Enhancing students’ writing skills through the genre approach

Dawit Amogne
Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia.

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In Ethiopia, the role English language plays in education and industries is indubitable although the language is considered largely as a foreign language. Paradoxically, studies indicate that the English language proficiency of Ethiopian students is plummeting. This article reports on a study conducted to examine the extent to which EFL students who majored in English at Bahir Dar University improved their argumentative essay writing skills as they were exposed to a genre based writing practice with their writing teacher. The results revealed out that throughout their learning, even after their exposure to genre based argumentative essay drafting, students had serious problems of critiquing or rebutting opposition views and coming up with stronger refutations. However, they were able to show progress in terms of identifying the lexico-grammatical features and overall rhetorical (genre) structure of argumentative essays. The participants’ reaction toward the approach was positive. The paired-samples t-test also indicated that the students’ argumentative texts written during the post-intervention phase showed significant improvements compared to the pre-intervention drafts. It was generally understood that given a learning passage through a genre based approach in writing, students could take control over the linguistic features of text types with particular communicative purposes, and develop their writing skills at ease. The article suggests implications for teaching of writing in EFL contexts. It has also called for the employment of the genre approach in EFL writing classroom contexts.

Key words: Genre, genre-based writing, essay, rhetoric, argumentation, EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

INTRODUCTION

Although in Ethiopia, English is seen as only a foreign language, there is a tendency today that the language is being understood as an official language next to Amharic, which is the official language of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The language is a medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary levels of education. Besides, it is a dominant language in workplace communication areas such as business, science, technology in quite many government and non-government offices (Mekasha, 2006; Hailom, 2009). In Ethiopia, university students’ level of English is plummeting very dramatically. The government is trying to boost the level of use of English to a better state; notwithstanding this effort made by the government, the students’ level in English proficiency is a deteriorating one that university teachers today find themselves in a serious confrontation to deal with the problem given they have very limited time working on students’ English. This is of course a manifestation in my own classroom where university students attending my writing classes...
are facing almost undefeatable problems in their attempt to produce simple written texts in English. Several attempts have been made to strengthen the TEFL situation in Ethiopia. Research works conducted at different levels are good examples showing these efforts. Writing requires the linguistic and cognitive skills of the writer, and it is not simple to achieve with a mere thought, but with practice; it is thus a thorny skill (Silva, 1990; Raimes, 1983, 1991). It demands caliber from both students and teachers in general. As the students revealed during the discussion, EFL writing tasks were becoming nuisance for them mainly because they had linguistic deficiencies.

Reports from writing instructions reveal successes in the genre approach (Weber, 2001; Chaisiri, 2010; Ning, 2008; Flowerdew, 2000). Process writing is also reported to have effect in heightening the writing abilities and confidence of students (Chaisiri, 2010; Ho, 2006; Bruton, 2005). In the same vein, process approach is highly advocated (Raimes, 1983, 1991; Flower and Hayes (1981, cited in Kim and Kim, 2005). A local study in Ethiopia by Yonas (1996) indicated, regardless of the difficulties, that the process approach to teaching writing is commendable in the Ethiopian context.

However, research investigating the Ethiopian students’ practice of writing in English is generally scanty, and there is no study which assesses the effectiveness of the genre-based approach to writing in EFL classroom context.

Given these realities, it seems clear that there is a need to find ways that may take to a better future. This study is partly motivated by the realities mentioned above. Thus, it aimed at scrutinizing the rhetorical structures of argumentative essays written by second year students studying English at a Bachelor’s degree level. Put it differently, the study attempted to explore the writing development in argumentative essays of English language undergraduate students who have experienced the genre-based writing approach.

Swales defines the concept of genre as follows:

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style (Swales, 1990).

Widdowson (2007) also defines genre as “a use of language which conforms to certain schematic and textual conventions, as agreed by a particular discourse community.” In Bhatia’s (1993) conception, genre is “a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purposes.”

Even though the notion seems a little controversial, Askehave and Swales (2001), analyzing the genres found in different professional areas, account for the existing curricula of English (Paltrridge, 1996; Bhatia, 1993). One possibility is that the genres are teachable as there are conventions for the rhetorical structures of different text types; does argumentative essay have its own communicative purpose and rhetorical features?

The author’s argument in doing genre investigation sprang from the ideas of Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993). According to Bhatia, “… a particular type of conventional codification of meaning is appropriate to a particular institutionalized socio-cultural setting” (p.5). It can be, therefore, argued that the way we organize argumentative essays is quite different from the way we build other discourse types such as narration, exposition and description. If this happens to be true, it is worth investigating the text features learners produce for different purposes. This is because the learners will be aware of the skeletal form and building blocks of their own academic compositions. Having developed the knowledge about the schematic structure of various text types, students can look into specific features of texts, and thereby build up their texts for particular purposes. More importantly, the genre approach of studying texts written for different communicative purposes will undoubtedly have contributions and implications for ESP learning and teaching (Weber, 2001; Partrridge, 1996; Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Henry and Roseberry, 1997).

