The effectiveness of genre-based approaches in teaching academic writing: subject-specific versus cross-disciplinary emphases

by

Adelia Carstens

submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor Philosophiae

in

Linguistics

in the

Faculty of Humanities

at the

University of Pretoria

Supervisor: Prof. A.J. Weideman

October 2009

© University of Pretoria
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements xi
Abstract xiii

Chapter 1: Introduction 1
  1.1 Background and purpose 1
  1.2 The concept of genre 1
  1.3 Rationale for the study 2
  1.4 Criticisms and benefits of genre approaches 6
    1.4.1 Criticisms 6
    1.4.2 Benefits 9
  1.5 Research questions, goals and objectives 16
    1.5.1 Research questions 16
    1.5.2 Objectives of the study 20
  1.6 Methodology 20
    1.6.1 Research design 20
    1.6.2 Programme evaluation model 21
    1.6.3 Ethical considerations 26
  1.7 Concluding remarks 27
  1.8 Chapter preview 28

Chapter 2: Theoretical underpinnings of genre approaches 29
  2.1 Introduction 29
  2.2 Genre in rhetoric and linguistics 30
    2.2.1 Rhetoric 31
    2.2.2 Ethnography and Sociolinguistics 32
    2.2.3 Systemic Functional Linguistics 33
    2.2.4 Cognitive Linguistics 38
    2.2.5 Critical Discourse Analysis 41
3.4 The New Rhetoric movement 81
   3.4.1 Theoretical underpinnings 82
   3.4.2 Domains of application 83
   3.4.3 Genre pedagogy 83
   3.4.4 Genre terminology and genre analysis 84
3.5 The three genre traditions: similarities and differences 84

Chapter 4: A survey of humanities genres 87
4.1 Introduction 87
4.2 A survey of the institutional context: university genres, text types and their characteristics 88
   4.2.1 Typological studies 88
   4.2.2 Corpus linguistics 91
   4.2.3 Rhetorical-functional research 95
4.3 Survey of writing requirements in the humanities 95
   4.3.1 Methodology 95
   4.3.2 Findings according to discipline 99
   4.3.3 Summary and interpretation of data 105
4.4 Conclusion 109

Chapter 5: Instructional model 111
5.1 Introduction 111
5.2 Method versus postmethod 112
   5.2.1 The notion of 'method' 112
   5.2.2 The 'postmethod condition' 113
   5.2.3 Macrostrategies as generic pedagogical principles 116
5.3 A possible explanation for shared pedagogical foundations 126
5.4 A method-neutral model for teaching genre-based disciplinary writing at tertiary institutions 128
5.5 The academic essay 130
   5.5.1 Students' problems with writing academic essays 130
   5.5.2 Approaches to teaching academic essays 132
5.6 A critical genre-based presyllabus for essay-writing interventions

5.7 Conclusion

Chapter 6: Essay-writing course for students of history – contextual analysis

6.1 Introduction and rationale

6.2 Procedure
   6.2.1 The purposes of historical writing
   6.2.2 Exploration of time, causality and judgement in historical writing
      6.2.2.1 Time
      6.2.2.2 Causality
      6.2.2.3 Judgement and evaluation

6.3 The (pre-)syllabus

6.4 Conclusion

Chapter 7: Evaluation of the subject-specific intervention

7.1 Introduction and rationale

7.2 Quantitative evaluation of the effect
   7.2.1 Method
   7.2.2 Presentation and discussion of students' results
   7.2.3 Statistical analysis

7.3 Textual analysis of the essays
   7.3.1 Method
   7.3.2 Presentation and discussion of findings
      7.3.2.1 Ideational analysis
      7.3.2.2 Interpersonal analysis
      7.3.2.3 Textual analysis

7.4 Opinion survey
   7.4.1 Conceptual framework
   7.4.2 Presentation and discussion of students' opinions

7.5 Conclusion
Chapter 8: Implementation and evaluation of the cross-disciplinary intervention

8.1 Introduction 186
8.2 Rationale and approach 186
8.3 Design and implementation of the intervention 187
  8.3.1 Respondents 187
  8.3.2 Syllabus and materials 188
8.4 Quantitative evaluation 190
  8.4.1 Method 190
  8.4.2 Presentation and discussion of results 192
  8.4.3 Statistical analysis 194
8.5 Textual analysis of the essays 196
  8.5.1 Method 196
  8.5.2 Presentation and discussion of findings 196
    8.5.2.1 Ideational analysis 196
    8.5.2.2 Interpersonal analysis 198
    8.5.2.3 Textual analysis 199
8.6 Opinion survey 200
8.7 Author’s reflection on the cross-disciplinary intervention 204
8.8 Conclusion 207

Chapter 9: Comparison of the subject-specific and cross-disciplinary interventions

9.1 Introduction 209
9.2 Comparison of the essay ratings 209
9.3 Text analysis of pre- and posttests 216
  9.3.1 Logical ideation 216
  9.3.2 Appraisal 217
  9.3.3 Thematic analysis 218
  9.3.4 What the discourse analysis reveals 219
9.4 Opinion survey 220
9.5 Conclusion 221
Chapter 10: Conclusion

