A proposal to improve narrative texts at the University using Genre Theory

A proposal to improve narrative texts at the University using Genre Theory

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Abstract: Academic writing is an essential skill that language students need to develop at tertiary education. This article intends to be a contribution to teaching academic writing having Genre Theory as a framework so that students are able to use different texts depending on their communicative end. Students were asked to write a narrative at the end of the semester. This article shows the main difficulties students have to write this text type in a language subject at tertiary education and the main aspects they do well following the characteristics of the genre. The analysis shows that students have difficulties with the use of transitions, verb tenses and lexical cohesion. We intend to highlight that making explicit the formal and structural characteristics of the genres contributes to facilitate that students are able to see a clear connection between the characteristics of a particular text type, in this case narrative, and its function in context.
Keywords: Genre Theory, text types, narrative, academic writing, teaching-learning process.
Resumen: La escritura académica es una destreza fundamental que el alumnado de lengua necesita desarrollar en la educación superior. Este artículo pretende ser una contribución a la enseñanza de la escritura académica teniendo la Teoría del Género como marco de modo que el alumnado sea capaz de emplear distintos tipos de textos dependiendo de su finalidad comunicativa. Se pidió al alumnado que escribiera una narración al final del cuatrimestre. Este artículo muestra las principales dificultades que el alumnado tiene al escribir este tipo de textos en una asignatura de lengua en la enseñanza universitaria y los principales aspectos que hacen de forma correcta siguiendo las características del género. El análisis muestra que el alumnado tiene dificultades con el uso de conectores, tiempos verbales y cohesión léxica. Señalaremos que explicitar las características formales y estructurales de los géneros contribuye a facilitar que los estudiantes puedan ver una conexión clara entre las características de un tipo de texto determinado y su función en el contexto.

Introduction

The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has involved serious changes at the tertiary education in European universities in the last years. One of them is that students and teachers share the responsibility in the teaching-learning process. This involves that students assume the protagonism and that the teacher's roles change from being a source of knowledge to becoming a facilitator of student's learning process.

Another crucial change is that the priority of education is not that students learn contents but the acquisition of competences that are useful for their future life as professionals in the labour market. Therefore, it is essential that students learn to do things that can be applied to authentic contexts, i.e., learning needs to be practical so that students see a connection between what happens in the classroom and real life.

In this sense, teaching academic writing needs to be transformed from a compulsory skill that makes students write just for the fact of writing to writing for real life. Consequently, students need to see that they can do things with the texts they are asked to write and that writing authentic texts is a way of interacting with society because the texts are created in order to accomplish different communicative ends: persuading, reporting, giving information, among others.

Thus, it is important that students are aware of the potential of language to be aware of all the different kinds of meanings from which writers and speakers can choose. Students have to realize that when they create a text they have power because they can do things with their texts, in Halliday's words (1978: 27): "Language, [...] is a potential: it is what the speaker can do".

Approaching writing in this way requests the use of a model that allows teachers and students be aware of the potential of the different linguistic and textual choices that can be used to create texts with social purpose and of the potential of the social interaction that texts create (Hua et al., 2007; Wennerstrom, 2003).

The application of Genre Theory to the analysis of texts is essential in order to help students to write better or more easily because they are aware of the structure of the different texts types and of the connection between the form of the texts and the meanings they express (Martínez Lirola, 2013). Consequently, following this approach, students will be able to interpret the relationships between text and context and establish a connection between the social purpose of a text and its grammatical characteristics.

Approaching Genre Theory

There is an interrelationship between language, text and context, i.e., depending on the functions of language in a particular context, the speaker or writer makes her/his language choices. In this sense, following Halliday (1978), we understand language as 'meaning potential', i.e., it is for making meanings and accomplishing purposes (Edelsky, 2006).

Genres are texts that share the same purpose in a determined culture and the same formal and structural features. In this sense, genre studies have focused on socio-cultural actions. As Biber (2006, p. 11) points out "[...] the term genre has been used to refer to a culturally recognized 'message type' with a conventional internal structure, such as an affidavit, a biology research article, or a business memo." Similarly, Parodi (2010, p. 25) defines genre in the following way: "A genre is a constellation of potential discourse conventions, sustained by previous knowledge of the speakers/writers and listeners/readers (stored in the memory of each subject), based on contextual, social, linguistic, and cognitive possibilities and/or constraints".

