THE EFFECT OF A GENRE-BASED WRITING COURSE ON ESL STUDENTS´ WRITING OF ARGUMENTATIVE TEXTS

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ABSTRACT: Genre has been established as a relevant and useful concept to conceive writing as a social activity. This paper reports the impact of a genre-based ESL freshman composition course on the quality of six students' writing of argumentative texts. The 15-week course had as theoretical frameworks the Australian school of genre and the pedagogical approach, the movement from the abstract to the concrete – an activity theory based pedagogy (Davydov, 1988 a, b, c, d). The analysis consisted of verifying the presence of the argumentative text moves as laid down by Hacker (1999) in pre and post-tests. The students, in general, improved their writing and two showed considerable improvement. The improvement can be seen on the quality of the thesis statement and on the abandon of the five-paragraph format by inserting the argumentative text moves. However, most of the students´ argumentation still needed additional work.

KEYWORDS: argumentative texts; Australian school; the movement from the abstract to the concrete; writing assessment; writing instruction

1. Introduction

Genre studies have become highly relevant not only for language studies but also for writing instruction. There are three perspectives on L1/L2 writing instruction: 1) the traditional one, which focuses on the final writing piece and on its accuracy; 2) the process writing which highlights the process of writing and 3) genre-based perspectives which conceive writing as a social embedded activity ruled by rhetorical principles delineated by discourse communities.

Although genre studies have been growing considerably both in Brazil and overseas, and gradually utilized for writing instruction, especially abroad, the literature lacks more research about the effect of genre-based pedagogies on students' writing improvement (CHENG, 2006; JUSWIK et al, 2006; TARDY,2006).

This paper contributes to the area of genre-based writing instruction assessment as it reports the effect of a genre-based writing course on ESL students' performance enrolled in a North-American university. The writing pieces chosen for this article are the argumentative texts which were analyzed qualitatively. The analysis indicates that students improved their performance in this genre.

2. The study

The genre-based course was designed following the Australian school which adopts systemic functional linguistics (SFL) tenets and an activity-theory based pedagogy named the movement from the abstract to the concrete (MAC) (DAVYDOV, 1988 a, b, c, d). Three genres were taught in the 15-week-course: announcements, cover letters and argumentative texts. They were depicted because they were either often read or written by the university students (announcements and argumentative texts) or because they were important for their careers (cover letters). This paper will report the effect of the genre-based writing course on argumentative texts.

14 students, originally from Asia or Central America, consented to participate in this study. They were mainly immigrants to the United States, having moved there at the average

age of 13. In general they did not have a good command of the English language, especially of writing. Out of the 14, six had their writing analyzed qualitatively for improvement. They were selected for having developed theoretical thinking most in the study. Theoretical thinking consisted of another topic investigated which will be briefly discussed later in this paper.

2. Methodology

2.1. of data collection

The writing pieces consisted of the students' pre-tests and post-tests that they took in class. The texts were typed and any trace of the students' identities was removed from the text. The words pre-test and post-test did not appear in the tests either. In this way the raters in their scoring were not influenced by either access to the students' identities or by the words pre-test and post-test. The texts were randomly assigned to the raters.

The test consisted of the writing placement test used by the department which offered the course. Whereas the pre-test pointed out that the assignment was a placement test which should be taken seriously in order to place the student appropriately; the post-test omitted this information. The texts were not edited.

The test offered students three topics to be discussed about: 1) the value and weaknesses of standardized tests, 2) strategies and techniques to learn English, 3) positive and negative aspects of broad-based education[1]. They had 65 minutes to take the test.

2.2 of data analysis

The qualitative analysis was carried out by identifying the presence of the moves of the argumentative text and its quality as informed by HACKER (1999), a manual on argumentative writing frequently used in freshman composition. As this study was part of a larger one with other goals besides writing improvement, I opted to employ a manual rather than conducting a genre analysis by myself. Although she does not approach the argumentative text as genre or its parts as moves her book represents an extremely influential book on the writing of argumentative texts. Language problems will only be considered if they interfere in the performance of the genre.

According to this author, the argumentative text has the following parts, not necessarily in this sequence: introduction, thesis statement (preferably at the end of the introduction[2]), argumentation, conclusion, establishing common ground, showing opponent's view, and rebuttal (dealing with opposing arguments).

