

# Evaluating Genre-based Teaching Approach in ESL Writing Class with De Beaugrande and Dressler's Theories on Text Linguistics\*

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**Abstract**—Recent years have seen increased emphasis being placed on the notion of genre in the language-learning classroom. However, based on evaluating genre-based teaching approach in ESL writing class with theories on text linguistics proposed by de Beaugrande and Dressler, some suggestions are proposed. Namely, we should not totally deny the merits that genre-based approach deserves; meanwhile, it is also unwise to take genre analysis as the central activity in ESL writing class. By studying the nature of writing from a cognitive point of view, a compromise has been recommended: to apply the combination of the principles of both process and product methodology and tasked-based approach to ESL writing class. But one principle goes always underneath the combination that we should not give learners fish to eat, but to teach them how to fish.

**Keywords**—genre-based approach; ESL writing; de Beaugrande; Dressler; text linguistics

## I. INTRODUCTION

How to teach writing beyond sentence level has long been a major concern for language teachers (both EFL and mother-tongue English teachers). However, the flourishing development on text linguistics or discourse analysis in the recent decades has shed a promising light on this field. One of the most influential is genre analysis. As a matter of fact, the concept of genre has been much written about, and we can read of its implication in large-scale L1 projects such as Disadvantaged school program in Australia, and in various L2 settings in a number of countries. What is worth mentioning is that genre-based teaching approach to writing class is originated from Australian school, who has focused on developing literacy in school children. Recent years have seen increased emphasis being placed on the notion of genre in the language-learning classroom. However, to what sense does it really help in writing class of EFTL environment if the aspect of mother tongue is ignored in this paper? And to what extent do we apply it to teaching writing to be most effective? To answer those questions, the nature of genre, its application in ESL writing class, and the nature of writing would have to be examined.

## II. OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES

The word 'genre' simply means 'kind'. Aristotle genres have been conceived as classes of text distinguished according to mutually exclusive and exhaustive characteristics. In other words, genres help us define and organize kinds of texts. It is just from this perspective, the two terms 'genre' and 'text type' share something in common so that it is viewed by some people that genre and text type have been conflated, with the term 'genre' being used to include both of these notions.

So in practice, one mode of teaching writing which originates from text type theory is also labeled as genre-based approach, that is, 'presentational mode' called by Hillocks(1984,1986). It is a product-oriented, teacher-centered approach in which students are the passive recipients of the rules (grammatical and rhetorical) and examples of good writing. Students imitate a pattern or follow rules which are given through teacher lecture. This mode of teaching has encountered much criticism of being structural and rigid in rules, which cannot inspire learners' autonomy and help learners improve their competence.

However, the past fifteen years have witnessed a dramatic reconceptualization of genre and its role in the production and interpretation of texts and culture. Led in large part by scholars in functional and applied linguistics, communication studies, education, and most recently, rhetoric and composition studies, this movement has helped transform genre study from a descriptive to an explanatory activity, one that investigates not only text-types and classification system, but also the linguistic, sociological, and psychological assumptions underlying and shaping these text-types. In brief, the assumptions mainly lie in that text is a semantic unit, a social exchange of meaning; language is a meaning potential or recourse; language users make different linguistic choices, which in turn result in different wording patterns of different structure of text; since there are recurring situations in the culture in which people interact and enact social activities, this contextual regularities give rise to regularities in texts (Kress, 1993). Therefore genres are frames for social action and reflect patterns of textual and social regularities. They are locations within which meaning is constructed.

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A number of definitions of genre have been influential in the recent area of genre analysis, notably those of Martin (1984) and Swales (1990). Swales (1990:58) defines genre as 'a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes which are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community'. Martin (ibid.:35) describes genre as 'a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as member of our culture', whose definition has been particularly influential in the work of Australian genre-based approach to teaching writing. Its focus is on the social processes, such as explain, describe, and argue. The genres with which the Australian school concern themselves are those of Recount, Procedure, Description, Report, Explanation, Discussion and Exposition. The schematic structure of Exposition Genre, for example, is Thesis, comprising Position and Preview, followed by Arguments, each argument consisting of a point and an Elaboration, followed by Reiteration, the restatement of the Thesis. Those working in the Australian School have focused on the need to empower school children, by endeavoring to provide equal access to the genre needed to function fully in the society. The use of a 'curriculum genre' has been advocated, in which the teacher and students work through a model text--the emphasis at this stage is on the text's social purpose, how this is achieved through its schematic structure, and its linguistic features. Secondly, the teacher and the students construct a text of the genre jointly, which involves reading, research, pooling and collecting information. Finally, students choose and research a topic and prepare their own texts of the genre concerned (Callaghan, 1993). These procedures are regarded by some advocates as process teaching.