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

genre-based teaching can help students gain access to discourse which will help them to improve their written and spoken interactions in a second language. In this sense, genres are seen as 'resources for meaning' rather than a 'system of rules' (Swales, 2002, p. 25).

Recent studies highlight the importance of academic writing so that students are able to use texts appropriately in context (Coffin & Donohue, 2012; Gardner, 2012; Klein & Unsworth, 2014). There are also studies that analyse the different approaches to writing that can be used (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010; Klein & Yu, 2013; Schleppegrell, 2011; Wingate, 2012). Moreover, other studies join the use of computer assisted language learning (CALL) with genre theory (Hsien-Chin, 2000; Martínez Lirola & Tabuenca Cuevas, 2008 and 2010; Pérez Gutiérrez & Pérez Torres, 2005).

It is necessary to make explicit the different genres so that students are aware of the potential of each of them and of their textual and grammatical characteristics (Moyano, 2013). Our approach to teaching genre is the one proposed by the Sydney School. Following Martin and Rose (2012, p. 1): "The initial aim of the Sydney School project was to design a writing pedagogy that could enable any student to succeed with the writing demands of the school. The project began with research into types of writing in the primary school, out of which grew the concept of genre as a 'staged goal-oriented social process'".

The main research questions we will try to answer in this paper are the following: what are the main difficulties University students have when they are asked to write narratives? In what way can Genre Theory help students overcome these difficulties?

Methodology and main steps in our research

One of our main objectives in this article is to help students improve their writing skills and that they are aware of the different genres and their characteristics so that they can use the appropriate text in the right context and accomplish the social function they intend to (de Silva & Feez, 2012; Fecho, 2011; Herrington et al., 2009; Hubbard & Levy, 2006). Consequently, the model of Genre Theory followed by the Sydney School was chosen for teaching.

English Language V is a core subject taught during the first semester in the third year of the degree in English Studies (Grado en Estudios Ingleses). Its main purpose is that students develop the five skills in English (listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction) so that they are able to acquire level C1 at the end of the academic year after they have also passed the subject English Language VI. The subject was taught during four hours a week: the first hour was used to revise essential grammatical aspects and vocabulary connected with different semantic fields, the second hour was used to teach aspects related to academic writing and the teacher decided to use genre theory (see section Approaching Genre Theory). The third and four hours were used to

improve oral skills; for this reason students were asked to prepare and oral presentation and a debate on a topic of their choice.

During the academic year 2014-2015 there were 125 students registered in the subject. All the students have studied English in primary and secondary education and during the first year of the degree in the core subjects English Language I, II, III and IV. Most of the students wanted to be English teachers at the high school. There were also students who want to work as translators or interpreters.

Research design

After observing literacy problems in students writing, we decided to use Genre Theory so that students could see models of good writing and analyse textual structure, taking into consideration the cultural and social context of the texts. This would allow them improve their writing skills and be able to adapt their register to the text type they were using depending on the communicative situation. The main difficulties student had were the choice of grammatical structures and the choice of vocabulary that collocated with specific text types. For example, there could be an almost complete absence of transitions in students' writings, or in other cases, more complex grammatical devices such as nominalisation are not frequently used.

The teacher explained the main characteristics of the text types following the classifications proposed by some of the main authors in the Sydney School (Butt et al. (2000, 2012); De Silva Joyce & Feez (2012); Droga & Humphrey (2003) and Humphrey et al. (2012)). These authors divide texts in recount, narrative, description, procedure, information report, explanation, exposition and discussion.

Students were offered good examples of different genres or text types, so that they could observe the different stages in the construction of the text. The teacher emphasized that the use of one text type or another depended on what was intended to achieve in different cultural and social contexts. After that, students were asked to observe the main grammatical features in the text. It was only at the end of the semester that students were asked to write their own texts following the stages and linguistic patterns found in the models. Due to the limitations of this article, we are just going to concentrate on a text type, i.e., narratives.

This study comprises 60 narratives written by students who were registered in the subject English Language V of the degree English Studies during the academic year 2014-2015. The analysis concentrated in observing if students have followed the formal and functional characteristics of the genre selected (see table 1).