For the introduction and thesis statement, she prescribes the following: " … the most common strategy is to open the paragraph with a few sentences that engage the reader and to conclude with a statement of the essay's main point. The sentence stating the main point is called a thesis"(p.13). The thesis should be "a generalization, not a fact; it should be limited, not too broad; and it should be sharply focused, not too vague" (p.15). The argumentation should be supported with plenty of evidence (facts, statistics, examples, and experts' opinion, for example). The conclusion should "echo your main idea, without dully repeating it, … summarize your main point, pose a question for future study, offer advice, or propose a course

[1] Universities in the United States require students to take course outside their majors to develop a broader approach to learning.

[2] Hacker (1999) recommends the following, which was also addressed in our classes: "In the United States … a direct approach is usually appreciated; when you state your point as directly as possible, you show that you value your reader's time" (p. 16).

of action" (p.16-17). Common ground should be established to entice the opponent (p.43). The opponent's view should also be displayed and should be refuted (p.43).

3. The analysis of the pre-tests

Table 1 shows the presence of the moves of the genre argumentative texts in the pre-test.

Student/ move	Introduction	Thesis	Argumentation	Conclusion	Common ground	Opponent's view	Rebuttal
K	X	X	X	X			
Cho	X	X	X	X			
M	X	X	X	X			
H		X	X	X			
Chl	X	X	X	X			
X	X	X	X	X			

Table 1 − Students' performance on the pre-test of argumentative texts.

K's text has an introduction, a thesis statement, argumentation, and a conclusion, but they are not well executed. The introduction does not set the context for the thesis properly, since it does not engage the reader. Although the introduction concludes with the thesis statement, it is not phrased with appropriate words ("There are same good and bad part of having this test.")

"Good and bad part" could have been replaced with 'advantages' and 'disadvantages', for example. This indicates the student might have an underdeveloped vocabulary in L2. The argumentation needs further development, since he pointed out just one advantage and one disadvantage for the standardized test. Further, he does not develop the relationship between cheating and testing. This short argumentation is followed by a brief conclusion, which simply repeats what was said in the argument. In sum, K has an understanding of some of the moves of the genre; however, he does not develop them well. The use of transitional words in the text (first of all, also, all in all) indicates a formulaic use of these words to provide cohesion to the text.

Cho also uses four of the seven required moves of the genre: introduction, thesis, argumentation, and conclusion. His introduction is interesting, since it relates language to culture ("English is represented west culture and Chinese is represented East culture") but does not explain this relationship better to engage the reader appropriately. He also does not explain why learning English is an obstacle. His text does not have a thesis that reveals his opinion about the value of these strategies as the prompt required; instead his text supports a simple fact ("I have used some ways to develop my English abilities."). Hacker (1999, p.15) refers to this type of thesis as "factual." Cho's argumentation supports this factual thesis by expressing one idea per paragraph and indicating this structure by using transitional words (first of all, in addition, finally), in the beginning of each paragraph.

The conclusion introduces some new ideas ("being patient and responsible to our study") since Cho does not associate the strategies used with the idea of patience and responsibility. In contrast, the conclusion attempts to provide a message to the reader: "If we spend our times and being patient and responsible to our study, we will smile at the end to be a winner. Also, It is not only on English, It can be everything in our life!".

Cho shows understanding of the five-paragraph essay but was not able to construct an appropriate thesis statement. The five-paragraph essay has the following format: introduction with a three-part thesis, three body paragraphs (one for each point of the thesis and use of transitions between paragraphs) and conclusion which summarizes the text (CHUPPA-

CORNELL, 1996; FOLEY, 1989). This formulaic writing in the use of the 'genre' five-paragraph essay and in the use of transitional words constituted a pattern most students followed to carry out the pre-test.