10.1 Introduction 223
10.2 Theoretical justification 224
10.3 The effectiveness of genre-based approaches 226
10.4 The effectiveness of narrow-angled versus wide-angled interventions 228
10.5 Limitations of the study 229
10.6 Summative remarks and the way forward 229

Reference list 252
## List of tables

1.1 Quasi-experimental design with two programme groups 21
1.2 Flexibility in the chosen research design 25
1.3 Data-collection and data-analysis instruments 26
2.1 Features of genre-based pedagogy, and the paradigms in applied linguistics to which they are indebted 56
3.1 Move analysis of conference abstracts (Yakhontova 2002) 75
3.2 The double classification and framing potential of genre-based pedagogy in the Australian tradition 79
3.3 Examples of important educational (elemental) genres, their main purposes and the (macro)genres of which they form part (Butt et al. 2000) 80
4.1 Summary of salient genres and text types/rhetorical modes in the humanities 106
4.2 Ratio of salient assignment genres to total no. of assignments per department 107
4.3 Relationships between salient genres and preferred rhetorical modes 108
5.1 Kumaravadivelu's postmethod principles, Butler's key issues in the teaching and learning of academic writing, and foundational principles of genre-based pedagogy 117
6.1 Overview of the most important Western traditions in historical writing 143
6.2 Relationships between the concepts of history and writing conventions of historians 144
6.3 Examples of Judgement and Appreciation (compiled from Coffin, 2003; 2006; Martin 2003; Martin & White, 2005) 153
6.4 Summary of engagement markers in the corpus of history articles 155
6.5 (Pre)syllabus for a module on essay-writing for students of history 156
7.1 Analytic scoring rubric for the assessment of academic essays 162
7.2 Percentage improvement of the subject-specific group per dimension 165
7.3 One-sided p-values of the pre- and posttest ratings for the four dimensions on the subject-specific intervention 166
7.4 One-sided p-values of the pre- and posttest ratings for the 13 items in the subject-specific intervention 166
7.5 Categories of logical ideation
7.6 Appraisal categories
7.7 Types of thematic bonds
7.8 Thematic bonds in paragraphs 3 and 4 of Pretest 1 in the subject-specific intervention
7.9 Thematic bonds in paragraph 4 of Posttest 1 in the subject-specific intervention
7.10 Pretest 1: Subject-specific intervention (overall score: 58%)
7.11 Posttest 1: Subject-specific intervention (overall score 79%)
7.12 Explication of the five dimensions of the construct underlying the opinion survey
8.1 Presyllabus for the cross-disciplinary intervention
8.2 Essay topics chosen by students in the cross-disciplinary group
8.3 Percentage improvement of the cross-disciplinary group per dimension
8.4 One-sided p-values of the pre- and posttest ratings for the four dimensions in the cross-disciplinary intervention
8.5 One-sided p-values of the pre- and posttest ratings for the 13 items in the cross-disciplinary intervention
8.6 Pretest 1: Cross-disciplinary intervention (overall score 60%)
8.7 Posttest 1: Cross-disciplinary intervention (overall score 81%)
8.8 Comparison of the two intervention groups in terms of their improvement on the dimensions of the scoring instrument
8.9 The significance of the difference between the improvement of the two groups on the four dimensions of the scoring instrument
8.10 Two-sided p-values of the scores from the Mann-Whitney U-test per respondent
8.11 Two-sided p-values of the scores from the Mann-Whitney U-test per item
8.12 Two-sided p-values of the scores from the Mann-Whitney U-test per dimension
# List of figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Schematic representation of the benefits of a genre approach in language teaching</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>The context-adaptive model (CAM) (Lynch 1996:4)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>The design process in applied linguistics, based on Weideman (2008)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Levels of context, language and function in Systemic Functional Grammar</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>A framework for text-oriented Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1992)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Mapping of the most important paradigms in applied linguistics, language teaching and writing pedagogy</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Bhatia's (2002a) genre hierarchy</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>The Teaching Learning Cycle (Cope &amp; Kalantzis 1993:11)</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Screen capture of the concordance for expla*</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Alignment between the three genre schools and the three main methodological categories</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Pedagogical cycle underlying methodological and postmethodological approaches</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>A teaching and learning model for tertiary-level disciplinary writing</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Presyllabus (Teaching and Learning Model) for essay-writing interventions</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Comparison of the pre- and posttest results of the subject-specific group per respondent</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Comparison of the pre- and posttest results of the subject-specific group per item</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Logical ideation: comparison of pre- and posttest results in the subject-specific intervention</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Appraisal: comparison of pre- and posttest results in the subject-specific intervention</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Students' opinions on the 5 dimensions of the construct: subject-specific intervention</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Responses to the concepts evaluated by statements 21-25 (Dimension 4)</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.1 Comparison of pre- and posttest results of the cross-disciplinary group per respondent 193
8.2 Comparison of pre- and posttest results of the cross-disciplinary group per item 193
8.3 Logical ideation: comparison of pre- and posttest results in the cross-disciplinary intervention 197
8.4 Appraisal: comparison of pre- and posttest results in the cross-disciplinary intervention 198
8.5 Students' opinions on the 5 dimensions of the construct: cross-disciplinary intervention 201
8.6 Responses to the concepts evaluated by statements 21-25 (Dimension 4) 202
9.1 Box plots displaying the differences between the subject-specific and the cross-disciplinary intervention groups with regard to the three most important dimensions of the analytic scoring instrument according to the ranks assigned by the Mann-Whitney U-test 213
9.2 Spiderweb plot of the means of the subject-specific and the cross-disciplinary groups in the opinion surveys 220
10.1 Summary of research strategy to address the research questions 223
10.2 Theoretical foundations of genre-based writing pedagogies 224

