THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GENRE THEORY AND THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENTS' LITERACY

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ABSTRACT. *In this article I examine a corpus of twenty essays written by university students on the English Language IV course at the University of Alicante before and after they have received instruction following the Genre Theory. The analysis of the essays will show that after receiving instruction on genres or text types, students have improved their written texts because they have mastered how the grammar of written language works and become aware of how grammatical features cluster in particular text types.*

With this study I intend to point out that the Genre Theory has a crucial role in literacy since it concentrates on the production and analysis of texts in a given language. This research will highlight the relationship between literacy and effective writing with an applied educational emphasis.

This paper will also highlight the pedagogical implications of teaching having the Genre Theory as a framework so that teachers and students can see in what ways this framework facilitates their teaching practice and guarantees their improvement in writing.

KEY WORDS: *Writing Skills, Genre Theory, literacy, pedagogy, text, text types.*

RESUMEN. *En este artículo examino un corpus de veinte ensayos escritos por estudiantes universitarios de la asignatura Lengua Inglesa IV de la Universidad de Alicante antes y después de que recibieran instrucción siguiendo la Teoría del Género. El análisis de los ensayos pone de manifiesto que después de recibir instrucción sobre los géneros o tipos de texto, los alumnos mejoraron sus textos escritos por haber prestado atención al modo en que funciona la gramática de los textos escritos y por tomar conciencia de la manera en que determinadas características lingüísticas aparecen concentradas en determinados tipos de texto.*

Con este estudio trataré de poner de manifiesto que la Teoría del Género tiene un papel crucial en literacy debido a que presta atención a la producción y el análisis de textos en una lengua determinada. Esta investigación enfatizará la relación entre literacy y la escritura efectiva.

Este trabajo también enfatizará las implicaciones pedagógicas de la enseñanza teniendo la Teoría del Género como marco con el fin de que los profesores puedan ver de qué manera este marco teórico facilita su práctica docente y garantiza su mejora en la escritura.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *destrezas de escritura, Teoría del Género, pedagogía, texto, tipos de texto.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will point out that using the Genre Theory as a framework helps students to increase their level of literacy. I will highlight the main characteristics of this approach and will observe in what ways they contribute to the development of students' writing. I intend to show that this approach helps students to develop "[...] a "multidimensional mental model of writing which takes account of the different dimensions involved in the production of a text. […] A multidimensional approach to writing would involve engaging in problem solving behaviour; this in turn would entail struggling to find a match between intentions and their expression, which potentially leads to learning." (Manchón et al. , 2005: 399)

I have analysed twenty essays written by university students on the English Language IV course at the University of Alicante before and after they have received instruction following the Genre Theory and have observed their improvements. The underlying premise is that students writing is improved if they become aware of the range of text types that they can consciously select during their social practices within a culture.

The Genre Theory is a very suitable approach to establish a relationship between culture, society and language use because it focuses on the relationship between texts and the

context in which those texts occur. In this way, students become aware of the different genres they can use depending on their communicative purpose, the audience, and the level of formality. As Martínez Lirola (2006: 149) points out: "This is essential so that students can see how members of a culture use written texts as part of their social lives and they can conclude that the purpose of a genre determines its shape, i.e., its schematic structure."

One of my main concerns in this paper is to response to student writing by providing a context and selecting a theoretical framework in which students learn to write better or more easily. Students need to acquire control over the different kinds of texts that they need to express meanings or get different things done in a particular culture, and to be aware of how the grammar works. To teach students how written language draws on the resources of grammar, it is necessary to help them to understand: "(1) how the grammar of written language works, (2) how grammatical features cluster in particular text types, and (3) how grammatical knowledge relates to the skills of reading and writing." (De Sylva Joyce and Burns, 1999: 118)

As a proponent of the genre approach, I will highlight the importance of making genres or text types explicit so that students learn how to use them and how to organise knowledge and information depending on the text type. In this way, students will be empowered to deal with various written genres and to use them in the appropriate context. As Drury (2004: 233) notes, this approach "[…] engages students in an interactive teaching/learning cycle where they acquire knowledge, understanding, practice in and feedback on the target genres and apply this in producing their own texts for particular purposes."

2. MAIN STEPS IN TEACHING THE GENRE THEORY. A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

The following steps must be followed to use grammar and genre based descriptions of text for teaching: firstly, teachers must select a text as an instance of a genre; whenever possible, several texts should be examined to confirm a genre. Secondly, we must identify the schematic structure of the text by examining the different grammatical features. In the third place, teachers must draw attention to the key grammatical features that create the genre so that our teaching practices are effective. Finally, we must use these features to develop in our teaching any aspect of the grammar that we consider relevant. The following subsections will show how we have done this.

2.1. *The sample*

The writings analysed were produced by ten university students on the English Language IV course at the University of Alicante. Each of the participants in the study produced two sample writings of expositions, a text type that argues a case for or against a particular point of view. One sample writing was written before and another one after they have received instruction following the Genre Theory. Before describing the procedure used for the analysis, it is necessary to say a few words about the type of instruction students received in Genre Theory.

First the teacher explained what was to be learned and why and described the main characteristics of each text type. A second step consisted in demonstrating the relationship between the social purpose of each text and the linguistic characteristics. Next, students engaged into guided practice, which guided them to independent practice outside the classroom. In other words, the teacher had to help students to see that there was a connection between writing in the classroom and writing for real life. The guided practice consisted in

identifying the main linguistic characteristics of each text so that students could see that different linguistic features cluster in particular text types.

