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## WHY GENRE-BASED APPROACH SHOULD BE USED TO TEACH ACADEMIC WRITING IN INDIAN CONTEXT?

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### Abstract

The present paper discusses the different approaches to teach academic writing that has used by the teachers over the years. It describes the salient features of each of these approaches in brief to understand the transition between the changes in the teaching methods. Finally the importance of genre-based approach as a form of instruction in Indian schools and colleges is focused in detail. The advantages of using this approach with scaffolding as an instruction are mentioned briefly with respect to Indian context.

**Keywords:** Academic Writing, Genre-Based Teaching, Language Instruction

### Introduction

Research on teaching academic writing in a second language gained momentum during the late 1960's with the emergence of nativist, cognitive and communicative theories of language acquisition and learning. Teachers paid attention to the process of writing a text going through stages of drafting, editing, redrafting as was advocated in the process approach to teaching writing. In the mid-1980's the focus of teaching writing turned on the readers' direction or writing for different situations. A brief overview of the salient features of each of these approaches is mentioned as follows.

### The product approach

One of the approaches to teaching writing is the traditional method where the focus is on the product known as product approach, in other words, the production of neat, grammatically, correct pieces of writing. According to this approach, the teaching of writing focuses on "one-shot correct writing for the language practice" (Cheung 1999). The emphasis was on grammatical correctness and adherence to given models or guidelines (White 1988) and there

was little or no opportunity for the students to add any thoughts or ideas of their own (Raimes 1983).

Moreover, the approach focused only on organization of ideas and the students were expected to make use of the aspects of grammar or devices that have been taught to them by the teacher. Also, it emphasizes the role of teacher authority, the teacher should be the one to correct errors, and any kind of self-expression was not encouraged in the approach. This approach however, works well with the huge classrooms but it does not encourage the students to think. This approach helps the teachers to grade students easily as the focus is on form. In addition, it does not make a meaningful activity with an aim to improve writing which leads to limited creativity. However, in mid-1960's a new approach developed in contrast to the traditional approach known as Process Approach. It is a linear process focusing on the processes of writing rather than the formalistic, end-product.

### **The process approach**

Elbow's book "Writing without Teachers" first published in 1973 changed the way writing instruction was looked at traditionally. In this book, Elbow suggested that writer should "free write" (and not worry about correctness, logic and form); play with words and ideas; form writing groups and rely more on imagination than on criticism.

The process based models were reacting against the "author-vacated" (Flower 1985) and the dead prose of school writing. Process practitioners (Cheung 1999; Flowers & Hayes 1980; Murray 1980) claimed that their emphasis on craft, voice and technique could lead to engaging, dynamic, strongly voiced students' essays. Thus, the focus shifted from the final product itself to the different strategies the writer gets through in order to create this product.

In the process approach, the steps or stages are illustrated and practiced from the generation of ideas and compilation of information through a series of activities for planning, gathering, information, drafting, revising and editing. This sequence of activities typically occurs in four stages: "pre writing, composing/drafting, revising and editing" (Badger & White 2000:154).

Prewriting is the phase of idea gathering. Drafting is the process of writing a rough outline of what will be addressed. Once student produce a rough draft, they read it again and share it with

peers or a teacher to receive comments. Then they make modifications to their writings based on the feedback from their peers or teacher; revising or elaborating on the first draft. Editing, correcting, mechanical errors like spelling or punctuation is the last stage. However, none of the process writing procedures dealt with linguistic knowledge, such as grammar and organization of content. Even though the final stage of editing addressed some mechanical features of language, they were mainly concerned with the skills of processing ideas like planning and drafting.

### **The genre based approach**

Since the mid-1980's considerable attention has been paid to the genre approach to teach writing. In terms of writing in a second language, the genre approach has been defined as "a framework for language instruction" (Bryam 2004:234). The term 'genre' has been defined as a class of communicative events and members of each subclass share some communicative functions (Swales 1990) such as film reviews analyze movies, editorial columns give ideas about content of a book, journal or magazine, product manuals describe the mode of operation and a set of trouble shooting strategies for a specific gadget.