Appendices (on CD)
A Informed consent by contributors of study guides 1
B Informed consent by the Head of the academic department selected for the subject-specific intervention 11
C Informed consent by participating students 16
D Ethical clearance letter 18
E Opinion survey questionnaire 20
F Theme analysis of respondent 1’s pre- and posttest essays (subject-specific intervention) 23
G Theme analysis of respondents 1 and 7’s pre- and posttest essays (cross-disciplinary intervention) 30
Acknowledgements

First, I wish to thank my supervisor, Prof. Albert Weideman, who taught me the basics of Academic Literacy. Thank you, Albert, for your wonderful mentorship and your encouragement throughout the journey.

Dr Lizelle Fletcher from Statomet deserves special thanks for her expert statistical advice. Lizelle, what I know about statistics, I have learned from you. You came very close to fulfilling the role of a co-supervisor. Thank you for your professional guidance, your attention to detail and your genuine interest in my research.

I would also like to thank Ms Karen Horn, who co-designed the syllabus for the history intervention and taught the course with passion and dedication. Karen, you proved the importance of collaboration with subject-field experts during the design and implementation of writing support programmes.

To the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies, in particular Prof. Johan Bergh and Ms Karina Sevenhuysen, my sincere thanks for unveiling the discourse of history by providing me with lists of relevant sources, reviewing part of chapter 6, providing examples of study guides and readers, and making time for personal conversations.

Finally, I wish to thank my husband Cassie and my children Anrie, Gideon and Rondine for their love and encouragement during the past three years.

Adelia
October 2009
Abstract

The main purpose of the research was to investigate the effectiveness of genre-based approaches in teaching academic writing. The study was motivated by the researcher's perceptions about university students' difficulty in acquiring the essayist literacy of the academy, and the fact that very little empirical research had been conducted on the effect of genre-based writing interventions. The following questions guided the research: (1) Can genre-based approaches be justified theoretically? (2) How effective are genre-based academic writing interventions? (3) Which is more effective: a narrow-angled or a wide-angled approach?

The theoretical framework combines foundational principles of Systemic Functional Grammar, Constructivism and Critical Literacies. A mixed methods design was used, including a survey of writing tasks, genre analysis, discourse analysis, and a quasi-experimental comparison of pre- and posttest essay ratings.

The survey of writing tasks indicated that the academic essay was the written genre most frequently required by humanities departments, and that argumentation, discussion, explanation, description and analysis were the text types featuring most prominently in writing prompts. Since the materials of the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies contained the largest number of essay-length tasks, the subject-specific intervention was focused on students of history. The cross-disciplinary group included students with Economics, English, History, Philosophy, Political Sciences, Psychology and Sociology as majors.

A genre-based presyllabus, comprising exploration, explicit instruction, joint construction, independent construction and critical reflection, was customized for the subject-specific and cross-disciplinary groups. The syllabus gave prominence to the use of rhetorical modes, logical development of an argument, and engagement with other authors.

The statistical analyses of the essay scores show that the narrow-angled and the wide-angled genre-based interventions were effective. Although the size of the improvement
on the four dimensions of the scoring instrument was not equal, the overall improvement of the students in each of the groups is statistically significant. Despite the more modest overall improvement of the students in the cross-disciplinary group, their mastery of stance and engagement exceeded that of their subject-specific counterparts.

Even though both interventions were effective the subject-specific group performed significantly better than the cross-disciplinary group overall ($p = 0.043$). Their performance was also more consistent across the four dimensions of the scoring instrument.

The results of the opinion survey indicate that students from both groups were generally positive about the effect of the respective interventions on their academic writing abilities. The only significant difference is the subject-specific group's more positive evaluation of the transferability of the skills they acquired. The more pronounced skills transfer was probably facilitated by the subject-specific group's deeper level of engagement with source materials and more opportunities for practising content-based writing.

Main limitations of the study include the small sample size and non-parallel presentation of the two interventions.

**Key terms:** ACADEMIC ESSAY, ACADEMIC LITERACY, ACADEMIC WRITING, COMMON CORE, CROSS-DISCIPLINARY, GENRE-BASED, HISTORICAL WRITING, LANGUAGE TEACHING, SUBJECT-SPECIFIC, HUMANITIES.