Analysis and results

The narrative is a form of writing whose purpose is "to narrate a sequence of events triggered by an unusual or unexpected event with an outcome that both entertains and instruct the reader or listener" (Butt et al., 2012, p. 29). The basic structure of this text consists on an orientation, complication, resolution and coda (Butt. et al., 2012; Humphrey et al.,

2012). In addition, the main grammatical features of this genre are the following (Butt. et al., 2012, p. 29; (Humphrey et al., 2012, p. 195): relating and action verbs, verb groups usually in past tense, particular concrete participants, detailed noun groups, circumstances expressed as adverbials to express details, etc.

Due to the limitations of this paper, we are just going to offer one example of a narrative written by an English Language V student. This example shows the main structural and grammatical characteristics found in narratives. As we can see, this student has followed the structural aspects of a narrative because we observe a clear orientation followed by complication, and finally, the text ends with a resolution and a coda. Moreover, this text has been chosen because it is representative of some of the main difficulties students registered in English Language V have and of some of the main things they do well following the characteristics of this genre.

In this sense, the following narrative follows the basic structural form of a narrative according to Butt et al. (2012, p. 29) and Humphrey et al. (2012, p. 195). However, the transition between the different parts of the narrative is not as complete as could be expected at this level. In addition, the problematic shifting from past to present tenses and the awkward references in and out of context show that the student had great difficulty in following the textual and grammatical features required for a narrative. Moreover, although there are some grammatical characteristics of narratives, the student has some difficulties with the grammatical elements appropriate to this text type (see example below) where the main mistakes and the corrections made by the teacher appear marked in red and blue.

Table 1
Example of a student's narrative

Orientation	Rain, clouds, sun and again rain. A rain that keeps fallingVTense slowly and tiring??? for some long days. Its nine o'clock in the morning and this day is supposed to be the most important day of my life. However, the rain makes me feel a little bit nervous and frightened. Did I manage to pass the exam? This question is thereVTense inside my mind for some days and today I will be able toCut find out the answer.
Complication	This morning a deep melancholy seatedWChoice all around me???. I look again through the window and begin to see as in a huge mirror how it passed the last year of my life.WOrder ??? A new beginning and so many changes -briefly, a new life. Who could have imagined that something supposedVTense to be a short holiday in Spain willVTense end upMissingW inPreposition a new life far away from my mother country? Surely I did not, but it happened and here I am trying to remember how everything began. My arrival inPreposition Spain and the moment I met my parents after almost 2 yearsMissingW; the first day when I touched the fine sand on the beach, my first day of classes, the first Spanish words learned. I began everything from zero but it was a great challenge for me and today I'll be able to find out the results of an entire year of hard work. Looking through that window I feel how a little smile appears on my face. I am proud of how I managed to face all the difficulties of the last year. "Yes, you do not have to be frightened because you have worked hard to get where you are, you will pass this exam also"...I am thinking. I begin to feel more confident and without taking into account the slowlyWForm rain I tookVTense my umbrella and get out of??? the house because I remembered I had to meet one of my classmates somewhere near the high school. A friend,whichPronoun error from the beginning tried to teach me Spanish. The one who laughVTense when I said a "wrong" word by mistake but also the one that explained MissingWme the real meaningMissingW. Now, we both have to go to our high school because in function of the results??? we get today our lives will change Prepositionin goodWChoice or worse. Finally, I get to the place where I am meeting her and like always she is smiling. We begin talking and together we move slowly towards the school. In front of it, all my classmates are expecting the important envelope with our results. Looking around me, I can see how some of them keep smiling, others are very serious and others seem to beAwkward phrasing in a cafeteria having fun with their friends. We are so different and our goals are different as well. Suddenly our teacher comes, opens the door and tells us to enter inCut the hall of the building. One by one, we begin to sit down. However, our headmaster suddenly breaks down the fuss.??? He enters caringWChoice the envelope that today is possibleWChoice VTenseto make us smile or cry. We are now all very nervous and our smiling faces turned out inPreposition VTense serious ones. The headmaster let us know that the results are in alphabetical order. Therefore, I take the hand of my friend and I wait looking at the headmaster because I know that it is a matter of two minutes until he utters my name. "Babuti Cristina your results"...he said. With short??? steps, I get to the master's desk and I take the paper he gives to me. I do not know how but my eyes can see only the final result and nothing else written down on the paper. I begin to cry and I can see how everyone is looking at me.
Resolution	"I passed" ...I said finally and my tears begin to fall down onCut my face. My classmates seem to be proud of me and they begin to offer me congratulations. Moreover, I am proud as well and happy because I did it. After only 9 months studying here in Spain, I was able to pass all the exams and now the dream I had of studying at theCut university comeVTense true.
Coda	I remember how my tears, tears of joy kept falling MissingWsome long minutes but it did not matter. It was the most important day of my life and everything was allowed.

