A contrastive approach to genre-based pedagogies

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Abstract

A practical study was carried out designed to compare two pedagogical approaches to teaching genre. Two groups of business English students were established. The first group (linguistic analysis) followed a writing programme, in which they analysed the linguistic features of the report genre and practised the relevant language in a series of focused exercises. The second group (contextual analysis) followed a programme of similar length, in which they carried out various pedagogical tasks to encourage an in-depth understanding of the contexts in which reports are written. Both groups wrote pre-test paragraphs and a final report. These were assessed to determine the quality of each piece of writing and the progress made by individual students.

The students in both groups improved, and the gains were statistically significant in both cases. However, the contextual analysis group were found to make greater progress over the course of the programme, and their final reports were assessed as being of higher quality. Although these results cannot be taken simplistically as a vindication of top-down methodology for teaching genre, they demonstrate the complexity of the issues at stake. It is evident that there is often a wide gap between controlled practice of the kind provided by exercises, and real writing tasks in which students have to meet the rhetorical challenges of the professional world.

Key words: L2 writing, genre, genre pedagogy, business English.

Theoretical background

When teaching writing for specific purposes, the notion of genre is of crucial importance. The goal is clear: students need to master specific text types ranging from letters or e-mails to full-length reports or academic papers. However, the means by which this objective can best be achieved are less certain. A review of the literature shows the existence of two broad pedagogical trends (Flowerdew, 2002). The first, which is characteristically associated with the “Australian school” of genre pedagogy, but which also informs much ESP practice, is based loosely on systemic-functional approaches. The surface features of genres, such as lexis, grammar and rhetorical structure, are foregrounded, and links are established between these features and the writer's communicative purpose (Kress, 1987; Swales, 1990; Swales and Feak, 2000). In contrast, authors such as Freedman (1994) contest the claim that the explicit features of genres should be taught, and suggest that such teaching may even prove harmful because of the intrinsic complexity of written genres and the tendency of students to reify and misapply rules that they are taught. She argues that explicit discussion of formal features of genres may prove useful, but only as a secondary form of consciousness-raising integrated into practical writing activities. Along similar lines, Coe (2002), representing a tendency sometimes known as the “New Rhetoric”, emphasises the relationships between form and process that shape writing in real-world contexts and argues that genres are dynamic rhetorical choices. In his view, instruction should focus on exploring the forces and pressures that influence writers, helping students to discover how to write in concrete social situations by a process of guided participation. In the context of L2 writing, authors such as Ventola (1994), Yunik (1997) and Pang (2002) have adapted this “strong” emphasis on context to a blend which foregrounds context but does not exclude consideration of concrete language.
features arising from the study of contextualised examples. Such an approach ties in with the recent emphasis on situated learning which facilitates the transfer of skills (Adam and Artemeva, 2002). In pedagogical terms, this methodology could be described as a top-down approach to teaching genre. We designed a small-scale study to explore the differences between these two methodologies in practice, and to identify the positive contributions and possible difficulties of each approach.

**Experimental study**

Two groups of students enrolled on consecutive semesters of the course Inglés Empresarial were established. The first group (linguistic analysis, n=20) followed a 6-hour writing programme based on Swales and Feak (2000), in which they studied the linguistic features of the report genre and practised the relevant language. The second group (contextual analysis, n=24) followed a programme of similar length, in which they carried out various pedagogical tasks to encourage deeper understanding of the contexts in which reports are written. Both groups wrote a pre-test paragraph and a final report. The pre-tests and final reports were then analysed.

**Linguistic analysis group**

The programme followed by the linguistic analysis group began with a brief discussion of the market research (MR) report genre and analysis of a model text. Students were encouraged to draw on the model to perform paragraph-writing tasks, and were given further examples of appropriate language where relevant. Further activities were designed to sensitise the students to textual organisation, lexical choice including register, and the need for highlighting statements. At the end of these sessions, students brainstormed a checklist for report writing, and wrote reports as homework.

**Contextual analysis group**

Students began with discussion of MR and the methods used, and completed a questionnaire-writing activity in the classroom. The roles of manager, researcher and writer were discussed, with a particular emphasis on the need to obtain useful information and report it in a way that is appropriate in that context. Students then looked at three different extracts which were loosely related to the report genre, and worked in groups to note their ideas about the purpose of the texts and how their language might relate to that purpose. They then examined a longer report to obtain an overview of function and structure, and received a copy of the model given to the first group. Finally, students carried out a role play designed to raise their contextual awareness, in which they discussed sets of MR results, rated them in terms of importance, and predicted what consequences they might have for the different stakeholders. They wrote the reports individually as homework.
Results

Two methods of assessment were used. First, the pre-test paragraphs and final reports written by both groups were rated using an analytical scale developed to evaluate the extent to which students had assimilated particular aspects of the report genre over the course of the programme. Each report was assigned a score of 0, 1 or 2 on each category (0 indicated no conformity to the usual requirements of the report genre, 1 indicated that the report partially conformed to these norms, and 2 indicated that the report followed the genre conventions throughout). Second, the final reports written by the students in both groups were evaluated by two independent raters using an adapted TWE scale (0-6).

