

# GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING SKILLS

*By Denok Lestari*

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## ABSTRACT

In the process of teaching and learning English, most students consistently find difficulties in expressing themselves in writing. The problems in writing English include choosing appropriate vocabulary, organizing the structure properly depending on the topic or the purpose of writing, following correct grammar rules, and integrating ideas. To solve these problems in writing tasks, genre-specific writing instruction may be useful since it presents some examples to students who have only limited exposure to authentic English writing.

Genre-based approach focuses on models and key features of texts written for a particular purpose. It starts with the whole text as the unit in focus rather than the sentence. In the genre-based approach, samples of a specific genre are introduced, and some distinctive characteristics of the given genre are pointed out so that students notice specific configurations of that genre. The specification of genres is based on the classification used by many systemic functional linguists, especially in application to classroom teaching of English. For this reason, Genre-based approach might improve the students' writing skills since they could gain benefits from studying different types of texts.

*Key words: genre, approach, writing, text.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Genre-based approach, which focuses on models and key features of texts written for a particular purpose, has become popular since the 1980s along with the notion that students could benefit from studying different types of written texts. Genre-based approach is used to conduct the classroom activity in the process of teaching and learning based on genre. Genre-based approaches start with the whole text as the unit in focus rather than the sentence. The focus on the whole texts implies that there is higher level of order and patterning in language than just in sentence-grammar at the level of discourse organization and grammatical features. In the genre-based approach, samples of a specific genre are introduced, and some distinctive characteristics of the given genre are pointed out so that students notice specific configurations of that genre. The specification of genres to be taught is based on the classification used by many systemic functional linguists, especially in application to classroom teaching of English (Swales, 1990).

Most of the students consistently exhibited difficulties in expressing themselves in writing. Difficulties include choosing appropriate vocabulary, organizing the structure properly depending on the topic or the purpose of writing, following correct grammar rules, and integrating ideas. One of the main causes of students' low performance in English writing is, among other things, the lack of genre-specific writing instructions. To solve these problems in writing tasks, genre-specific writing instruction may be useful since it presents some examples to students who have only limited exposure to authentic English writing. Thus, the objective of this literature review is to report on theoretical and pedagogical issues of the genre-based approach to teaching writing in English as a foreign language.

## 2. GENRE-BASED APPROACH

1 Since the mid-1980s, considerable attention has been paid to the genre-based approach to teaching writing. In terms of writing in a second or foreign language, the genre-based approach has been defined as a framework for language instruction based on examples of a particular genre. The genre framework supports students' writing with generalized, systematic guiding principles about how to produce meaningful passages.

Swales (1990) identified genre as a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. His definition offers the basic idea that there are certain conventions or rules which are generally associated with a writer's purpose. For example, personal letters tell us about their writers' private stories, film reviews analyze movies for potential viewers, and police reports describe what happened. Most genres use conventions related to communicative purposes; a personal letter starts with a cordial question in a friendly mood because its purpose is to maintain good relationships with friends, and an argument essay emphasizes its thesis since it aims at making an argument. Each written genre has a specific goal that people should achieve through several steps. Thus, the specific social goals become main focuses when genre is discussed. It also implies that before writing, the context of a situation should be considered and analyzed in order to anticipate what linguistic features are required.

## 3. GENRES OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Brown (2004: 219) formulated the classification of the most common genres that a second language writer might produce, such as:

1. *Academic writing* include papers and general subject reports, essays, compositions, academically focused journals, short answer test responses, technical reports (e.g., lab reports), theses, and dissertations.
2. *Job-related writing* include messages (e.g., phone messages), letters/emails, memos (e.g., interoffice), reports (e.g., job evaluations, project reports), schedules, labels, sign, advertisements, announcements, and manuals.
3. *Personal writing* include letters, emails, greeting cards, invitations, messages, notes, calendar entries, shopping lists, reminders, financial documents (e.g., checks, tax forms, loan applications), forms, questionnaires, medical reports, immigration documents, diaries, personal journals, and fiction (e.g., short stories, poetry).