M misunderstood the assignment prompt and, instead of writing a text about the strategies she used to learn English, she seems to argue about the relevance of ESL courses for bilingual and multilingual speakers. She knows the general organization of the five-paragraph essay, but does not show strong argumentation in her text. Her introduction is not appealing due to language problems (wrong verb tense, lack of verbs, mispunctuation) and some loose sentences ("I am a Asian American."/ "In this class are either bilingual or multilingual speakers.") that interfere with her message. She finishes the paragraph with an unclear thesis ("In this class are either bilingual or multilingual speakers. because this class can help us learn more about the English, it will take it easy to learn, and we can easier to understand the skill."). In fact, this thesis is factual; it does not reveal the students' stance about the topic. She points out three advantages of ESL classes ((a) "class can help us learn more about the English", b) "it will take it easy to learn", c) "we can easier to understand the skill") which guides the subsequent organization of the text. Each paragraph that follows begins with part of the 'thesis'. However, this strategy does not improve the quality of the text as she is not able to support the points she raised. Her conclusion is basically a repetition of the 'thesis'. She uses a good sentence ("ESL class is Very important to improve the people who is English as a second languladge"); however, it loses value since she did not show how ESL courses/programs are relevant to bilingual or multilingual students' lives.

H initiates his text with a factual thesis ("As a bilingual student I have tried some strategies and techniques to help me develop my English language abilities.") and provides some evidence to support his argumentation (the use of bilingual dictionaries and songs to enrich his vocabulary) in the first and second paragraphs. The conclusion is redundant ("The strategies bilingual students use are many. Every bilingual or multilingual student has many strategies to develop their English language abilities,") and introduces a new idea ("but there are a couple of them that are better and easier to use than others."). He mentions the better and easier strategies, though he has not referred to them in his argumentation nor has he made a statement about them in his thesis. Yet, the last sentence of the conclusion ("As a bilingual student I can say it is very important to have a strategie to develop your English language skills, so that, Your English will improve so much.") is appropriate and would be more effective if he had used the adjective" important" in the thesis to convey more stance.

Similarly to Cho and M, Chl produces a typical five-paragraph essay. Her organization becomes even more formulaic with the use of transitional words "first", "second" and "third". Her introduction is inadequate since she does not set the context for the topic; rather she introduces herself and presents her proficiency in the language. Although she developed her argument well, she did not construct a thesis that revealed a stance ("There are couple ways [strategies to learn English] that I would like to share with you."). Actually, Chl uses a tenor quite consistent with this thesis. The thesis, through the use of the words "share" and "you", lends a didactic tenor to the text. This tenor is effectively maintained through extensive use of the first and second person pronouns and of the imperative form ("make friends with native English speakers"/ "don't be afraid" / "ask them to help you") throughout the text. Nevertheless, she is not aware that these linguistic forms are inappropriate for argumentative texts. Her conclusion rightly does not add new ideas or repeat the thesis, and is also in tune with the didactic tenor she used in the text ("hopefully they can help someone else too").

On one hand, Chl wrote a coherent text, since she used appropriate linguistic forms to achieve her goal of writing a didactic text on English-learning strategies. Whether the use of

these forms and this goal was conscious or not is impossible to determine.[3] On the other hand, Chl produces a typical five-paragraph essay, with formulaic transitional words to introduce the arguments (first, second, third), inappropriate tenor and introduction for the genre argumentative text, and a factual thesis statement.

X wrote a text in the five-paragraph format. Her introduction could have been more appealing, for example, by focusing more on her personal struggle to learn English and setting a good context for the thesis. Her thesis is also factual ("I have found some ways to improve my English."). Like Cho, M, and Chl, she managed to support the factual thesis and organize this argument neatly (one idea per paragraph). However, the format limits the development of her ideas and she uses formulaic transitional words (first, then, third). Although transitions are necessary for effective writing, the use of these words as a formula such as 'all paragraphs should start with a transitional word' (first, second, third; or first, then, finally) is problematic. Her conclusion does not introduce any new ideas and refers back to what she said ("Above are just some of the good ways …"); nevertheless, this, as the entire text, is I-focused, which is not an appropriate tenor for this genre.

In general, students showed the ability to support a thesis, even though it was factual, and to construct organized texts. The neat organization stems from the utilization of the fixed five-paragraph format, which is an adaptation of the argumentative text genre to a school genre for assessment purposes. Students were unaware of the other moves of the genre: establishing common ground, displaying the opponent's view, rebuttal and the restatement of the thesis. The argumentation of some students (K, M, and H) needed to be developed further in order to support the thesis. Despite the organization, most texts were poor in quality because content needed to be developed and linguistic problems occurred, especially in M's text.