Table 1 shows the mean score on the final report for students in both groups. A total (out of a possible 18 points) is then calculated, for the purposes of comparison. In no case was the difference statistically significant. None the less, it is noticeable that the overall score was higher for the contextual analysis group than for the linguistic analysis group. Since the linguistic analysis group had followed a programme in which features of each of these categories were taught explicitly, it is somewhat surprising that the contextual analysis group scored slightly better.

Table 2 shows the mean gains from pre-test to final report on the same categories. Again, the contextual analysis group seemed to make slightly greater progress. In both cases, the overall gains were statistically significant (p<0.001 on Student's paired t-test), but the difference between the two gains was not significant.
Finally, in addition to the analytical assessments, the reports were graded holistically by two independent raters, using an adapted TWE scale (0-6). The agreement between the two raters was calculated using Kappa and Weighted Kappa, and was found to be “good” on both (Kappa=0.628, Weighted Kappa=0.704). The mean score in the linguistic analysis group was 4.48, whereas the mean score in the contextual analysis group was 4.76. Although this difference was not statistically significant, the balance was again tipped in favour of the contextual analysis group.

On a subjective level, it was striking that the students in the second group had made greater efforts to rise to the challenge of writing a report in a professional manner. Many of the reports written by the contextual analysis group were much longer than those written by the linguistic analysis group, showed greater efforts to explain and interpret the data, and had more developed analysis and recommendations. Another interesting contrast is that some of the students in the contextual analysis group seemed to have tried harder to “think themselves into” the task: several students invented a name for their own MR company, while others expanded at some length on the possible repercussions of falling sales. In general, the reports written by the contextual analysis group were more ambitious than those by the linguistic analysis group, and showed more evidence of higher-order skills in their order and development, and in the way they related the task to wider issues.

To summarise, as might be expected, the contextual analysis group performed particularly well in terms of understanding and developing the task. Disappointingly, there was no evidence of a parallel advantage existing for the linguistic analysis group as far as concrete language features such as register or use of equivalent or junction words were concerned.

Discussion

Although the contrastive design of the study obviously invites comparison, it was noted that the intention was not to "prove" the superiority of one methodology over another, but rather to identify the strengths and shortcomings of both. The first and most important point is that both programmes seemed to be helpful to the students: both groups made considerable progress from pre-test to final report. Although it might seem surprising that writing programmes of so few hours' duration should have such a powerful effect, it must be remembered that the programme was highly focused, and was grounded in areas which were known to be problematic for groups of this kind. Similar claims that specific aspects of L2 writing can undergo rapid improvement as a result of intensive instruction are made by other authors (Pang, 2002; Shaw and Liu, 1998), who note that short programmes enabled students to make rapid progress on aspects such as register or metadiscourse, seemingly independently of issues such as grammatical accuracy, which come closer to the core of general language competence and require longer time to develop. One key underlying factor is the development of essential strategies, such as planning and organising text, which are allied more to “clearly understanding what writing entails” (Zamel, 1983) than to increased knowledge of the language.

Regarding the comparative aspect of the study, the results are particularly encouraging for the contextual analysis group. These students actually made greater gains on most of
the categories assessed, and scored higher overall on their final written product. Qualitative differences pointed to greater engagement with the issue of genre in this group: their reports were more ambitious in their scope and attempted a more sophisticated analysis of data. In a similar comparative study involving the writing of film reviews, carried out by Pang (2002), the students who followed his “conceptual awareness building” programme seemed better able to “master the real-life intent and practices of the film reviewer” (p. 157), and showed a higher awareness of the discourse functions within the possibilities of the review. However, the findings from Pang's “textual analysis” group had no discernible echoes in the results obtained by the linguistic analysis group from the present study: Pang's “textual analysis” group obtained greater increases in scores on the mechanistic aspects of text, such as format and presence of obligatory features, and their overall improvement was greater on both criterial and holistic ratings.

One possible explanation for the better performance of the contextual analysis group in the present study is that the top-down approach encouraged students to develop more appropriate strategies, and to relate what they learnt in the writing program to their wider understanding of the field. It can be supposed that undergraduate students have some background schemata about writing and the function of texts in the business world, which they can draw on if encouraged. It may be that this program enabled students to activate their existing knowledge and strategies, and challenge their presuppositions, better than the more limited linguistic approach. The linguistic analysis group, on the other hand, may have interpreted the writing tasks as “yet another language exercise”, rather than as a simulation of writing in real contexts. They thus did not make as many connections between what they learnt and its uses and functions as the contextual analysis group did, which meant that they were less able to reproduce it when required. This interpretation is consistent with recent research on the difficulty of transferring writing skills from one context to another (Adam and Artemeva, 2002), which can be alleviated by ensuring that classroom writing simulates real-life writing activities.

Finally, it might be speculated that there is a further factor which could account for the differences between the present results and those of Pang. Pang notes that his Chinese students “were used to learning English by rote and rules” (2002: 157), surmising that this made them more receptive to the linguistic focus. The Spanish students in the present study were perhaps less receptive to this approach, preferring the more interactive, group-oriented methodology of the contextual analysis approach (Wong-Fillmore, 1982; Stebbins, 1995; Breeze, 2002). A contributing factor could also be that the top-down approach was in some sense more “adult” or more complex, which may have made it more motivating. At the very least, it contained enough of the “shock of the new” to engage their attention and encourage them to respond more creatively to the more demanding nature of the task framed by this methodology, than to the more limited one defined within the parameters of the linguistic analysis approach.

References