In short, if we examine the term more specifically concerning writing, it should be 'Those studying written language rather than spoken, especially literary language, have more commonly identified different forms of writing as different genres'; thus 'Genres are socially constructed conventions of writing; they are the accepted conventions for doing things, connected with writers' purposes'. Then 'For teaching it is useful to be able to identify and describe the conventions of particular genres'. In other words, teaching writing is to teach or let learners learn socially constructed conventions of literary forms. By this way genres do not make much difference from text type in that they both stress on linguistics forms and structures of text. The only thing different is that genre simply interpreting text types from social functional point of view. As a matter of fact, genres can be seen as the compromise of text types under the trend of meaningful learning. Actually it is just the old wine in a new bottle. Pedagogically, genre-based approach is linguistic in nature and focuses people's attention on structure and forms.

### III. EXAMINE THE NATURE OF WRITING

When we examine the nature of writing, the theories on text linguistics proposed by Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler (1981) might well be most useful. The co-authors define a text as 'a communicative occurrence,

which meets seven standards of textuality. The first standard is cohesion and concerns the ways in which the components of the surface text, i.e. the actual words we hear or see, are mutually connected within a sequence. The surface components depend upon each other according to grammatical forms and conventions, such that cohesion rests upon grammatical dependencies. The second standard is coherence and concerns the ways that the components of the textual world, i.e. the configuration of concepts and relations that underlie the surface text, are mutually accessible and relevant. Coherence is the cause of cohesion. In other words, sense is prior to form. If we extend it far in meaning, we can safely say sense determines its carrier-form. The third is intentionality, concerning the text producer's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text instrumental in fulfilling the producer's intentions, which indicates that the producer's purpose should be conceived as the priority. The fourth standard is acceptability concerning the text receiver's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text having some use or relevance for the receiver. This attitude is responsive to such factors as text type, social or cultural setting, and the desirability of goals. In other words, if the producer and the receiver of a text of the same discourse community, the degree of acceptability will be high, otherwise it will be low. However it does not necessarily mean that if the producer and the receiver are of different discourse community, the acceptability would not exist. Rather, according to de Beaugrande and Dressler, the mechanism of human brain will adopt all kinds of text strategies to solve such problems, on the balance of effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness. It can account for why people can learn so many diversities of knowledge of various fields and newcomers can step into certain discourse community. The fifth standard is informativity and concerns the extent to which the occurrences of the presented text are expected vs. unexpected or known vs. unknown/certain. The higher informativity shows the unexpectedness or uncertainty of information and therefore arouses more interests; low informativity is likely to be disturbing, causing boredom or even rejection of the text. So something new is desirable in writing rather than obedient conformity. The sixth standard is situationality and concerns the factors which make a text relevant to a situation of occurrence, which is considered much from the receiver's point of view when the receiver finds out the association between text and its setting, it becomes much easier to understand it and communicate with the producer smoothly. The seventh standard is intertextuality and concerns the factor that makes the utilization of one text dependent upon knowledge of one or more previously encountered texts. The key of intertextuality is mediation, by which the text world is connected with the real world of individuals. To realize it, text strategies should have to be used. From the above, it can be concluded as the following:

- Text is communicative occurrence;
- Sense goes before form;
- Purpose should be conceived as the priority;

- The process of communication is the process of problem-solving in which text strategies are at large used.
- To produce or receive a text is a procedural and operational process which takes place in human cognitive mechanism;
- To research on text is mainly to study the operational process;
- Structural patterns and units of a text are only the units and structures in the operational process.

In other words, structural patterns, units, social conventions are only static corpus data that can only be meaningful when activated during the operational process charged by human cognition.