4. The analysis of the post-tests

Table 2 shows the presence of the moves of the genre argumentative text in the post-tests.

Student/ move	Introduction	Thesis	Argumentation	Conclusion	Common ground	Opponent's view	Rebuttal
K	X	X	X	X		X	
Cho	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
M	X	X	X	X			
H	X	X	X	X			
Chl	X	X	X	X		X	X
X	X	X	X	X			

Table 2 − Students' performance on the post-tests of argumentative texts.

K includes an opponent's view in his introduction ("Many students think that why should they take physical or humanity course while they are majoring in Engineering. How can these course are helpful for their major?"). The thesis shows stance in the use of the modal 'must' ("there are some reasons that every student must take physical or humanity education.") and is supported with some evidence. The first argument is confusing ("What Kenisiology have to do with math or science. So if a university take away the physical or humanity course, they have to cancel out the math and science course for Kenisiology too. That will be unfare for the student who major is Kenisiology Math and Science."). He is not able to explain clearly the fairness issue as it relates to broad-based education. In contrast, the

[3] Future research should address this issue since Dayvdov's approach nourishes students' control of their actions. Thus, it is relevant that students use the concepts of field, tenor, and mode consciously in writing.

second argument is supported well with the testimony of a student. The conclusion restates what was previously discussed. In sum, K reveals some improvement in writing argumentative texts by inserting a new move (the opponent's view) and by constructing a thesis with a stance, rather than just a factual one.

Cho's text contains all the moves of an argumentative text. The introduction is realized in one sentence, which, unfortunately, is copied from the assignment prompt ("In American Universities, students are required to take courses outside their major to develop a bredder approach to learning."). Unlike the pre-test, the post-test thesis reveals his opinion about the issue ("Atthough taking some courses not related to the major is time consuming, students gain much more benefits rather than spend."). Despite the poor proficiency in the language, he attempts to express the opponent's view ("Now, there is a view to say: It is not necessary to take minor courses, these courses too much times, and not relate to major."), establishes common ground ("We know that taking the minor courses are the consuming "), and rebuts the opponent's view (" but they are necessary."/ "The minor courses provide very fundamental knowledge and skills to prepare the major courses.") with evidence.

He employs appropriate arguments to convince the reader of his opinion: a) the value of foreign languages to a business career, b) the benefits of physical education for health, c) the entertainment provided by minor courses, d) the relevance of a minor in the job search. The conclusion provides a sense of closure to the text

> In short, students take the minor courses to enlarge their abilities to solve the problem, which they may face. Taking minor courses is very valuable to make them to be succeeded. Therefore, we should take the minor courses to build up our qualification to achieve our goals in future.

To summarize, Cho improved his writing noticeably; he learned the schematic structure of argumentative texts, constructed a thesis with a stance, and developed appropriate argumentation. However, he still has problems with the English language.

M's text is in the five-paragraph format with the following moves: introduction, thesis statement, argumentation, and conclusion. Her introduction is very brief and does not entice the reader, for it provides obvious information ("Students study at universities have to take their courses. The courses have to retate to their majors."). The thesis shows a stance through use of the adjective "good" and simply blueprints the organization of the text ("That is good for you because you can improve and learn more skill for yourself, get more experiences, and can see what happen outside your major."). Her low-level of language ability prevents her argument from being effective. Her conclusion simply restates the thesis. M shows little improvement from the pre-test to the post-test. Her writing is still restricted to the five-paragraph essay format; her linguistic abilities make it difficult for her to develop the moves appropriately and clearly. Her only improvement is that she constructed a thesis with a stance in the post-test.

H reveals little improvement as well, since his thesis remains factual ("I have improved my writing and speaking skills by doing simple thinks like reading in my free time, singing, and writing in my diary.") and he writes in the five-paragraph essay format: two paragraphs for the introduction, a three-pronged thesis developed in two paragraphs, and a paragraph for the conclusion. The only improvement detected was the addition of an introduction in the post-test. In fact, this introduction is appealing to the reader since H was able to highlight the relevance of the topic under discussion ("I, as a bilingual student, have learned that learning or adopting a new language is not easy. And it could become something very frustrating, specially when nobody understands what you say."). In both tests he was I-focused, which is not an appropriate tenor in this genre.