After having described the main stages in the instruction process, students must study texts in the genre they are going to be writing before they start to work on their own writing. For example, if teachers want students to write explanations, it is necessary to let them look at different models of explanations. In this way, students acquire knowledge of the topic they need to write about; it is also essential that they know the context in which their writing is going to be read and who is going to be the reader; apart from this, students need to be familiar with the style and conventions of the genre.

2.2. *The analysis*

The sample writings of expositions written by students were analysed by the lecturer in order to identify the main structural elements and text features of this text type. The main aspects analysed related to this two components in expositions can be observed in the following tables:

Structural elements in expositions
Statement of position
Preview of arguments
Argument 1: makes point and elaborate argument
Argument 2: makes point and elaborate argument
Argument 3: makes point and elaborate argument
Reinforcement of statement of position

Table 1. *Structural elements in expositions (based in Butt et al., 2000: 241)*

Textual elements in expositions
Information organised through lexical chains
Use of reference (we) to express solidarity
Use of conjunction to sequence arguments
Use of appraisal to position the reader in agreement with the writer

Table 2. *Textual elements in expositions (based in Butt et al., 2000: 242)*

In the analysis it is crucial to select one or more levels of analysis (lexis, grammar, etc.) to best address students' problems. The comparison between the expositions written by students before and after they have received instructions in the Genre Theory shows the following:

In the first stage, before students were familiar with the Genre Theory, they used to skip some stages in the structure of the text such as the preview of the arguments or the reinforcement of the statement of the position. During this stage, students tended to forget to use conjunctions to join one argument with the other. There were not many lexical chains that add coherence and cohesion to the text. They tended to use the pronoun 'I' instead of 'we' that shows solidarity. Finally, appraisal was not exploited to persuade the reader.

The following paragraph illustrates some of the problems mentioned above:

Argument 1 (there was no preview of the arguments): I am for the death penalty. I think it is a good thing because people pay for what they have done. I think it should be legal and compulsory in every country. Bad people would learn not to do wrong things to other people in this way.

In the second stage, an increase in the use of cohesive devices (reference, conjunction and lexical cohesion) was observed in the twenty essays analysed. In this stage students also exploited the potential of appraisal or the language of evaluation to persuade the readers to agree with their arguments, as we can see in the following paragraph:

Argument 3: I think the death penalty should be avoided because killing a human being can never be justified. Consequently, politicians should work on measures that highlight prevention. In this way, people whose behaviour is against the law have the opportunity to improve their attitude before they are sentenced to death.

3. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TEACHING HAVING THE GENRE THEORY AS A FRAMEWORK

In this section I will enumerate the main pedagogical implications of teaching having the Genre Theory as a framework so that teachers and students can see in what ways this framework facilitates their teaching practice and guarantees their improvement in writing:

- The Genre Theory ensures students become aware of the different genres or text types, which implies that students are aware of the social purpose, the text structure and the key grammatical features of each text type. In other words, this approach makes explicit the purposes of different varieties of writing and how these purposes determine the structure and the language of the genre.

- The Genre Theory focuses on the relationship between texts and the context in which those texts occur, and offers tools for the analysis of texts.

- Having the Genre Theory as a theoretical framework makes students aware of the relationship between the structure and shape of texts in order to be effective in a particular context, and to achieve the goals of a particular culture. Consequently, language and context are related.

- The Genre Theory highlights that in teaching writing teachers need to pay attention not only to the processes of composing texts but also to the nature of texts that students write. This implies that teachers need to pay attention to discourse-related aspects of writing, instead of just paying attention to language-related aspects at the sentence level.

- Using the Genre Theory as a theoretical framework, implies that teachers need to offer students good examples of different genres or text types, so that they can observe the different stages in the construction of the text.

- Finally, this framework emphasizes that we can understand a culture by paying attention to all the texts that are produced in that culture. As Martin (1997: 13) states: "As a level of context, genre represents the system of staged goal oriented social processes through which social subjects in a given culture live their lives."

4. CONCLUSIONS

Following the Genre Theory students analyse the social purpose of different texts and discover how different texts are used to accomplish different social purposes. Apart from this, students become aware of the different types of context surrounding them- context of culture, context of situation, etc. – and can learn to create context in their own texts. Working with authentic texts and placing them in a situational context help students to be conscious of the structure of texts and to understand why the genre is written as it is.

Once students understand the text as a whole, they will be able to adapt the text to different contexts and situations. This implies the selection of the appropriate lexico-grammatical resources depending on the topic they need to write about and the text type. In other words, students keep in mind the audience they are writing for, and adapt the text to it. Consequently, this approach highlights that the written text must have a definite communicative purpose and its end is to interact with the audience, i.e., there is a social purpose.

This approach helps students to keep in mind the following questions: (1) What do people write?, i.e., what is the content of the written texts, (2) who are they writing for?, who is the audience?. They need for a real audience to give authenticity to their text, and (3) why are they writing?, i.e., what is the purpose of the text, what do they want to achieve?

In my view, it is very useful to teach explicitly about genres so that students are aware of the different genres or text types. Besides, students will be able to use language according to the conventions and stylistic demands of each genre, which is determined by the social function that the genre want to accomplish in society. In consequence, students acquire control over the kinds of texts that are relevant for their social needs.

Following the genre approach makes possible that students produce texts consistent with the cultural conventions of the context in which the text is written and read, i.e., writing will result in a coherent and cohesive text. In this way, grammar is seen as determined by the texts that students need to produce for different purposes in different social contexts. As a result, students are able to explain the interrelationships between language use, culture and society.

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