So, for each written genre there is a subset of communicative acts that writers should know and use to fulfill the expectations of an imagined community of readers of that genre. Therefore, each genre is made up of communicative features, organizational structure and linguistic features. It is the writer's purpose that determines the rules and conventions of writing. Therefore, the communicative purposes and the structural features should be identified when genres are used in writing classes.

The notion of genres and its application in language teaching and learning has received attention in the last decade (Hyland 2002). Many have brought to fore the potential of genre as a powerful pedagogic tool for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Bunton 2002; Cheung & Lai 1997; Flowerdew 2000; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans 1988; Swales 1990). These studies provide teachers with a way of looking at what students have to do linguistically - the kinds of discourses they have to be able to understand and produce in speech and writing.

There are four stages in genre based instruction-modeling, guiding, practicing and finally independently writing the genre (Cope & Kalantzis 1993). This is different from product

approaches which involves imitating, copying and transforming models and emphasizing the error free final product and the process approaches which focus on the process of producing a piece of writing from the prewriting stage to the revising stage to the final writing (Nunan 1999). To Badger and White (2000) this genre based approach is an integration of the product and process approaches:

...Writing involves knowledge about language (as in the product and genre approaches); knowledge of the content in which writing happens and especially the purpose for the writing (as in genre approaches), and skills in using language (as in process approaches), ...writing development happens by drawing out the learner's potential (as in process approaches) and by providing input to which the learners respond (as in product and genre approaches) (p. 157-158).

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### **Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)**

In 1970's there was a massive change in the curricular as well as demographic change in higher school education. At that time, teachers were having difficulties in helping students who had problems in college writing tasks. Moreover, these problems with writing tasks were mostly due to the widespread usage of the objective types of question such as multiple-type /true-false in place of report writing or essays. Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) was started by Barbara Walvoord when she found out that issues related to student writing could not be solved by discussing but by implementing the techniques to help the students to write better.

WAC refers specifically to the pedagogical and curricular attention to writing occurring in university subject matter classes other than those offered by composition or writing programmes, most housed in the English Department. The movement provided systematic encouragement, institutional support and educational knowledge to increase the amount and quality of writing occurring in history, science, mathematics and sociology (Tate, Rupiper & Schick 2001).

WAC promotes following basic principles:

- writing is the responsibility of the entire academic community
- writing must be integrated across departmental boundaries
- writing instruction must be continuous during all four years of undergraduate education
- writing promotes learning, and

- only by practicing the conventions of an academic discipline will students begin to communicate effectively within that disciplines.

With the help of this programme the students are able to learn how to write and improve their thinking, develop ideas for the tasks they have been assigned. It also helps them to deal with the communicative tasks they will need to do in their jobs, no matter what kind of job it is. Moreover, it familiarizes them with the kind of language they should use in their assignments within the discipline. This programme helps the teachers to gauge whether the students have grasped the key concepts or more elaboration is needed. In addition to that, teachers would be able to help the students to incorporate writing as more communication and learning tool. Moreover, the students who are grounded in the fundamentals, teachers would have to engage them in more sophisticated analysis of ideas. This helps the teacher to check the suitability of level of materials and the way of teaching.

In brief, there are various approaches that have been devised to help students to improve their writing in academic context. Most of the teachers preferred process approach as it help to understand the process the student undergo while understanding the rubrics of writing. However, now various disciplines have emerged and these follow various types of genres of writing for their assessment. Therefore, it is essential to practice genre-based teaching in today's situation and context. Moreover, genre-based teaching helps students understand the language of the discipline as is discussed below.

### **Why genre based teaching?**

Genre knowledge is helpful for the students in understanding the environment where they have used the language and in giving access to their ways of communicating in particular professional, academic and occupational communities. Through teaching, it will able to demystify the various kinds of writing that will enhance students' career opportunities and provide access to a greater range of life choices. Without these resources the students will not be able to improve their writing skills and their writing, practices will be regarded as failure to imitate their standard forms (Johns 1997 cited in Hyland 2003).