The genres of writing that are listed above provide some sense of the many varieties of text that may be produced by a second language learner in a writing curriculum. Genre-based approach is also known as Text-Based approach in which all genres control a set of communicative purposes within certain social situations and that each genre (or type of text) has its own structural quality according to those communicative purposes. Therefore, the communicative purposes and the structural features should be identified when genres are used in writing classes. There are 12 types (genres) of text to be taught at Junior High School based on the National curriculum, such as: Procedure text (procedure, explanation), Information text (description, report, news item, review), Story text (narrative, spoof, recount), and Persuasive text (analytical exposition, hortatory exposition, discussion). A few examples and characteristics of text types are presented in the appendix.

#### 4. TEACHING-LEARNING CYCLES OF GENRE-BASED APPROACH

The cycle of teaching and learning activities in the genre-based approach consists of a number of stages which the teacher and students go through so that students gradually gain independent control of a particular text-type. Ministry of National Education (2009) provided a guideline for implementing the genre-based approach within the national curriculum and introduced the cycles of teaching/learning in Genre-Based Approach as mentioned below.

1. Building the context
2. Modeling and deconstructing the text
3. Joint construction of the text
4. Independent construction of the text
5. Linking related texts

Each of the five stages of the teaching/learning cycle is designed to achieve a different purpose within the cycle of the teaching and learning. Each stage, therefore, is associated with different types of activities. Usually, when a text type and its context are being introduced for the first time, the teacher and the students work through all these stages. However, it is possible to enter the cycle at any point. If, for example, students are already familiar with the context, the cycle could begin with activities from the modeling stage. It is possible at any time to return to activities from the modeling stage. It is also possible at any time to return to activities from earlier stages of the cycle if students need revision or further practice in order to progress. The purpose and focus of each stage is outline as follows.

##### *4.1 Building the context*

In this stage, students:

- a. are introduced to the social context of an authentic model of the text – type being studied
- b. explore feature of the general cultural context in which the text type is used and the social purposes the text – type achieves
- c. explore the immediate context of situation by investigating the register of a model text which has been selected on the basis of the course objective and learner need.

An exploration of register involves:

- d. building knowledge of the topic of the model text and knowledge of the social activity in which this text is used, e.g: the social activity in this text is used, e.g: the social activity of job seeing within the topic *employment in Indonesia*.
- e. understanding the roles and relationships of the people using the text and how these are established and maintained, e.g: the relationship between a job seeker and a prospective employer.
- f. Understanding the channel of communication being used, e.g.: using the telephone, speaking face-to-face with members of an interview panel.

Context – building activities include:

- g. presenting the context through pictures, audio – visual material, display, excursions, field-trips, guest speakers etc.
- h. establishing the social purpose through discussions or surveys etc.

- i. cross – cultural activities
- j. related research activities
- k. comparing the model text with other texts of the same or contrasting type e.g.: comparing a job interview with a complex spoken exchange involving close friends, a work colleague or a stranger in service encounter.

#### ***4.2. Modeling and deconstructing the text***

In this stage, students:

- a. Investigate the structural pattern and language feature of the model
- b. compare the model with other examples of the text – type

In this stage diagnostic assessment helps the teachers to decide how much time to devote to particular language features and what kind of presentation or practice students need with each feature. Modeling and deconstruction activities are undertaken at both the whole text, clause and expression levels. It is at this stage that many traditional ESL/EFL language teaching activities come into their own. However it is important that these activities are presented in relation to the text – type being studied, the social purpose being achieved and the meanings being made.

Text-level activities include:

- presentation activities using devices, such as: OHPs, charts, big books, board work etc.
- sorting, matching and labeling activities e.g.: sorting sets of texts, sequencing jumbled stages, labeling stages etc.
- activities focusing on cohesive devices such as sets of related lexical items, conjunction, modality, reference e.g.: semantic maps, vocabulary networks, cloze, transparency overlays etc.

Clause-level activities include:

- presentation and practice activities relating to the grammatical features of the text

Expression-level activities include:

- oral-aural, pronunciation, decoding, spelling, handwriting or typing practice as needed for the use of the text-type

#### ***4.3. Joint construction of the text***

In this stage:

- students begin to contribute to the construction of whole examples of the text-type
- the teacher gradually reduces the contribution to text construction, as the students move closer to being able to control the text-type independently.

Joint construction activities include:

- teacher questioning, discussing and editing whole class construction
- skeleton texts
- jigsaw and information gap activities
- small group construction of texts
- dictation/dictogloss
- self-assessment and peer assessment activities

Diagnostic assessment is critical at this stage as the teacher must decide whether students are ready to move to independent functioning or whether they need to undertake further work at the text modeling or joint construction.