Accordingly, to write is to produce a text, and this is a process of solving problems. The primary task is to fulfill the producer's purpose, by which I mean in order to fulfill purpose, the producer will adopt any means to reach the perfection of his goals, including forms. For example, one day Williams, an American poet ate the plums that were kept for breakfast by his wife. So he wrote a message for his wife to beg her pardon. If, according to the theories of genres, the social conventional form of a message for sorry should be as that: first, describe wrong doing, then state reasons for doing that and last show the sincerity to beg the receiver's pardon. It would be read: I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me since they were delicious, so sweet and so cold. Surely, it would reach his goal. But Williams did not write in this way, rather he wrote a poem:

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
so cold

It goes without saying that the traditional form of message could fulfill its social function, but it could not exactly express the specific situation, producer, receiver, mood, emotion, etc. It is easy to see that the poem contains more information and finer goals, compared with the

traditional form of letter. A conventional-formed letter could never reach the perfection of the poem. So it is evident that form is purpose-served which is adopted by the producer's conscious selection, comparison and balancing among effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness charged by cognition.

Besides, a case in point is the coming-into-being of a genre. Since genres are frames for social actions and concerning writing, they are socially constructed conventions of literary forms. There must be a problem of time order. Only after a certain social action first came into being and widely spread, have the conventions existed. So ideas or purposes are original and it is unnecessary to worry about the genres. What genre-based approach in writing class does is just to impose conventions or rules on people. People have the great power of creativity. It is just this creativity that gives rise to our so colorful and wonderful life, correspondently genres.

Moreover, it is impossible to teach all genres in class. The problem lies in that genres are infinite. First, just as mentioned in the previous paragraph new genres have continuously been created being resulted from humans' creativity. Second, one can make finer and finer distinctions, identifying distinct ways of talking used by teachers in staff-rooms, secondary school teachers, science teachers, teachers at parents' meetings, and so on. As another example, scientific writing can be divided up into biology, physics, and chemistry and so on; alternatively, people can examine differences between scientific and popular physics writing or even between physics articles and student essays. The distinctions are infinite and endless.

To sum up, genre-based approach is prescriptive and restrictive rather than creative; it is a text-centered approach product-oriented, rather than a student-centered one, process-oriented; it gives an imposed rather than a responsive notion of text, and disempowers rather than empowers students. While when we examine the nature of writing, we can see that writing is a purpose-fulfilling process during which concepts are constructed and produced through a series of procedures and every procedure is a problem, the ongoing of procedures is the process of solving problems through all kinds of strategies. As to structural patterns, units, social conventions, etc., they are only static corpus data which needs activating and negotiating by which concepts can be reconstructed.

So adopting genre-based approach to writing is to attend to the trivialities and neglect the fundamentals. What is fundamental to teach student in writing class is to develop students' skills in terms of cognition since textual communication entails all the major skills for rational human behavior in general: (a) problem-solving capacities; (b) planning capacities; (c) capacities for generating, testing, and revising hypotheses; (d) capacities for pattern-matching; (e) processing ease for expected or probable occurrences; (f) processing depth for non-expected or improbable occurrences; (g) capacities for reducing complexity to meet processing limitations; (h) capacities for selective focus of attention; (i) capacities for maintaining continuity of

experience; and (j) capacities for projecting or inferring these various dispositions and activities among the other participants in interaction’.

#### IV. WHAT WE CAN SAY FOR GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO ESL WRITING CLASS

It can be safely said that writing process in nature is the same no matter in one’s mother tongue or in one’s second language, which suggests that at least 3 fundamental elements should be involved: real world, text world and mediation. For the producer of a text, the real world means his established concepts about the world which are stored in his mind or we call it the old information, more specifically, structural patterns, units, social conventions, culture, etc. Text world is the carrier of the producer’s purpose and goal whose effect is supposed to be most perfect. Mediation, acting as an agent, bridges the gap between the real world and the text world through all kinds of mental skills or strategies. From the above we can see, what makes difference between writing in L1 and writing in L2 is the real world knowledge. Mediation in fact can be regarded as mental skills to negotiate the real world and the text world, which is cognitive potentials, existed in any human being. And the text world is the reconstruction of concepts on the basis of one’s world knowledge through mediation. Thus, as Bruner says ‘language can never be neutral, that it imposes a point of view not only about the world to which it refers but toward the use of mind in respect of this world. Language necessarily imposes a perspective in which things are viewed and a stance toward what we view’. It can be interpreted as what language you have, what concepts/ thoughts you have. To extend it far, it can be that the more words you have, the more thoughts you have. Cameron (1996), argues that an expert user of discourse would be able to select from a range the appropriate type of discourse for a situation and would know the prototypical patterns of the types and the chunks that make up the patterns. All of these suggest the importance of words, patterns and conventions, whose significance would not consist in the linguistic forms or structures but the cultures and concepts embedded into them.