Also, there are fundamental differences in the use of lexico-grammatical, semantic-pragmatic and discoursal resources between everyday language and specialist language, especially those of

writing. A writing course should be able to fulfill the current and the future needs of the student. Surveys conducted by Flowerdew (1993), Loutiala Saliminen (1996) and Scollon et al. (1999) have provided an indication of the genres that students are likely to encounter at the university and later in the workplace.

A general English course often fails to equip them with the linguistic competence required for technical subjects, since they lack genre-specific knowledge of academic discourse. One of the main causes of Indian University students' low performance in academic writing is the lack of genre-specific writing. Difficulties include choosing appropriate vocabulary, organizing the structure properly depending on the topic or the purpose of writing, following correct grammar rules and integrating ideas. To solve these problems a genre-specific writing instruction is useful since it presents some examples to students who have only limited exposure to authentic academic writing in English.

Genre based writing instruction follows modern theories of learning in giving considerable recognition to collaboration and scaffolding or teacher-supported learning (Hyland 2007). The Vygotskian notion of scaffolding emphasizes the role of interaction with peers and experienced others in moving students from their existing level of performance (what they can do at the present time) to a level of "potential performance" which they would be able to do in future without assistance. Research has shown that when tasks are scaffolded, students are able to reach much higher levels of performance (Danto 2000; Ohta 2000). The degree of teacher intervention and selection of tasks and sequencing of learning plays a key role in scaffolding writing, where students move from closely controlled activities to autonomous writing.

Genre-based approaches allow teachers to sequence learning and to teach generic characteristics in an itemized fashion. This helps students to see writing as a set of selected concrete linguistic and structural items rather than see genres as abstract finished products. It helps learners to move from current proficiencies to target proficiencies. This becomes the purpose of the course and helps in determining the objectives materials and tasks used to teach writing. Swales (2000) work on academic writing for graduate students takes students through a perceived order of increasing rhetorical complexity in writing a report or thesis: through methods, abstracts, results, introductions and discussions. The book helps both teachers and students to analyse academic

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texts and reflect on their structure and shows teachers how to present writing to students in the most accessible way.

One kind of support is through the use of “writing frames” (Wray & Lewis 1997; Hyland 2007) which are skeletal outlines used to scaffold and help students write. These frames could help students with forms, structural organization of texts and formats. It helps in raising what is called rhetorical consciousness raising “by guiding students to explore key lexical, grammatical and rhetorical features and to use this knowledge to construct their own examples of genres” (Hyland, 2007:160).

In spite of the popularity of genre-based approaches in academic writing at tertiary levels, many language practitioners consider the approach a rigid, formulaic way of construction of texts and a mechanical and an unthinking application of formulas. They are criticised as prescriptive and restrictive. However, positive learning outcomes have been reported in student writing style and linguistic accuracy with the use of a genre-based approach to teaching (Flowerdew 2000; Cheung & Lai 1997). Moreover, genre-based pedagogies “offers the students an explicit understanding of how texts in target genres are structured and the why they are written as they are” (Hyland 2003:26). In the genre classrooms, various methods for instruction are followed like investigating the texts and contexts of students’ target situations, encouraging reflection on writing practices, exploiting genre sets and creating mixed-genre portfolios (Johns 1997; Paltridge 2001 cited in Hyland 2003).

Thus, it can be concluded that genre-based teaching along with scaffolding is essential in today’s Indian scenario of teaching academic writing. However, it needs to be pursued carefully in terms of what should be used in terms of materials, not over generalizing this method of instruction for each and every writing purpose, understanding the learner needs in terms of style, not intimidating them with examples due to which writing becomes a burden and focusing only on the style of writing but not on what is to be written. If these limitations are kept in mind, then the idea of helping the students to become better academic writer is not a dream far from the reach of each and every teacher. Then it can be the approach to be used for teaching academic writing across different disciplines in Indian context.

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