#### ***4.4. Independent construction of the text***

In this stage:

- students work independently with the text
- learner performances are used for achievement assessment

Independent construction activities include:

- Listening tasks, e.g.: comprehension activities in response to live or recorded material such as performing a task, sequencing pictures, numbering, ticking or underlining material on a worksheet, answering question.
- Speaking tasks, e.g.: presentation to class, community organization, workplace etc.
- Listening and speaking tasks e.g. Role plays, simulated or authentic dialogues
- Reading tasks e.g. Comprehension activities in response to written material such as performing a task, sequencing pictures, numbering, ticking or underlining material on a worksheet, answering questions.
- Writing tasks which demand that students draft and present whole tasks.

#### ***4.5. Linking to related texts***

In this stage students investigate what they have learnt in this teaching/learning cycle can be related to other texts in the same or similar contexts, and future or past cycles of teaching and learning. Activities which link the text-type to related texts include:

- comparing the use of the text-type across different fields
- researching other text-types used in the same field
- role-playing the same text-type used by people with different roles and relationships.
- comparing spoken and written models of the same text-type
- researching how a key language feature used in this text-type is used in other text-types

It is very important to note that the genre approach does not advocate that students mindlessly imitate the teacher. Instead it gives students the opportunity to learn to function at a level beyond that which they could learn to do on their own. The genre approach offers students the freedom to say and write what they want effectively. It makes it possible for the teacher to meet learner's need within a framework which facilitates progress towards the students' potential instead of abandoning them permanently at entry level.

### **5. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE GENRE-BASED APPROACH**

Several advantages and disadvantages of the genre-based approach are discussed below. First, on the positive side, students generally appreciate the models or examples showing specifically what they have to do linguistically. Studying a given genre also provides them with an understanding of why a communication style is the way it is through a reflection of its social context and its purpose. In this context, the genre-based approach is very beneficial because it

brings together formal and functional properties of a language in writing instruction, and it acknowledges that there are strong associations between them. Eventually, the prior knowledge will make it easier for students to produce acceptable structures in their writing tasks. Therefore, an assigned genre seems to serve as an influential tool for the learning and teaching of writing.

Furthermore, the genre-based approach encourages students to participate in the world around them, to comprehend writing as a tool that they can utilize, and to realize how writers manage content to promote logical organization. It also allows students to become more flexible in their thinking and eventually to realize how authors organize their writings. The genre-based approach is found more suitable for learners at beginning or intermediate levels of proficiency in a foreign language rather than those at advanced levels, in that it releases students from deep anxieties about their writing tasks. There is no doubt that writing tasks can be more demanding than other language skills, so students at low level of proficiency absolutely need something that they can rely on since they have little exposure to English writing (Swales, 1990).

Despite genres' beneficial roles in helping learners to produce written work with confidence, there are two concerns about the genre-based approach. One is that it underestimates the skills required to produce content, and the other concern is that it neglects learners' self-sufficiency. The genre-based approach not only places too much emphasis on conventions and genre features but also is less helpful for students in discovering the texts' true messages due to the targeted aspects of the specified genre. Likewise, if teachers spend class time explaining how language is used for a range of purposes and with a variety of readers, learners are likely to be largely passive. Thus, the genre-based approach is blamed for limiting learners' creative thoughts about content and is criticized in that it overlooks natural processes of learning and learners' creativity. Finally, Swales (1990) pointed out that, at its best, it helps learners to identify and interpret literary texts, while at its worst, it interferes with the learners' creativity. This concern means that students may end up writing genres as meaningless reproductions.

However, above all those weaknesses, genres always evolve through incorporating a rich variety of voices, styles, discourse features, and points of view. The genre-based approach allows students to be exposed to the plurality of a genre, which implies that students still have chances to develop their creativity in writing. Thus, if the genre-based approach is to remain true to the fundamental nature of genres, then teaching in the genre-based approach should include a final step in which students are encouraged to break the style of the existing genre and let it evolve (Swales, 1990).

