Genre Awareness and Analysis: A Strategic Tool for Language Learning

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Key Questions

What are our current conceptions of “genre?”

What are practical ways we can demystify the structural and linguistic features of both formal and informal genres for language learners?

How can genre awareness help our students become better readers and writers?
WHAT IS A GENRE?
Dictionary definition:

- A category of artistic, musical or literary compositions characterized by a particular style, form or content

- Usually confined to art or culture
Which of these would you group together?

letter  will  text message

novel  toast  newspaper article

sermon  campaign speech
ASPECTS OF GENRES

a) topic of the text

b) speaker/author of the text

c) audience for the text

d) relationship between the participants

e) purpose of the text

f) setting
g) structure of the text

h) tone of the text

i) typical patterns of grammar

j) typical vocabulary

k) community expectations and/or shared understandings

l) assumed background knowledge
Three key concepts

• Discourse communities: are we insiders or outsiders? How does genre participation establish our position?

• Constraints & choices: how do these define a genre?

• Implicit/explicit pedagogy: what do we do as teachers?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
<th>COMMUNICATIVE EVENT</th>
<th>LEVEL OF EASE (1-5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Classroom</td>
<td>Facilitating a Discussion</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2) A biker bar</td>
<td>Talking to someone you don’t know</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) 5 Star restaurant in Paris</td>
<td>Ordering a meal</td>
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<td>4) YMCA Swimming Pool</td>
<td>Posted swim workout</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) DMV Office</td>
<td>Filling out a renewal form</td>
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Genre theory

• [Genres are]…abstract socially recognized ways of using language
• Members of a community have little difficulty in recognizing similarities in the texts they use frequently and are able to draw on their repeated experiences with such texts to read, understand and use them easily. (Hyland 2007)
Which is an apology?

- Sorry.
- I’m sorry. Are you all right?
- Begging your pardon, ma’am.
- So what’s your foot doing there?
- I’m soooo sorry. Are you OK? Can I do anything?
- I’m sorry you hurt your foot.
- How absolutely careless of me. May I buy you a new pair of shoes?
- Please do forgive my inexcusable lack of consideration.
• “Practicing a genre is almost like playing a game, with its own rules and conventions. Established genre participants are like skilled players, who succeed by their manipulation and exploitation of, rather than strict compliance with, the rules of the game. It is not simply a matter of learning the language…it is more like acquiring the rules of the game in order to be able to exploit and manipulate them to fulfill professional and disciplinary purposes.” (Bhatia, 1993)
Genre Competence

- Students should be helped to develop "genre competence", which means the ability to interpret and create contextually appropriate texts, oral or written. Embedded in this is linguistic competence (which draws upon understanding the linguistic code) and communicative competence (which draws upon contextual, pragmatic and background knowledge).
SOME EXAMPLES OF GENRE AWARENESS STRATEGIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

1. Genre analysis: everyday genres

2. Genre expertise: The Mystery Object

3. Genre awareness: Which does not belong?
Define: smoothie
Definition: Hamburger

1) a sandwich consisting of a patty of hamburger in a split typically round bun. Example: They served hot dogs and hamburgers at the cookout. (Merriam Webster)

2) chopped beef, spiced and flavoured, formed into a cake and fried, often served between two halves of a toasted bun. Orig. U.S. (Oxford English Dictionary)

3) [C] (informal burger, UK also beefburger) a round flat shape made of beef, which is fried and eaten between two halves of a bread roll. (Cambridge Advanced Learners)

4) noun; a sandwich consisting of a cooked patty of ground or chopped beef, usually in a roll or bun, variously garnished. Also called beefburger. (Dictionary.com)
1) WRITE A LETTER OF COMPLAINT TO THE MANUFACTURER ABOUT THE MYSTERY OBJECT

2) WRITE A TOAST TO THE INVENTOR OF THE MYSTERY OBJECT

3) WRITE A LETTER TO YOUR GRANDMOTHER THANKING HER FOR THIS GIFT

4) WRITE A SCHOOL BOARD ANNOUNCEMENT BANNING THE MYSTERY OBJECT FROM SCHOOLS

5) WRITE AN EXPLANATION OF HOW TO USE THE MYSTERY OBJECT
5) WRITE AN EXPLANATION OF HOW THE MYSTERY OBJECT IS USED

6) WRITE A DESCRIPTION OF THE MYSTERY OBJECT FOR A CATALOG

7) WRITE A CRAIG’S LIST AD SELLING THE MYSTERY OBJECT

8) WRITE A POLICE REPORT REGARDING THE USE OF THE MYSTERY OBJECT IN A CRIME

9) WRITE A SET OF INSTRUCTIONS FOR HOW TO USE THIS OBJECT
Post-writing discussion

When writing this piece, what are some choices you made to write in this genre effectively?

