatibly the students' writings could follow the established one obligatory *thinking move* and two optional *reflecting* and *announcing moves*. Table 5 shows the results of this.

Table 5: Percentages with acknowledgements of each move mentioned

1 *Reflecting*	33
2 *Thanking*	
Step 2.1 presenting participants	50
Step 2.2 thanking for academic assistance	91
Step 2.3 thanking for resource	45
Step 2.4 thanking for moral support	87
3 *Announcing*	
Step 3.1 accepting responsibility	0
Step 3.2 dedicating the thesis	0
*4 Promising	*33*

Note: Moves 1, 2 & 3 are identified by Hyland (ibid.); move 4 is generated by this study.

Compared to Hyland's corpus (2004b), the average length of the undergraduate student text is far longer than masters' dissertation acknowledgements (DA) i.e. 181.4 vs. 117.0 words/per text, but close to doctoral DA i.e. 181.4 vs. 204.5 words/per text. It is surprising that the undergraduates were able to write longer acknowledgements than the master postgraduates, confirming the increased *quantity* of genre writing (Lee and Chen 2009). Regarding the three moves used in the students' texts it is not surprising that the *announcing move* was not applied for apparently this move is mostly found in post-graduate dissertations. However, the present study, instead, generated a new optional *promising move*, which is not found in Hyland's framework (2004b). This move refers to a) the *promises* the writers made for the future to return assistance received, and b) the *promising* achievements they avowed in acknowledgement of any assistance given. The following are some examples of this

new move:

1 I will make sure [to] have a good accomplishment and come back with honour in the future.
2 I will do my best to take care of myself to repay all the years they have spent and rais[ed] me up.
3 Without all of you, I can't finish my graduat[ion] with such a significant result.

This *promising move* may originate from firstly, the differences between studying an undergraduate and a postgraduate programme, and secondly, from the contextual factors in a Confucian society, e.g. filial piety (to parents), and recognition of where achievement (or assistance) has come from.

Next, the 24 acknowledgements were simultaneously graded by one American and one British colleague to judge whether or not the texts are acceptable based on the criteria provided. Table 6 displays these results.

Table 6: The average scores of 24 students' acknowledgements

	Linguistic-level	Semantic-level	Contextual-level
Rater A	6.95	5.83	6.20
Rater B	4.95	5.29	5.70
Average	5.95	5.56	5.95
Spearman's rho	.667**	.541**	.689**

Notes: (1) Linguistic-level includes wording, grammar, structure & mechanics; semantic-level includes content, organisation & style; context-level refers to the communicative purpose. (2) **>.01 significant positive correlation between the two raters' scores. (3) Scores range from 0 to 10.

Generally speaking, the students' performance reached a satisfactory point of 6.0, acceptable enough in terms of the first trial of this unfamiliar genre. Comments from two NS colleagues mainly focused on whether the appropriate words and phrases for appreciation were applied and if gratitude was specified to actual people and acts of assistance. The major problem lies with the fact that some writers did not specify *where* their gratitude should be applied, but merely thanked 'anyone' or 'many people' who had offered assistance. In conclusion this part can confirm that genre transferability did work successfully to some extent, though more extensive and explicit instruction is still required to make the writing more communicative.

Discussion and suggestions for teaching ESP writing

The two questions framing this research are:
1) Can ESP learners improve their writing skills through GBWI?
2) Can learners transfer their genre knowledge to other genres?

It appears that these questions can be confidently answers to some extent in this project. However the assessment tool used is not standardized, but may be adapted for future inquiries.

First of all, this present research confirms the *effectiveness* of genre-based approaches. Through well-planned genre-based approaches, learners can be sensitized to the

procedures of genre analysis, which is still rarely adopted in Taiwan. During this process learners not only acquired the analytical skills needed for examining contextual, semantic and linguistic topics of one particular genre before writing, but also improved their ultimate writing performance and proficiency. Additionally, what the students have learnt in this ESP course not only highlights the improvement in their writing in terms of content and language, but has increased their understanding of a profession and industry, i.e. H&T in this study. The awareness of genre helps learners approach a discipline from both narrow and broad angles. The purposefully-designed activities in classroom and the online assessment allow writers to produce texts from a macro-level to a micro-level, gradually and in a way which constructs both top-down and process approaches to writing in the classroom.