There are four things which teachers need to consider as they implement this approach:

1. Joint construction involves negotiation between the teacher and student, not domination by the teacher. Both the teacher and student need to have a shared understanding of the context and of the meanings being negotiated. Problems are shared and the teacher only asks direct questions when students show they have a chance of success. Throughout this process students are thinking and making choices to contribute to the joint construction.
2. Teachers need to create contexts in which the use of the target language is legitimate and meaningful. Teachers also have to decide what kinds of texts to use.
3. Jointly constructed and negotiated meanings are best supported within predictable and familiar routines, or cycles, of interaction and activity over extended periods of time.
4. Teachers need to monitor the level of difficulty as control is gradually handed over to the student.

## 6. APPLICATIONS OF THE GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING WRITING

In a text-based syllabus you need to plan a sequence of developmental steps. Each step involves activities which gradually move students towards independent control of a target text-type. The first step in a sequence builds on the knowledge and experience the students have brought with them and each subsequent activity or task builds on what went before. Within each developmental step, students should progress from: (1) the known towards the unknown, and (2) the simplest and easiest elements towards the more complex and difficult.

It is important that students know what is expected of them as they work through each developmental step. Students must also feel that each step is achievable, logical and linked to their language learning goals, so that students always feel that success is possible. The support is gradually reduced as students begin to function more and more independently.

There are various practical applications of the genre-based approach to the teaching of writing. Below is the example of teaching and learning process based on genre –based approach, with the material Report Text.

1. Building the context
  - a. The teacher introduces a model of report text, e.g. text “Whales” and provides related images, photographs, video, or illustration, and then brainstorms vocabulary from images.
  - b. Students learn the purpose of report text i.e. to generally describe an object (in this example, whales) through scientific research.
  - c. Students study the context within the report text. Students may gather information through scientific books, internet, etc.
2. Modeling and deconstructing
  - a. Students study the generic structures of report text, i.e. general classification and description.
  - b. Students collect examples of a language feature, i.e. present tense, and the relating verbs, e.g., “Whales are sea living mammals”.
  - c. Students compare the text with another report text, e.g., text “Whales” is compared to text “Snakes”.
3. Joint construction of the text
  - a. In this stage, students start to understand the text as a whole and the teacher slowly directs the students to study independently.
  - b. Students work in groups to discuss the text type, role play using appropriate gestures, or fill in cloze exercises, in order to comprehend the text thoroughly.
4. Independent construction of the text
  - a. After having experience the learning process in stage 1 to stage 3, students already gain understanding about the type of text being discussed, and are able to construct a text similar to the text modeled. Students perform the task independently, while the teacher only monitors and evaluates the teaching and learning process.
  - b. Students respond to an oral text, answer the questions following the text, group presentation, and make a draft or an outline of a report text.
  - c. Students consult with teachers and peers throughout the process. Drafts are edited, reworked and proof-read.



## 5. Linking to related text

- a. Students relate and compare report text with other texts, e.g. descriptive text, which has a similar purpose. Students look at the text structure, language and text features.
- b. Students do the role play and learn the relationship between the participants in the dialog.
- c. Students gain complete understanding about report text and are able to produce a report text on their own.

It is very important to note that the genre approach does not advocate that students mindlessly imitate the teacher. Instead it gives students the opportunity to learn to function at a level beyond that which they could learn to do on their own. The genre approach offers students the freedom to say and write what they want effectively. It makes it possible for the teacher to meet learner's need within a framework which facilitates progress towards the students' potential instead of abandoning them permanently at entry level. Thus, if the genre-based approach is to remain true to the fundamental nature of genres, then teaching in the genre-based approach should include a final step in which students are encouraged to break the style of the existing genre and let it evolve.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Genre is a functional term that refers to the stages of different structural patterns of text within a culture which is developed to achieve a social purpose. Genre basically concerns the social purpose of the text, the stages of the text, and how they relate to particular language features of the text.

The cycles of teaching/learning in Genre-Based Approach are: 1. Building the context; 2. Modeling and deconstructing the text; 3. Joint construction of the text; 4. Independent construction of the text; and 5. Linking related texts. Each of the five stages of the teaching/learning cycle is designed to achieve a different purpose within the cycle of the teaching and learning. Each stage, therefore, is associated with different types of activities.

In the genre-based approach, the knowledge of language is intimately attached to a social purpose, and more focus is on the viewpoint of the reader than on that of the writer. Students should be exposed to many examples of the same genre to develop their ability to write a particular genre. Through exposure to similar texts, students can detect the specialized configurations of that genre, and they also can activate their memories of prior reading or writing experiences whenever they encounter the task of creating a new piece in a familiar genre.

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