

# On the Need to Know Students' Prior Experiences with Genre in the ESL Writing Classroom

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It is common for writing instructors to have their students fill out needs-analysis surveys at the beginning of each school term. Many would argue that this has become a required method of good teaching practice (Hyland, 2003). Before we begin teaching our students, instructors must uncover what kind of writing their students are familiar with and where they hope their English study may take them. In April 2004, I gave my students such a survey in order to determine their previous writing experience. While collating this data, two issues that challenge the assumptions that many second-language writing instructors make about the universality of their students' experience with genre and writing instruction across languages and cultures became apparent.

Both issues require careful consideration as they play a crucial role in determining how much success students will find in the second language-writing classroom. The first problem concerns students' previous writing experience. I discovered that my students had wide-ranging levels of experience at writing in English, and an even wider range of experience in writing instruction and practice in their first languages. This range of experience plays a role in determining how well students may be able to transfer their first-language writing skills to their studies in the ESL classroom.

The second issue focuses on assumptions that are often made about the universality of genre structures across language and culture. This problem became apparent when my students and I took part in a pre-survey discussion of genre terms in order to reach a common understanding of their definition. In the process of collating the survey findings, I came to realize how carefully one must proceed when assessing students' experiences and abilities; genres and their labels vary greatly between the languages and cultures represented by my students. Not only can a misunderstanding of genre definitions make survey results meaningless—when the teaching begins, instructors' incorrect assumptions about their students' experience with and their abilities to use a particular genre may hinder their success in the classroom.

## **Background**

### *The genre-based approach*

Academic writing instruction in the second language classroom has undergone a great number of changes since the end of the Second World War. The received wisdom of which method might best help students acquire English language fluency has changed dramatically in the last fifty years. After the war, until the mid 1960's, language focus at the sentence level was most emphasized in the writing classroom

(Burns, 1990). This grammatical focus underwent a dramatic shift in the 1970's, giving way to a more process-focused approach, which aimed at fostering students' creative expression in their writing. Students were asked to brainstorm, carry out mind-mapping, practice writing from experience, and learn self and peer editing skills as they achieved greater proficiency in English.

The popularity of that approach has most recently given way to a more genre-focused method that centers on teaching both the text form and the socio-cultural function of a particular text of English. The genre-based approach is seen as an antidote to an often-perceived weakness in the creative-process approach of writing instruction. Critics of the process-approach have often argued that while it aids students in exploring their own understandings of the world, it ignores the social reality that some texts (genres) and their organization hold widely different levels of legitimacy (Kachru, 1999).

Described by Lock and Lockhart (1999) as an, "interventionist pedagogy" (p. 47), the genre-based writing instructor teaches students the explicit forms and products of academia and professional workplaces. At its most politically conscious level, Hyland (2002) argues that, this approach, "... demystifies texts...and...helps learners gain access to ways of communicating that have accrued cultural capital in particular communities" (p. 120). All genres are viewed as socially constructed and some genres are shown to be more dominant than others. The instructor cannot ignore the cultural locality of the classroom, its students and the socio-cultural contexts from where they have come.

Discourse analysis has shown the many differences between 'good writing' among various linguistic communities. Clyne (1987) compares the difference between German, 'Teutonic' and Anglo-American, 'Saxonic' writing styles. Kachru (1999), similarly, contrasts Inner Circle Englishes with Hindi and Indian English rhetorical structures. Hyland (2003) emphasizes this relationship between culture and language and how it operates through genre. "Cultural values are reflected in and carried through language but also because cultures make available to us certain taken-for-granted ways of organizing our perceptions and expectations..." (p. 36). The belief in academia of the existence of a universalist structure of genre has made it difficult for some scholars and instructors to recognize one important detail—namely, that 'good' writing is clearly a culturally relative concept.

## **Research/ Survey focus**

Students were asked to comment on the instruction they received in composition and their writing practice in their first language and in English during their years of compulsory elementary and secondary education and previous university studies. Students were asked to differentiate between instruction received and writing practice required in both languages.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

6 graduate students who were registered in an intermediate academic writing course completed this survey. These students were enrolled in an International Relations program at the graduate level. With the exception of this course, students studied in Japanese. All students hoped to write their graduate theses in Japanese. Survey participants came from five countries: Indonesia, Inner-Mongolia, China, Malaysia and Japan.