The other factor which led to this research is the fact that research in the area is yet budding in general, and, to date, there is no local research addressing the issue. Thus, as part of the efforts made to drive the English as a foreign language academic environment in the optimal track, this study attempted to scrutinize the linguistic features and communicative purposes of argumentative essays, and it drew lessons for the current and/or future direction(s) of dealing with the multifaceted features of written texts.

This position is supported by Bhatia (1993), who points out that genre analysts have often underplayed psychological factors in aiming to account for their descriptions of textual staging. For Bhatia, it is this very perspective which reveals the cognitive structures, typical of particular areas of enquiry.

A number of published genres have been studied in the literature, including research articles (Yang and Allison, 2003; Swales, 1990), abstracts (Yakhontova, 2002), grant proposals (Connor and Mauranen, 1999), theses and dissertations (Paltrridge, 2002), letter of application (Henry and Roseberry, 2001), argumentative essay introductions and conclusions (Henry and Roseberry, 1997).

By and large, the author believes that this kind of study can critically investigate the correlation between grammatical forms and functions used in work places.
Such studies on conventionalized organizational structure of various genre help experienced readers to process the texts efficiently and teachers to understand the rhetorical structures meaningfully. Many researchers (Hyland, 2004; Johns, 1997; Swales, 1990) have argued that the findings of move structure analyses can be translated into the classroom, especially for L2 writers in tertiary education. More importantly, the results of the genre analysis could be translated into teaching of the genres as they have moves and steps that can be identified and learnt. The assumption held here is that the genre approach could help learners capture the text features and linguistic forms of the genre in question. The focus in this study is argumentative essay.

An argumentative essay has a unique purpose when compared to other genres such as exposition and narration, not to mention very few text types. The selection of vocabulary items and grammatical preferences may also depend on the nature of the text in question in general and its communicative goal.

Thus, this study aimed at exploring model argumentative written texts, and examining the English language students’ writing development as a result of experience in a genre based writing classroom context.

Research questions

1. What are the rhetorical moves and steps employed in students’ text-responsible argumentative essays?
2. Are there argumentative essay writing improvements as students move from draft to draft? If so, what are the major aspects of the improvement?
3. What does the students’ overall experience in the genre based classroom context look like?
4. Is there a difference between the text structures of high and low-scored essays?

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Participants

The participants of the study were 24 second year English students in Bahir Dar University. These participants were in their second year study. They had already taken a basic writing course before they were taught argumentative essay writing using a genre approach.

The data

The data were composed of a corpus of 48 argumentative essays of participants – half were gathered at the initial stage, the remaining half (24) at the end. The first draft was used only as a baseline, and the second was evaluated to see if students showed progresses in terms of structuring the argumentative genre. The essay students composed was on the topic whether expansion of higher education could be a solution to poverty reduction in Ethiopia. This topic was chosen principally because it was assumed that the topic was arguable in the concurrent Ethiopian situation. It was also believed that the students were familiar with the idea.

Instruments

The instruments employed for this study were test and interview. The pretest was used as a baseline to assess where the students’ level of writing was in terms of drafting argumentative texts.

Data analysis methods

The following elaboration of the teaching and learning cycle was adapted from Paltridge (2001).

Building knowledge of field

The teacher introduced argumentative genre to the students and helped them to analyse the genre structure.

Joint construction of text

The teacher and students worked together to construct texts that are similar to the text that had already been learnt in the previous stage.

Independent construction of text

Students worked independently and practised a lot to produce their own texts within the genre chosen.

Move analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993) was employed. Steps in each move were then identified. The Holistic Approach was employed in marking the essays. A five point marking scale ranging from excellent to very poor (5-1) was employed. Several argumentative essays were produced at different times but only the two — one at the beginning and another at the end of the intervention were rated. The marking of essays was made by two TEFL experts for whom the inter-rater reliability was found to be $r=0.88$ and $r=0.91$ for argumentative writing assignments I and II respectively.

The data were re-coded several times to guarantee a better level of reliability. As a text is made up of a series of moves, each of which may contain one or more steps. The steps are the strategies through which writers typically sequence information in the context of a particular genre. They are short communicative purposes of the texts. These moves and steps were identified based on approaches suggested by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993). All the moves and steps that appeared at least once were included in the data analysis. Ultimately, an analysis of data was made by scrutinizing the students’ argumentative essays. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were made, and implications are forwarded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Henry and Roseberry (1997), the overall function of an argumentative essay is to put forward a point of view, and defend or explain it. The general essay structure model as presented by Bruffee (1980) is observed:
1. Introduction: background and preparation
2. Body: Argument (Support)
3. Conclusion: Relevance of proposition

The corpus was then analysed in terms of basic essay structure as presented by Bruffee. Accordingly, the moves and steps followed by the writers’ (second year English students’) essays.