Chl revealed considerable improvement in her text. She shows two moves of the argumentative text: an opponent's view ("People might think that ESL classes offer easy assignments and all basic stuff.") and a rebuttal ("That's not true."). In addition, she does not use the formulaic transitional words (first, second, third) like in her pre-test. Her introduction is quite appealing since she is able to establish some credibility with the topic ("through out the entire process of learning English, I have already found some of the strategies that actually could help me to develop English skills."). The thesis statement reveals a clear stance through the use of the adjective 'helpful' ("In my opinion, attending ESL classes and communicating more with native English speakers are very helpful for learning English.").The argument is effective and convincing, and the conclusion not only summarizes the text but also offers advice ("We cannot be too anxious to learn everything in English in a short time, we have to do it step by step."). Both her tests reveal that Chl is a writer able to use different tenors in her text: the pre-test was didactic and I-focused, whereas the post-test was more impersonal, suitable to the argumentative text required by college writing assignments.

X's text contains an introduction, a thesis with a stance ("Broad-based education is sufficient to help students to developed broad-based knowledge and abilities which are very important elements for success."), some argumentation, and a conclusion. Her introduction is appealing because it is informative

> In our college study, besides the courses required by our majors, we still have to take many other courses for general education and some course for election. General education courses includ general science, humanity, arts, and social study. For elected credits, we can choose some course out of the major field and general study, but which we are interested in. The U.S college education are combited with these three conpaits; it is called broad-based education.

Her argumentation is reasonable since she provides two arguments to support her thesis: 1) broad-based education is important because it provides the person with an array of abilities, required by the market; 2) broad-based education is important because it provides more opportunities to students. However, it is not clear how more choices and opportunities provided by broad-based education can lead these students to success.

> Broad-based education provide more choices and opportunity for students. Students can try outher fields besides their major to get more experience. Maybe, we can find out other field is more appropriate than the current major. If we never try other things, we will not know which is the best for us.

Her post-test is somewhat we-focused, whereas the pre-test was I-focused. The conclusion restates the thesis, and is to some degree confusing, due to misspelling. In summary, X improved her writing in some aspects (the introduction, the thesis, the use of transitional words) but not in others (the focus on the first person pronoun, weak argumentation, and a somewhat confusing conclusion).

In the pre-test, four students (Cho, M, Chl, and X) wrote in the five-paragraph format, while in the post-test two students (H and M) wrote in it. Although Chl wrote just four paragraphs in the post-test the text was not in the five-paragraph mode, since it contained moves of the argumentative text such as opponent's view and rebuttal. Thus, what identifies a text as manifesting the five-paragraph format is not only the presence of five paragraphs but also the formulaic use of language: three-pronged (factual) thesis, formulaic transitional words, and absence of the moves establishing common ground, opponent's view and rebuttal. The analysis of the texts reveals that Cho and Chl improved noticeably, whereas M and H showed little progress. X had some development, followed by K. The effect of the genre-based writing course on argumentative text writing can be mainly observed on the abandon of

the five-paragraph format, by introducing some or all moves of the genre, and on the construction of a non-factual thesis. The quality of the argumentation needed additional work.

5. Discussion

The qualitative analysis of the pre-tests and post-tests in the genre argumentative text revealed that students, in general, improved their writing. Chl and Cho improved considerably, while M and H improved only slightly. Cho incorporated all the moves of the genre in his text, and Chl inserted all moves, except for establishing common ground. Cho's and Chl's texts developed appropriate argumentation, which could be identified by the presence of the opponent's view move. The few number of students who improved (2 out of 6) can be explained by the fact that they received little instruction on this genre.

Argumentative texts were taught for just three classes during the 13th and 14th weeks of the course when the moves of the genre were given and excerpts of Hacker (1999) were read and discussed. Students read three samples of the genre, carried out linguistic analyses, based on systemic functional principles, and identified the genre moves. The teacher posted the answers to these exercises in a global learning environment used by the university instructors called Angel and similar to market counterparts like The Blackboard. As a result, there could be no extensive discussion of their possible doubts. The instructor also emphasized cultural differences in mastering this genre, such as the direct approach preferred by Americans (HACKER,1999, p. 16) and the indirect approach employed by some eastern cultures (HINDS, 1990). Thus, the little time spent on this genre was not enough to encourage all students to abandon the five-paragraph format or to incorporate new moves of the genre.