### *Materials/ Procedures*

This survey was given to students at the beginning of the 2004-2005-school term (see Appendix 1 for survey). It focused on asking students to record their experiences in the area of composition from all levels of received education, both in their first language and in English. Students were asked to record what instruction they received, what practice they were asked to complete, how often they were asked to write and upon which topics they wrote about. While the survey was conducted in English, students were asked to select among genre types that were presented to them in Japanese. The characteristics of each genre type were discussed before students completed the survey. It was hoped that, since all students were proficient in Japanese, genre labels in that language would create a more stable field for definition. The instructor believed that all parties had a shared understanding of the characteristics of each genre. This assumption proved to be incorrect and will be discussed later. Students were given the following genre choices from which to choose:

小論文 (descriptive paragraph)	作文 (expository, persuasive essay)
感想文 (reflective paragraph)	短編小説／詩 (short story, poem)
レポート (descriptive essay)	

Participants in this survey do not represent a generalisable sample. Therefore, the results of this research cannot be generalized in discussion about all language classrooms. The results of this study are intended to highlight how a genre-based outlook in writing instruction offers a framework for conceptualization about how students' past experiences with genre must be recognized and understood so that they might be bridged with intended instruction in the second language classroom.

## **Results**

### *First Language writing instruction*

All students received their primary writing instruction in their first language while in elementary school. They reported instruction in writing reflective response journals and writing stories during these years. Two students, those from Indonesia and Malaysia, received instruction in essay and report writing in elementary school. All students reported writing stories and reflective paragraphs about their experiences both inside and outside of class. All students wrote stories. Two students, those from Indonesia and Malaysia, wrote paragraphs and short essays while attending elementary school.

Students report similar instruction at the junior secondary level. They continued to write reflective and descriptive paragraphs. The two participants from Indonesia and Malaysia continued to write longer essays and reports. All students report that while the length of the assignments grew, the frequency of writing decreased. Where all students reported that they were asked to write at least three times a month at the elementary level, this number decreased for all students but the survey participant from Malaysia who reported being asked to complete some form of writing at least once a day. Students from Japan reported being asked to write once or twice a year. Survey participants from both China and Mongolia reported writing once a month. The student from Indonesia reported writing twice a month.

As students moved to the senior secondary level of education, writing instruction broadened to include genres that had not been taught at previous levels. A wide difference in the breadth of instruction between

students as well as the amount of writing practice completed is also evident. Students from Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia and China received instruction and wrote in all genres in senior secondary school. Japanese students were taught short essay and reflective paragraph writing and were asked to practice writing in those areas. There was a marked difference in the amount of writing practice students were asked to do. The student participant from Indonesia wrote twice a month. The Malaysian participant was asked to write twice a week. Students from Mongolia and China were both asked to complete writing assignments once—in order to enter university. Japanese participants completed writing assignments twice, as preparation for entrance examinations. All told, throughout their compulsory education, students had a wide variety of instruction and an equally wide variety of opportunity to utilize the instruction that they received.

At the undergraduate level, participants were given little writing instruction but were all asked to write short papers and reports of no more than two pages in length (estimated by all students to be less than 1000 words). The amount of writing required by students differed, as in earlier levels of their education. Students from Indonesia, Malaysia and China were asked to submit written assignments at least twice a month. The Mongolian student reported that he did not complete writing tasks of any length while he attended university. Japanese participants reported that they completed writing assignments in their first languages twice a year, in the form of final course examinations.

#### *English Education*

Participants reported equally varied histories in the length of their English education as well as the depth and quality of writing instruction and practice they had. One student (from Malaysia) began receiving English writing instruction and practice from his first year in elementary school. Both Japanese participants began their English language instruction at elementary school but received no writing instruction or practice until university. This practice was limited to a creative writing class that both participants took where they wrote poetry and short stories. The student from Mongolia began his English study in university but received no writing instruction or practice. The students from Indonesia and China both began learning English at the junior secondary level. The Indonesian student began to write short descriptive essays in English in senior secondary school twice a month. She was asked to submit short descriptive essays once a month while she attended university. The student from China received English writing instruction in secondary school but was not required to practice it. At the university level she was asked to write reflective paragraphs no more than two times a year when she received English instruction.

### **Discussion and Classroom Implications**

The results of this study illustrate the heterogeneous nature of the experiences students received in writing instruction and practice both in their first languages and in English. It is often asserted that second-language students are able to draw on their first language writing skills as they develop their English language proficiency. Hyland (2003, p. 35) has noted that, “many adult learners are successful writers and able to bring sophisticated cognitive abilities and meta-cognitive strategies to the task of writing.” ‘Successful’ writers may be able to draw on those skills but it would be incorrect to assume, as results of this survey indicate, that all adult writers, even those at the graduate level, have learned and practiced the

skills necessary to transfer them to English. In many cases, the English writing classroom may be the first place students are exposed to and practice genres with any particular depth.