• Purpose
• Intended outcome
• Tone
• Shared understandings
WHICH DOES NOT BELONG?

• What is the genre? Name it!
• How do you know? What features tell you this?
• Which one does not belong in this group? Why?
Theoretical assumptions of genre-based pedagogy

1) Genres are social in nature; they represent participation in a given context

2) Genres have typical ways of being organized textually and grammatically recognizable features; yet they are flexible and respond to context

3) Teachers can apprentice students as participants in a discourse community; this can be done explicitly

4) Genres can both include and exclude; an inability to participate in given genres creates inequities in terms of access
SOME EXAMPLES OF TEACHERS USING GENRE AWARENESS STRATEGIES

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GENRE: ____________________________

a) topic:

b) author:

c) audience:

d) relationship between participants:

e) purpose:

f) setting:

g) structure/formatting requirements:

h) tone:

i) patterns of grammar:

j) key or typical vocabulary:

k) community expectations:

l) shared understanding:

m) assumed background knowledge:
Genre: a reflective essay

topic: personal experience

author: anyone – students

audience: peers and teacher

relationship between participants: supportive; meant to encourage good writing

purpose: to raise questions
to share a viewpoint
to tackle tough issues
[to reach a heightened awareness]
[to perceive meaning in ordinary life]

setting: determined by topic

structure: begin with the incident
explore the significance
relate topic to the world

tone: passionate, energized, personal, [curious; exploratory]

patterns of grammar: use of the “I” voice; [sequence of questioning and answering]

vocabulary: experience, “I”, feel, reflect, wonder, consider, seem

community expectations: we’ll spend time on the piece (writing process); we should make a fresh point (high stakes writing)

shared understanding: honesty is essential; you’re speaking with your own perspective; a reflective essay provides insight regarding the author’s personality and values; we have competence in writing mechanics

assumed background knowledge: awareness of major events in recent history, standard knowledge of pop culture (to catch allusions)
GENRE: AP LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION
FREE RESPONSE ESSAY QUESTION
ARGUMENT

a) topic: passage from a text which makes a definitive point; invites debate

b) author: students taking the AP Test or students prepping for it

c) audience: AP scorers; teachers; in some cases, peers

d) relationship between participants: a power relationship exists: students must demonstrate specific writing skills for/to anonymous scorers

e) purpose: to express a point of view
to show off one’s linguistic powers
to persuade the reader to respect—even share—one’s viewpoint
to earn a high enough score to earn college units

f) setting: a “depressing desk or table” in a classroom or auditorium;
some kind of institutional venue

g) structure/formatting requirements: Intro and an assessment of the author’s assertion; concession—acknowledging the validity of the opposition;
advancement of the writer’s position with specific examples; conclusion,
which includes a reassertion of the writer’s viewpoint

h) tone: confident, assertive, knowledgeable

i) patterns of grammar: use of the subordination in the thesis
rhetorical use of repetition
periodic use of “I” voice

j) key or typical vocabulary: believe, think, feel, agree, disagree, somewhat, perhaps, although

k) community expectations: writing in 40 minutes is a big challenge, it requires quick thinking, occasional mechanical problems okay

l) shared understanding: AP tests are valid tests of writing skills; writers should stick to what they know well.

m) assumed background knowledge: cultural literacy; writer can use experience as evidence
Some features of genre-based pedagogy

1. The purpose of a genre-based approach is to help learners understand why genres are written/spoken the way they are.

2. Teachers should focus on the purpose and context of genres, not just textual features alone.

3. Students are helped to develop “genre competence”, which means the ability to understand and create contextually appropriate texts. They should be able to understand both the regularities of form (the constraints) and the choices available to them.

4. Teachers should remember that we are teaching tendencies, not fixed patterns. Genres should not be presented as fixed templates.

(Adapted from Paltridge, 2001)
Final Thoughts

It is important for us to:

• Give students genre awareness; the critical link for reading – writing and access to discourse communities
• Give students ample opportunities to deconstruct genres: discover on their own the constraints and choices
• Understand the genres our students know and understand as insiders
• Use these as a springboard to more academic genres
USEFUL REFERENCES

Dean, Deborah: Genre Theory: Teaching, Writing and Being. NCTE


THANK YOU!

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