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Genre Awareness and Analysis: A Strategic Tool for Language Learning

Students studying foreign languages often struggle to produce texts whose forms, purposes and linguistic features are unfamiliar or unclear to them. How can we - as instructors - help them understand the key genres of a foreign language, as well as the linguistic choices and cultural expectations that shape them? This session will offer an activity-based introduction to "genre-based pedagogy," illustrating strategies to reduce students' dependency on writing "recipes" and to help them understand both the constraints and the choices available to them as writers and language learners. Broadening our students' understanding of genre beyond that of a simple "text template" is a critical step toward their successful engagement with the genres of the target language and culture.

Key Questions to Consider

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 in language study?

OUTLINE

- 1) Reconsidering the definition of genre
- 2) Theoretical background for genre-based pedagogy
- 3) Genre awareness activities for the classroom
- 4) Final thoughts and discussion

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FEATURES OF GENRES

CHOOSE ONE OF THE GENRES AND EVALUATE THEM ACCORDING TO THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:

- 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 understandings & expectations for this genre**
- l) assumed background knowledge**

Note: some of the criteria may be more salient (and helpful) than others, depending on the nature of the genre you are considering.

SOME FEATURES OF A GENRE-BASED WRITING PEDAGOGY

- 1) The purpose of a genre-based approach is to help learners understand why genres are written/spoken the way they are.
- 2) Teaching should stress the purpose and context of production, not isolated features of text. This is not about textual analysis alone; we need to focus on social and contextual features of text.
- 3) Genre analysis should be descriptive, not prescriptive.
- 4) Teachers should remember that we are teaching tendencies, not fixed patterns. Genres should not be presented as fixed templates against which to compare text, nor as texts in isolation.
- 5) Students should be encouraged to understand the choices they are making about text structure and language and why they make those choices.
- 6) Students should understand what one can appropriately talk or write about in a given context.
- 7) Students should be helped to develop “genre competence”, which means the ability to interpret and create contextually appropriate texts. Embedded in this is linguistic competence (which draws upon understanding the linguistic code) and communicative competence (which draws upon contextual, pragmatic and background knowledge).

(From Paltridge, B.: Genre & The Language Learning Classroom)

Developing an assessment grid for genre-based tasks & understanding

GENRE: _____

A) KNOWLEDGE OF SOCIAL CONTEXT/PURPOSE

What would you like students to identify and demonstrate understanding of for this genre?

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B) GENERIC STRUCTURE

What would you like students to be able to identify and reproduce for this particular genre?

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C) LANGUAGE FEATURES (Syntax, specialist vocabulary, discourse markers)

What would you like students to identify, construct and effectively employ for this genre?

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D) ENGAGEMENT WITH TEXT

What activities would you want students to engage in related to this genre? How might you measure successful engagement?

Some Genre-Based Activities: A Partial List

This list represents a brief compilation of possible genre-focused activities. Obviously, they would need to be adapted to different grade levels, disciplines, or levels of language proficiency. Many are drawn from – or adapted from – Paltridge’s Genre and the Language Learning Classroom (See bibliography). Others are activities that I’ve used with my own students.

FOCUS ON GENRE AWARENESS

- 1) Which texts belong together? Which does not belong? Students compare 3-4 texts and group them. Discuss which features suggested similar grouping.
- 2) Categories: Group genres into categories; discuss the salient features, reasons for grouping.
- 3) Feature analysis: Students investigate key genres using the A-L list of genre features. Students do the same using self-chosen genres in which they are experts (“insiders”)
- 4) Cereal boxes: uses visual analysis of an “everyday genre” as a paradigm for an analysis of context, purpose, author’s intent and the effects achieved. Use as a bridge to textual analysis. Ask students to evaluate a blended genre (text/visual) such as a website, CD cover.
- 5) Analyze (or write) multiple examples of the same genre addressing different content (e.g. 3-4 editorials addressing different issues). Consider how the change in topic creates changes in the genre, if at all. Conversely, look at multiple genres addressing the same content (e.g. a single event might elicit an announcement, a policy statement, a phone conversation, an e-mail and a poster)

FOCUS ON AUDIENCE

- 1) Evaluate a series of similar genres across multiple publications with different audiences (Example: hip-hop CD review in Time magazine, Rolling Stone magazine and hip-hop magazine)
- 2) Cross-cultural version: similar accounts of an event written for different linguistic and/or cultural audience. (Example: Account of the Tour de France published in French newspaper vs. American paper. Use English versions for both. Consider: What knowledge is assumed? What assumptions are shared/not shared? How do perspectives differ?
- 3) Defining your terms: Define a key term that is used in a discourse community in which you are an insider (e.g. skateboarding, video games, sororities). Define it for a series of people differing in age (5 year-old to grandma), time (pioneer to time capsule), contexts (IM chat to speech in class), etc.

4) Partner explanations: Students write explanations of some skill/event in which they have expertise (e.g. baking bread, burning a CD). Must interview a “non-expert” partner before writing, and learn what they don’t know.

FOCUS ON DISCOURSE STRUCTURES

1) Text jumbling: An example of the genre is cut into segments (such as the news article we studied). Reassembly requires attention to discourse features such as old/new information, transition, pronoun reference, openings and conclusions.

2) Mix and match genres: how does structure have to change while encompassing the same content? For example, change a science explanation into an anecdote, a folk tale into a police report of a crime, a literary description of a character into a doctor’s report on the same character)

3) Have students analyze and deconstruct several examples (not just one) of a particular genre (as in our CD reviews). Identify and name the “moves” (Swales) the author makes. Decide which are essential and which are choices. Consider which are more or less effective.

FOCUS ON LINGUISTIC FEATURES

1) Translation: Oral to written speech. A student narrates a brief event in their life (“A time when..”) Other students listen and then write a brief narrative, telling the same story. Compare written narrative to oral (works best when oral is taped and then transcribed for analysis). Discussion features of oral and written language. Compare across written narratives for authorial choices, particularly opening and closing.

2) The “car accident” One student recounts to two others an incident of a car accident. (With younger students, a suitable alternative?) Listener A writes a narrative of the accident. Listener B writes a police report. The narrator writes a letter to the driver of the other car. Compare framing and language choices (esp. word choices, and syntax) across the texts.

3) Nominalizations: Change phrases into nominal forms and vice versa. Have students “overnominalize” to compare effects. Take a section of a text book and “de-nominalize” it; compare the results. Have students record a conversation with a friend and nominalize it. Can also be done with subordination, participial phrases, etc.

4) Register changes: Take examples of children’s writing and adjust the register to more formal. Discuss the decisions made. And vice versa. Take dialogue and rewrite for different audiences (the president, the principal, your best friend, a stranger on a bus, etc.)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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In the first chapter of their book, Berkenkotter & Huckin provide a widely cited exposition of the key features of genres from a socially embedded, disciplinary perspective.

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Hyon provides a succinct overview of the three primary approaches to genre theory, North American New Rhetoric, Australian (Sydney School) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes), contrasting their contexts, goals and instructional frameworks of each. Although some of the information is now dated, it is an excellent place to start an exploration of the topic.

Partridge, Brian. 2001. Genre and the Language Learning Classroom. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Partridge writes from the perspective of an applied linguist, offering a brief but clear overview of the three approaches to genre theory, and a multitude of practical activities for exploring genre theory (as teachers) and applying it in classrooms.

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Seminal and influential article within the New Rhetoric discussion of genre.

Swales, John. 1990. Genre analysis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is the primary text in which Swales outlines his ideas on genre from an applied linguistics perspective.