Generally, the basic genre-step structures are presented in the following Table 1.

**Genre moves and steps identified**

In the introduction section of the essays, background and preparation, three moves were identified. These were: establishing an issue (66.6%), introducing opposing views (91.67%) and narrowing the focus and announcing a position (91.67%). These were realized through the steps or strategies (to use Henry and Roseberry, 1997’s term). Example sentences were extracted from the texts produced by the students (see the examples given in the table).

In the body, wherein the argument (support to argument) was realized, three moves were realized. The first move, justifying the thesis was seen among 19% of the essays which involved two specific communicative purposes (steps/strategies): stating a reason / evidence (42%) and providing evidence to back up the reason (95.8%). The backup used in this phase involved examples, historical evidences and statistics. The second move, linkage to the thesis was exhibited in 75% examples, historical evidences and statistics. The second move, linkage to the thesis was exhibited in 75% of the texts. The last move in this stage was addressing counterargument which was in very few texts (8.32%). Stating the opposite view (14.16%) and refuting the argument (38.66%) were used in these few texts.

The conclusion stage was the other phase under examination. Unlike Henry and Roseberry’s (1997) observation of conclusion as an optional move, all the essays in this study were found to have conclusions. Two important moves were identified. The first move consolidating the position (59%) involved three steps: signaling conclusion (83%), restating the thesis/proposition (91.6%), and pressing against opposition (20.8%). The other move, calling for actions was seen in 28% of the texts gathered. In this last move of the essays two strategies were dominantly used: suggesting what to do (62.5%) and concluding (46%).

What students were able to achieve, as described so far, conform the model texts’ essays analyzed at the beginning of the study. However, it should be noted that there were aspects of the genre that students were having difficulties with. Various genres and steps were employed to a greater extent throughout the essays with varying rates. The author, however, witnessed that even after exposing themselves to various argumentative texts, students were almost unable to critique (rebut) the opposition views. That might have affected their ability to produce even a stronger argument. Appealing to an authority was not seen at all. It means students lacked the skill of connecting arguments to literature. The dominant feature of students’ compositions was circular argumentations where students restated the arguments rather than proving them.

Texts were assessed to have progress in various forms. Compared to the initial argumentative text, the post-intervention texts had shown improvements in:

- Signaling (better employment of transitional devices)
- Clearer rhetorical organization
- Conformity to the rhetorical structures of model essays analyzed in the classroom
- Better awareness of lexico-grammatical features
- Better control over the language of argument

**Students’ reactions**

There were a number of things students benefited: Some as indicated by the interviewees were the following.

- Developed awareness about the rhetorical organization of an argumentative essay so that they developed the cognitive map of an argument in general.
- Became familiar with the lexico-grammatical features
- Enjoyment of the activities cognitive awareness that language is part of a complete text that occurs within an identifiable context.
- They were also found to have control over the language of argument. One of the interviewees put the following.

My serious problem in writing essays, particularly argumentative essays, was as to how I should begin and develop it. …It is like how to … I now know its structural organization …thus I have few problems putting my ideas together (Surafel, interviewed on 28 May 2011).

Another subjected reflected her views as follows. My fear was whether I was able to write an essay. … I think, I have a better understanding of what and how I should write the introduction and the conclusion at least (Selam, interviewed on 28 May 2011).

It seems that the students had the opportunity to take control of the text features in case of writing an argumentative essay.