Secondly, in addition to confirming the transferability of genre knowledge, the results also contradict the arguments that genre-based approaches can be conformable, formulaic, mechanical, rigid, restrictive, and prescriptive (Dudley-Evans 1998). It is hard to deny that a genre has inevitably got to follow certain rules and conventions in order to achieve its specific communicative purposes in a community. However, as Hyland (2004a) argues, in addition to its 'constraints', a genre also allows 'choices' within the particularities. Indeed, a genre text can be created flexibly but cannot go beyond its parameters under its specific framework. Hence, in this study a new move, '*promising*' was generated helped by the flexibility of the genre, the writers' creativity and the instructor's encouragement.

This paper is not arguing that genre-based approaches should be treated as a panacea to immediately remedy EFL learners' writing problems. Rather, genre-based pedagogy should be purposefully applied firstly to general usage and then to more specific and relevant contexts.

Initially a needs analysis should be conducted to identify what genres could be included. Students are more likely to be motivated to write when encouraged to link what they write to what is relevant and useful for their work. Next, rather than designing a single-skill-focused course, the writing course should be integrated with other language skills to be more holistic. For example, L2 writing usually involves much pre-reading; consequently reading skills can be taught and learnt on a writing course too. Once the aims and the scope of the course have been established instructors should seek out examples in English of the specific genres. These can be authentic texts used by NS or *lingua franca* ones used by NNS, depending on the writers' context.

A step by step learning plan for students could be as follows:

1 Students read the sample texts.
2. Students analyse the genre from contextual, semantic, and linguistic perspectives with the instructor's help.
3. Simultaneously, the instructor and students work together to identify the obligatory and optional moves/steps of the genre.
4. Students compose texts of their own.
5. Students-students and teachers-students conferencing activities can be organized to discuss the similarities and differences between examples and students' writings.
6. The teacher should intervene intentionally if the overall purpose and conventions of

the genre of text cannot be readily ascertained.
7. Eventually students revise the drafts and resubmit, until the texts are acceptable.

Ultimately assessment can be used to test whether students' writing performance has improved and to determine whether genre transferability is actually happening.

This plan may be applied, not only for improving writing skills but also for other language skills, reflection and analytical skills. As Ur (1996) argues, genre-based approaches include the features and strengths of other types of approaches such as product- and process-based approaches. This makes GBWI particularly worthwhile for trial, especially when English writing tasks can seem irrelevant and de-motivating to practice-oriented polytechnic university students in an EFL setting like Taiwan.

References

Bhatia, V. K. (1993). *Analysing Genre: Language use in professional settings.* London: Longman.

Bruner, J. 1966. *Towards a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belkapp Press.

Dudley-Evans, T. (1998). Genre models for the teaching of academic writing to second language speakers: Advantages and disadvantages. *Journal of TESOL France 2*(2), 181-192.

Hyland, K. (2004a). *Genre and Second Language Writing*. Michigan: Michigan University Press.

Hyland, K. (2004b). Graduates' gratitude: the generic structure of dissertation acknowledgements. *English for Specific Purposes 23*(3), 303-324.

Hyland, K. (2007). Genre pedagogy: language, literacy and L2 writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing 16*(3), 148-164.

James, M. A. 2009. ''Far" transfer of learning outcomes from an ESL writing course: Can the gap be bridged?' *Journal of Second Language Writing* 18/2: 69-84.

Language Training and Testing Centre (LTTC). (2011). *GEPT Scores Report.* Available at http://www.lttc.ntu.edu.tw/academics/results.htm. Accessed 18 June 2011.

Lee, D. Y. W. and Chen, S. X. (2009). Making a bigger deal of the smaller words: Function words and key items in research writing by Chinese learners. *Journal of Second Language Writing 18*(3), 281-96.

Paltridge, B. (2001). *Genre and the Language Learning Classroom.* Michigan: Michigan University Press.

So, B. P. C. (2005). From analysis to pedagogic applications: using newspaper genres to write school genres. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes 4*(1), 67-82.

Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ur, P. (1996). *A course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wardle, E. (2009). "Mutt Genres" and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University? *College Composition and Communication 60*(4), 765-789.

Yayli, D. (in press). (2011). From genre awareness to cross-genre awareness: A study in an EFL context. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes.*