Students likely employed the five-paragraph format because it was probably the form of writing that was taught and practiced in their school and it is a suitable writing formula for timed writing tests (CHUPPA-CORNELL, 1996; KUEHNER, 1990). Moreover, as this writing was done in class and students knew they were being tested for placement purposes (the pre-test), they were not interested in taking the risk to write more extensively (some students did not even write five paragraphs – K and H). The more they wrote, the more mistakes they were likely to make; and consequently, their placement might have been jeopardized. Thus, the five-paragraph mode might be an appropriate 'genre' for the testing situation.

The fact that H wrote in the five-paragraph format in the post-test but not in the pre-test indicates that he knew this type of writing by the time of the pre-test. Nevertheless, he might not have used it because of some anxiety caused by the test, or lack of ideas to come up with an introduction and one more argument to support the thesis. Also, H, aware of his writing problems, might have wanted to remain at the lower level of the writing course and consequently, might have decided not to put so much effort into the test.

These students still needed more extensive work with language to improve their writing. The instructor attempted to help them improve their proficiency through linguistic analysis of the different genres studied, and by raising their awareness of the choices the language system offers the user. Unfortunately, as the course had perhaps an overly ambitious set of goals (to develop theoretical thinking, to teach generic moves of the genre, to improve their language abilities, and to encourage more control in their actions) there was not sufficient time for extensive language-focused work.

As hypothesized in Ferreira (2005) students need three types of knowledge to write effectively: empirical knowledge of genre, theoretical knowledge of genre, and linguistic knowledge. Empirical knowledge consists of knowing the generic moves of the genre, whereas linguistic knowledge is language proficiency. Theoretical knowledge refers to the understanding of how ACP manifests in a genre. The ACP (abstract communicative principle)

is a basic[4] founding principle of communication employing systemic categories and was the orientation of the course in order to develop theoretical thinking among students. In other words, to write well in the genre argumentative text a student needs to know that this genre has a social purpose, which is to provide a particular perspective on a certain debatable issue, and to convince the reader about the thesis, or at least, make him/her see the problem from a different perspective. A visual representation of what could be the theoretical knowledge for the genre argumentative text follows:

Field (realized in the moves, refers to the debatable issue chosen by the writer)

↓

Tenor (different voices are portrayed but the writer´s prevails)

Mode (realizing textually the above)

Four students (K, M, H, X) did not fully absorb the empirical knowledge of the genre argumentative texts, since they only provided introduction, thesis, argumentation, and conclusion in their texts. Regarding linguistic knowledge, M was the most lacking and language-related problems clearly hindered her writing in the genre. Cho and Chl seemed to have developed some theoretical knowledge; as they constructed a convincing text with appropriate arguments. However, the methodology of data collection of the study does not allow us to state with certainty how much theoretical knowledge of argumentative texts these two students had and if they employed it to write them. The use of theoretical knowledge as a tool for effective writing needs to be further investigated by explicitly asking students to use their visual representations of the genre taught (the modeling phase of the MAC pedagogy) to write. These representations should refer to the ACP. In addition, students were not aware that the field, tenor and mode have specific combinations in this genre. These limitations were certainly a consequence of the lack of time available for a thorough treatment of the genre.

The number of arguments did not increase from the pre-test to the post-test, probably because these tests constituted timed writing tasks, where students had 65 minutes to generate ideas, write, and revise.

In sum, students did not have empirical knowledge of the genre argumentative text (they knew a simplified school version of it) and obviously did not possess theoretical knowledge of the genre, which refers to the social purpose of this genre and how tenor, field, and mode are combined in it.

6.Conclusion

Despite the short amount of instruction on the genre argumentative texts, students were able to show some improvement on the level of organization, argumentation and thesis construction. This result reveals the potential of genre-based writing instruction for L2 writing improvement. The paper also raises the hypothesis about the need of a third type of knowledge for writing . the theoretical knowledge of the genre . still to be tested in subsequent research.

[4] In dialectical logic which rules theoretical thinking basic means abstract.

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