Students' experiences and subsequent instructional needs cannot remain unexamined. As Bosher (1998) concludes in her work on Indo-Chinese students studying in the United States, those who may be studying at the same level, "may differ developmentally in their writing and may have very different strengths and weaknesses which they bring to the reading/writing task" (p. 228).

The difficulty I faced in developing shared definitions of genre types with my students reflects the fluidity of genre between language and culture. Instructors who seek to follow the genre-based approach to writing instruction must challenge the myth that 'good' academic writing has universalist characteristics. Recognizing the socially constructed nature of 'good writing' in genre means that the instructor should assume nothing about students' past experience with a particular genre. It is only after uncovering what students have done in the past and how they construct a given genre that the instructor can begin to co-construct a curriculum with his/her students.

## Conclusion

It is imperative that composition instructors recognize the necessity to work from where their students' past writing experiences have brought them. The first step in achieving this goal is to ask students to complete a survey that can begin to inform the instructor about the breadth and depth of the composition instruction and practice students may have received in both their first and second languages. Even graduate students may have little writing experience in their first language. Assumptions about students' writing experiences must be replaced by a fuller understanding of students' writing experiences so that instructors' can better accommodate students' learning needs.

One stumbling block to using a survey to examine students' experiences in writing concerns the fluidity of genre definitions between languages and cultures. Students and instructors must discuss these differences so that common understandings can be developed. This issue reaches the heart of the genre-based approach to writing instruction. Genres are socially constructed; good writing is not universally defined across cultures. Before students can be instructed about the power of genres in English, instructors must recognize the power and fluidity of what their students will bring from their own experience.

## References

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**Appendix 1**

The purpose of this survey is to uncover what experiences you have had at writing in your first language and in English.

What is your first language? \_\_\_\_\_

**Part 1: Writing experiences in your first language****Elementary School —**

Were you taught the structure of different kinds of writing assignments?

If yes, what kind of writing assignments were you taught?

小論文 作文 感想文 短編小説／詩 レポート

What kind of writing did you do?

Choose 作文 感想文 レポート 短編小説／詩 何もなし

How often did you write?

What kind of topics did you write about?

**Junior High School —**

Were you taught the structure of different kinds of writing assignments?

If yes, what kind of writing assignments were you taught?

小論文 作文 感想文 短編小説／詩 レポート

What kind of writing did you do?

小論文 作文 感想文 レポート 短編小説／詩 何もなし

How often did you write?

What kind of topics did you write about?

**Senior High School —**

Were you taught the structure of different kinds of writing assignments?

If yes, what kind of writing assignments were you taught?

小論文 作文 感想文 短編小説／詩 レポート

What kind of writing did you do?

小論文 作文 感想文 短編小説／詩 レポート 何もなし

How often did you write?

What kind of topics did you write about?

**University —**

Were you taught the structure of different kinds of writing assignments?

If yes, what kind of writing assignments were you taught?

小論文 作文 感想文 短編小説／詩 レポート

What kind of writing did you do?

小論文 作文 感想文 レポート 短編小説／詩 何もなし

How often did you write?

What kind of topics did you write about?

**Part 2: Writing experiences in English**

When did you begin studying English?

When did you study English?

elementary school junior high school senior high school university

**Junior High School —**

Were you taught the structure of different kinds of English writing assignments?

If yes, what kind of writing assignments were you taught?

小論文 作文 感想文 短編小説／詩 レポート

What kind of writing did you do?

小論文 作文 感想文 レポート 短編小説／詩 何もなし

How often did you write?

What kind of topics did you write about?

**Senior High School —**

Were you taught the structure of different kinds of English writing assignments?

If yes, what kind of writing assignments were you taught?

小論文      作文      感想文      短編小説／詩      レポート

What kind of writing did you do?

小論文      作文      感想文      短編小説／詩      何もなし

What kind of writing did you do?

Choose      小論文      作文      感想文      短編小説／詩      何もなし

How often did you write?

What kind of topics did you write about?

**University —**

Were you taught the structure of different kinds of English writing assignments?

If yes, what kind of English writing assignments were you taught?

小論文      作文      感想文      短編小説／詩      レポート

What kind of writing did you do?

小論文      作文      感想文      短編小説／詩      レポート      何もなし

How often did you write?

What kind of topics did you write about?

(English Education in Japan, 日本における英語教育)