Obviously it is unwise to totally deny the benefits of genre-based approach to ESL writing class, in that by presenting models or genre analysis, we can learn the concepts of words, phrase, language chunks and social conventions, etc. concerning certain specific field, which are the foundation for our further reconstruction of conception.

Besides, psychologists today cannot share the layman’s belief that imitation is a mechanical activity and that anyone can imitate almost anything if shown how. To imitate, it is necessary to possess the means of stepping from something one knows to something new’.

However, in practice, activities around genre analysis play the dominant role in ESL writing class. Though nowadays there is a trend to introduce genre-analysis into the process writing, however genre analysis is still the core all the other activities revolving around. Just as what we mentioned previously, writing is a purpose-fulfilling and concept reconstruction process taken charge of by various

mental skills, for example, problem-solving capacities, planning capacities, capacities for generating, testing, and revising hypotheses, capacities for pattern-matching, etc. Then to teach writing is mainly to teach students to be aware of and master those skills or rather to equip students with the capacity to work with high power by recognizing and performing any given task as an instantiation of a general operation type’.

To sum up, genre analysis in ESL writing class is necessary and indispensable but it could never be dominant.

#### V. A COCKTAIL IN THE EDUCATION PROCESS BOTTLE

The process writing approach has evolved out of research (in L1 and L2) into how writers write; in other words, looking at the process of writing as opposed to the final product. This research represents a backlash against the model-based approach of the 1960s, which in invited students to imitate a model text (usually specially written texts) in order to reinforce a certain structure. Researchers of the 1970s and 1980s argue that analyzing the product alone reveals nothing about how the writer achieved that product or the ‘anguish’ (Raines 1983) the writer may have gone through to produce it. So since the mid-1970s, L1 and L2 composition teachers in the United States have been involved in the writing as process model, which typically carries students through a cycle of pre-writing talk, free writing, peer feedback, and revision. The teacher, as facilitator, does not assign specific topics, give evaluative criteria for judging writing, demonstrate ‘good’ writing with models, or assign grammatical exercises (Zamel 1976, 1980). The pure application of process writing instruction has been much criticized in its almost exclusive concern with psycholinguistic, cognitive and affective variables and its failure to take into account the many forces outside of an individual writer’s control which define, shape and ultimately judge a piece of writing (Horowitz 1986 b:446). Then Swales (1986:8-9) advocates an approach which emphasizes less the cognitive relationship between the writer and his or her internal world and more the relationship between the writer, the writing environment, and the intended readership, so the combination genre analysis with the process writing instruction is recommended which we just analyze that genre analysis becomes the core of teaching and plays the dominant role. So it still does not correspond to the nature of writing.

Besides, the nature of writing is to fulfill one’s purpose or goal in written form, while in the classroom teaching, there are no authentic purposes to write about. As a matter of fact, what is to write and how to write is equally important. Therefore tasks, especially specific tasks are required. In fact, introducing task-based language teaching is perfectly wonderful. This notion of language ‘tasks’ results from a pragmatic isolation of the tasks second language learners need to master to survive in English academic communities. A renewed interest in task-based ESL instruction has also been supported by psycholinguistic, linguistic, and cognitive research which shows that linguistic structures are not acquired separately and linearly, but rather, subconsciously in meaningful units when the learner’s attention is focused



on meaning, i.e.... task completion not language (Long 1992:35). In other words, by given tasks, learners can mediate the real world and the text world authentically, and learning becomes meaningful.

From the above, we can see process writing is the mainstream, while genre analysis or models serve as substantial basis or static corpus data and tasks function as the actualizer to realize the purposes or goals. While in its beneath lies this principle that we should not give learners fish to eat, but to teach them how to fish. This concern is also expressed by Widdowson (1983) and Larsen-Freeman (1983) as 'an appropriate approach will be of the education process:

The educating process is individual-oriented. Objectives are more general and are stated in terms of developing an individual's skills so that he or she can adapt to and function in any situation'.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Recent years have seen the dramatic development in various fields concerning language learning and teaching, which contribute altogether to highlighting people's insights into language acquisition. Solo model in a single discipline would be less convincing and even implausible. To make a comprehensive survey to the general situation becomes the trend. It is also the case in writing, where efforts have been made to combine the principles of both process and product methodology. Likewise Raimes (1991:422) calls for a synthesis of L2 writing methodologies: 'one that presents a governing philosophy but pays attention within that philosophy to all four elements involving writing: form (product), writer (process), content and reader'. Undoubtedly, it is indeed a progress.

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