



Informational Report Writing Using the Genre-Based Approach in ESL Elementary Context

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Abstract

Students in an ESL K-12 school are having difficulties when approaching L2 writing. Many reasons contribute to making writing a difficult and undesirable task. Teachers are not adequately trained to teach L2 writing. Thus, the content taught, and pedagogies employed are not tailored to students' needs which as a result impacts students' ability to write. In addition, the students have limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Students need systematic instruction in academic language (De Jong & Harper, 2005), and enough instruction time to write effectively. According to Harmer (1998), teaching writing to ESL learners helps in reinforcement, language development, learning style, and most importantly, writing as a skill.

Introduction

The genre-based approach to writing is selected to develop the skills necessary for writing about different genres (Ju, 2005). This approach is widely used in school settings to support the academic writing development of ELLs (Lee, 2012). By using the concept of Teaching–Learning Cycle, teachers guide, and students interact together “not only to teach the class and to produce a generic text type but also to use language in teaching the abstraction of the content knowledge and the skills of generalizing and synthesizing and hypothesizing” (Callaghan, 1993, as cited in Kusumaningrum, 2015).

Many studies advocate applying the genre-based approach to address the challenges encountered in teaching and learning writing (Harman, 2011; Hyland 2004). According to Hyland (2004), this approach provides the students with the characteristics of texts they are expected to compose through explicit teaching and guided practice. Teachers and students work together to compose a text in a coherent framework, focusing on language, context, and learners' needs. Moreover, this approach lines up with the notion of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Teachers, with the role of the more competent, provide proper scaffolding based on competence levels and needs until the students are ready to perform the task independently. This approach increases teachers' awareness of texts, so they confidently teach writing to students.

Nevertheless, this approach requires careful planning to support language learners in exploring, creating, and understanding the nature of genres (Christison & Murray, 2014) and

effective training for teachers. To create interacting writing tasks, an informational report genre unit is designed for grade 4 students that have intermediate English language proficiency.

“Genre” is a term used for identifying different types of text (Hyland, 2004). It was first implemented in Australia in the mid-1960s. When students have substantive background knowledge, correctly and logically understand the requirements and expectations of writing tasks, they will be able to use the language appropriately in their study and future work (Dwivedi, 2015).

Tasks and Sequence

To ensure effective implementation, teachers must follow the following four phases: Building Knowledge of the Field, Modelling of the Text, Joint Construction of the Text, and Independent Construction of the text. It is important to mention that teachers may start at any of these stages and move back and forth between the stages until students become familiar enough with the genre.

The first phase is conducted to develop students’ background knowledge of the content and context of texts (De Oliveira & Lan, 2014). Teachers expose students to a variety of texts about animals to introduce the target language in both spoken and written (videos and mentor texts). Students are expected to read relevant texts that are level appropriate. With the teacher, they discuss the purpose of the text, provide opinions, and explain providing evidence from the text. For example, the teacher may ask if this text is fiction or non-fiction. Why is the text different than a personal narrative type? Students notice that this type includes facts, and no personal pronouns have been used. Moreover, the students are guided to notice the headings, diagrams, maps, pictures, and/or bold words then discuss how these features help writers and readers. In addition, students are instructed to highlight the technical expressions and vocabulary used in the text (Feez & Joyce, 2002 as cited in Kusumaningrum, 2015). By doing so, students realize the linguistic features of the genre and build content knowledge.

Next is the modeling of the text. In this phase, the teacher creates an exemplary text to share with the students. They discuss the purpose of informational text, what makes an informational report, organization of sentences and paragraphs to compose an overall coherent text. The teacher instructs students to pay attention to the beginning and the ending of the texts. Students highlight the topic and closing sentences for each paragraph in the text. They also examine each section of the report and identify what that section does as they read and explore the social function and schematic structure of the text and compare the text with different text types using graphic organizers and mind maps. Using a graphic organizer is recommended to brainstorm and generate ideas about different topics to learn genre structure (2015, as cited in Zhang, 2016). Students will be taught to differentiate between a topic (Owls) and subtopics (collection of facts about owls) to help them organize their writing. For example, the teacher works with the students to write about owls and write a few subtopics as paragraphs (introduction, location, characteristics, diet, conclusion). The students understand the

grammatical features by deconstructing the text in a meaningful context as they learn how to write.

In the joint construction of the text, students are moving closer to work individually. In this stage, teachers and students work together on constructing a text that is similar to the texts the students deconstructed. A variety of books, texts, and bookmarked websites about different animals are available for the students. The teacher tells the student that they need to become experts if they want to write about a particular animal. The students are expected to search different resources to find facts that support their writing. The teacher reminds the students to narrow down their topic and explains how to do so by using visuals to show a report about birds, a report about nocturnal birds, and a report about the Barn owls.

Teachers use collaborative and cooperative learning techniques to encourage students to express their ideas in spoken and written forms to be ready to compose their own text. When students are searching for information, the teacher reminds them to stay away from plagiarism and paraphrase using their own words. The teacher may explain and model paraphrasing if the students are unfamiliar with it. Also, the teacher should remind the students to focus only on facts that fit the subtopics and take notes while gathering information to keep them organized. Some students may still need support before moving to the last stage. Students will be taught to differentiate between a topic (Barn Owls) and subtopics (collection of facts about owls: introduction, characteristics, location, diet, conclusion) to help them organize their writing.

In the last stage, students are prepared to construct their ideas independently. Teachers may continue to support their students indirectly, by providing feedback through the writing process. Students start to draft their reports. Then students are directed to revise their writing. They may write a new lead that hooks the reader and improves their conclusion. Students are directed to go back to the texts they read and use better vocabulary words to discuss their topic. The students reread their writing and look for places to add the new technical terms and transition words that make their writing more sequenced and organized. The teacher also directs students to add more details if needed to support their facts. Furthermore, students edit their writing by using an editing checklist where they circle misspellings and correct, using the three-line symbol for capitalization. The teacher may ask for a peer editing activity. Finally, students are ready to publish their final writing. Students are encouraged to reflect on which areas they have grown and what their next goal is to achieve.

Assessment

The genre-based assessment is a complex process. To ensure effective assessment, the analytical method is used (Hyland, 2004; Hyland, 2007). This type of scoring defines the features to be assessed by separating the components of writing. Hence, the assessment tools must be designed according to the type of informational report and its features. The teacher sets assessment criteria that are aligned with the genre and ensures to teach according to them. Learning goals must be shared explicitly with students (Lee, 2012).

To meet the students' needs, a writing pre-assessment is conducted. Peer evaluation is requested during the stages of the model. Active participation and interaction are observed and

considered in assessing performance. Formative feedback through the writing process is provided as well as a rubric for students to evaluate their pre-writing and post-writing to assess different areas such as the lead, facts, paragraph organization, transition words, vocabulary choices, text features, spelling, punctuation, and ending.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges associated with incorporating this approach, its benefits outweigh its drawbacks. Teachers are required to understand the nature of the target language, choose relevant input texts, plan for creative tasks, select appropriate materials, and design effective assessment tools to measure performance. Those practices increase teachers' professional and pedagogical competencies. Besides, this approach helps students develop language abilities in a coherent way. The genre-based approach involves both product and process writing activities which makes it effective in teaching writing.

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