**A paired-samples t-test**

The scores in the two phases (pre-intervention and post-intervention) were taken for comparative purposes and the results showed promising transitions. This paired samples t-test was executed to spastically examine...
Table 1. Genre moves and steps identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Moves</th>
<th>Steps (strategies)</th>
<th>Examples (from students’ texts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introducing the thesis</td>
<td>1. Establishing an issue (66.6%)</td>
<td>i. Describing a general concept (66.6%)</td>
<td>• Poverty is a serious common phenomena [sic] in the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ii. Citing authority (29.2%)</td>
<td>• According to UNESCO reports, many countries in the world…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>iii. Stating an example (12.5%)</td>
<td>• Even, the government change [sic] the major country budget for education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Introducing opposing views (91.67%)</td>
<td>i. stating what beliefs different people/parties (unnamed) hold (20.83%)</td>
<td>• There are some people who believe that education cannot be a solution to eradicate poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ii. stating an opposing view (single wing) – 66.6%</td>
<td>• They contend that …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>iii. Presenting justifications (25%)</td>
<td>• [they say] educated people in Ethiopia are poor…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Narrowing the focus &amp; announcing</td>
<td>i. Refutation/ridiculing (27.1%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• It is groundless to argue that …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a position (91.67%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>ii. Introducing one’s own position (83.3%)</td>
<td>• I stand for the second group of people who support education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>iii. Stating the thesis (100%)</td>
<td>• I, nevertheless, strongly believe that education plays a tremendous role in shaping the growth of the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>1. Justifying the thesis (19%)</td>
<td>i. Stating a reason / an evidence (42%)</td>
<td>• [It brings] economic development …and political stability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ii. Providing evidence to back up the reason (95.8%)</td>
<td>• … they are highly prosperous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>a) examples</td>
<td>• If people are educated, they can be engaged in solving problems related to economy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b) historical evidences</td>
<td>• When they reach what they want, they decide to leave…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c) statistics</td>
<td>• These all are contributing factors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What these people say is that…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• It is groundless to stand against education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Linkage to the thesis (75%)</td>
<td>i. Stating effects – 58.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td>• In conclusion,… / To sum up,… / To recapitulate,…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ii. Strengthening/re-stating the thesis – 83.3%</td>
<td>• Education is a fundamental solution for reducing … poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Addressing counterargument (8.32%)</td>
<td>i. Stating the opposite view (14.16%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Education can be a solution …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ii. Refuting the argument – 38.66%</td>
<td>• People who believe in education must change their mind…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Consolidating the Position (59%)</td>
<td>i. Signaling conclusion (83%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Every citizen deserves … sufficient education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ii. Restating the thesis/proposition (91.8%)</td>
<td>• Without education, no one does show any progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>iii. Pressing against opposition (20.8%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Together, let’s expand education and try to develop this nation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Calling for actions (28%)</td>
<td>i. Suggesting what to do (62.5%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ii. Concluding (46%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
whether there was a significant difference between the pre-intervention and post-intervention writing tests.

Table 2 illustrates the students’ argumentative writing performance at the pre-intervention and post-intervention sessions.

It is seen from the table above that there was a statistically significant improvement in students skill of argumentative writing performance after text focused approach was implemented \( (t=3.56, df=23, p=0.002) \). The implication is, therefore, the genre approach can boost students’ writing performance and it should be applied with some flexibility.

**Differences between high and low-scored essays**

With regard to the genre structure of argumentative essays of high \( (N=4) \) and low scorers \( (N=5) \) it was found out that the high-scored essays had a predictable essay structure whereas the low-scored essays did not follow a consistent step structure for the same move. It was also observed that the low proficiency students kept repeating the proposition. What is more, the points they mentioned, apart from grammatical deficiencies, had loose connections to the thesis. Another feature of an essay scored low demonstrated one prominent feature. It begins by introducing a reason and immediately rushes to the conclusion- without supplying enough support to the proposition.

**Conclusion and Implications**

Findings reveal the genre of argumentative essays of English language students, the improvements exhibited as students were taught argumentative writing skills using the genre approach, the students’ reactions toward the approach and the text variations between high and low proficient writers in the class have been discussed so far. Results revealed out that students can produce a rhetorically predictable argumentative essay given that they pass through the genre analysis approach. The approach could also give them opportunity to have cognitive control over the textual organization. As a result, they showed a significant improvement in independently producing an argumentative essay. It seems that students enjoyed the experience and got important features of an argument. Further, it was seen that the texts of low proficient writers lacked a strong link (justifying points) to the thesis. This result conforms to the findings of Chaisiri (2010), who reported writing developments and positive attitudes of students, having experienced genre based writing lessons. In a similar vein, Flowerdew (2000), after his examination of the effectiveness of genre based writing experience with technical communication students, suggests that the move analysis technique could enhance the writing abilities of students.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that if rhetorical patterns be taught with caution and flexibility, EFL (English as a foreign language) learners can benefit a lot and learn faster for the reason that the approach eases a burden by breaking a text down into functional units.

Having discovered the characteristics and genre features of moves and steps, learners can then be required to independently develop their own texts thereby they can experiment their own writing so as to produce better versions. There is, however, little evidence if these skills of a particular genre writing task are transferrable to some other genres.

Further research is sought to find out why students fail in academic writing and the studies should try to implement different forms of genre discovery. It is also good to keep learners abreast of various writing development options. This study has never assumed a conclusive role, nor does it put pressure on practitioners as the need for further exploration still remains the crucial question. As a point of argument, the author believes that in the Ethiopian EFL context where students’ failure in
English (and other subjects, as failure could be associated with lack of proficiency in the language) is frequently pronounced, the genre based approach to the teaching of writing is worth considering.

References