Table 1. Example of a student's narrative
Table 1. The corrections made by the teacher point out that the main difficulties students had are related to the choice of the correct verb tense; in addition, there are also some words that are missing4 and some problems with word order and word choice. However, this text has several characteristics of narratives such as the ones presented in the following paragraphs:
There are some verbs in the past tense ("did, happened, met, touched, learned", etc.). However, the student uses the present tense in most cases as a way to add vividness to her/his narrative and give it a sense of immediacy.
The main concrete participants in this narrative are I, my parents and my classmates. There are not many details offered about them. Some of the grammatical problems observed in the narrative have to do with the use of compound and complex sentences to develop ideas because there are several mistakes (see table 1).
As expected in narratives, the student uses evaluative vocabulary ("be the most important day of my life") and grading resources to intensify feelings ("a little bit nervous and frightened, a deep melancholy, very nervous").
There is lexical cohesion by the use of some collocations ("school, classmates, teacher, exam, headmaster, among others"); however, the student does not use synonyms or antonyms to develop the ideas presented in this narrative.
As regards the use of connectors, there are some ("however, finally, moreover") but the text could be improved if the student had used some more in order to connect the ideas. Nevertheless, the use of adverbials as theme is done several times in order to set events in time and place as we can see in the following examples: "Looking through that window, in front of it, looking around me, after only 9 months studying here in Spain".
In addition, most students (78%) structured their texts in a coherent and cohesive way whereas the others had written texts with a very poor structure. It was observed that 61% of students had problems with the use of transitions because they used less than 3 in their texts. Moreover, there were students who had the tendency to cluster ideas in one sentence.
The fact that the structure of different genres was explained during the semester and that the explanation of each genre went together with the analysis of different models of the text type under analysis has facilitated students' understanding of the social purpose of each genre and its communicative end. In this way, students can write their own texts having context in mind so that texts can be effective and follow the formal and functional characteristics requested. In essence, we observe that following Genre Theory helps students establish a relationship between grammar and textuality in order to improve their writing skills.

Discussion

Genre Theory was adopted as a theoretical framework so that students could become 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. As proponents of the genre approach, we argue that making the genres explicit and showing how to write them will help students to be aware of how knowledge is structured in different written genres depending on the text type. Genre Theory uses materials and tasks based on authentic linguistic data in order to promote student awareness of the conventions and procedures of the genre in question.

When students are able to analyse the main formal and structural features of the main text types following Genre Theory, they can predict the context of the text, and at the same time they learn to use the said features in their written texts and improve their level of literacy. 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".

We believe that we can use grammar and genre based descriptions of text to improve students writing in the following ways:
- Selecting a text as an instance of a genre. It is convenient to examine several texts to confirm a genre type.
- Identifying its schematic structure by examining grammatical features that connect the text with its context in each stage of the text.
- Drawing attention in teaching to the key grammatical features that create the genre and its stages.

- Using these aspects in a detailed way in teaching so that students concentrate on the grammatical aspects of the text that teachers consider crucial.

Conclusions

The use of the Genre Theory is a very useful approach to writing because it allows that students can see models of good writing and analyse textual structure, taking into consideration the cultural and social context of the texts, i.e., this approach establishes a connection between writing and real life because pieces of writing are seen as texts with a function in context.

This article has presented the main difficulties students have in narratives. Moreover, we have also referred to the main positive aspects observed in the form and structure of the genre after students had studied the differences between different genres following Genre Theory as a methodological proposal.

Genre Theory is considered useful to improve students' writing because it makes them become aware of the different linguistic and textual choices that can be made inside a culture in order to create different texts types with social purpose. The approach of teaching writing that we followed gave students the opportunity of using language in genres that could be used in real social contexts, which allow students exhibit varied degrees of control over the meaning potential of English.

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