Genre and Discourse Analysis in Language for Specific Purposes

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Language for specific purposes (LSP) refers to a distinctive approach to language education that focuses on the particular linguistic features, discourse practices, and communicative skills used by target groups. Its success depends on accurately identifying what these features and practices are so they can be taught to students, and this has been greatly assisted since the late 1980s by the emergence of genre analysis. Genre analysis has become established as one of the most popular and productive frameworks for the study of specialized communication in academic, professional, and institutional contexts. Essentially, the approach is used to describe texts within textual and social contexts, rejecting the idea that individual texts should be treated in isolation from either their use or other texts. This entry will offer an overview of the importance of genre and discourse analysis in this area of research and pedagogy.

Discourse and Genre Analysis

Discourse analysis is a collection of methods for studying language in action, looking at texts in relation to the social contexts in which they are used, but this broad definition has been interpreted in various ways across the social sciences. This is because language is an irreducible part of social life, and connected to almost everything we do. Discourse analysis, in fact, spreads between two poles, giving more or less emphasis to concrete texts or to institutional social practices, but generally tending to focus on language phenomena that occur above the level of the sentence. Genre analysis is a more specific form of discourse analysis that focuses on any element of recurrent language use, including grammar and lexis, that is relevant to the analyst’s interests. Genres are the recurrent uses of more or less conventionalized forms through which individuals develop relationships, establish communities, and get things done using language. As a result, genre analysis sees texts as representative of wider rhetorical practices and so has the potential to offer descriptions and explanations of both texts and the communities that use them.

Genre analysts set out to offer descriptions of “typified acts of communication” based on the form and purposes of texts. Fundamentally, genres are kinds of broad rhetorical templates that writers draw on to respond to repeated situations; users see certain language choices as representing effective ways of getting things done in familiar contexts. Genre analysis is therefore grounded in the assumption that the features of a similar group of texts depend on the social context of their creation and use, and that those features can be described in a way that relates a text to others like it and to the choices and constraints acting on text producers. This is the very stuff of communication. O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, and Fiske (1994, p. 128), for instance, argue that “genres are agents of ideological closure—they limit the meaning-potential of a given text,” while writers can rely on readers already having some knowledge and expectations about the conventions of a genre. We know immediately, for example, whether a text is an essay, a joke, or a recipe, but we can also recognize innovation, irony, and creativity. Genres can thus be
seen as a kind of tacit contract between writers and readers, influencing the behavior of text producers and the expectations of receivers.

While approaches to genre differ considerably in the emphasis they give to text or context, the research methods they employ, and the types of pedagogies they encourage, text-analytic varieties have had most impact in LSP contexts. These approaches are influenced by Halliday’s (1994) view of language as a system of choices that link texts to particular contexts through patterns of lexico-grammatical and rhetorical features (Christie & Martin, 1997), and by Swales’s (1990) observation that these recurrent choices are closely related to the work of particular discourse communities whose members share broad social purposes. These purposes are a key element of the context of a text and the rationale of a genre; they help to shape the ways it is structured and the choices of content and style it makes available. The following sections discuss the aspects of language usually studied, the relationship between genre and context (both social and textual), and the application of research to pedagogy.

**Genre Structures and Features**

Perhaps the most fruitful line of research in LSP has been to focus on genre as text, with the aim of exploring the lexico-grammatical and discursive patterns of particular genres to identify their recognizable structural identity, or what Bhatia (1999, p. 22) calls “generic integrity.” Analyzing this kind of patterning has yielded useful information about the ways texts are constructed and the rhetorical contexts in which such patterns are used, as well as providing valuable input for genre-based teaching.

Some of this research has followed the move-analysis work pioneered by Swales (1990), which seeks to identify the recognizable stages of particular institutional genres and the constraints on typical move sequences. Moves are the typical rhetorical steps that writers or speakers use to develop their social purposes, and recent work on academic genres has produced descriptions of the results sections in research articles (Bruce, 2009), dissertation acknowledgments (Hyland, 2004c), and grant proposals (Connor, 2000). In professional contexts, research has explored the structures of genres in direct mail letters (Upton, 2002) and in management and legal cases (Lung, 2008).

While analyzing schematic structures has proved an invaluable way of looking at texts, analysts are increasingly aware of the dangers of oversimplifying by assuming blocks of texts to be mono-functional and ignoring writers’ complex purposes and “private intentions” (Bhatia, 1999). There is also the problem raised by Crookes (1986) of validating analyses to ensure they are not simply products of the analyst’s intuitions. Transitions from one move to another in a text are, of course, always motivated outside the text as writers respond to their social context, but analysts have not always been convincingly able to identify the ways these shifts are explicitly signaled by lexico-grammatical patterning.

Research has therefore tended to move more toward examining clusters of register, style, lexis, and other features that often distinguish particular genres. One feature of academic genres to receive attention is writers’ use of evaluative *that* constructions in articles and dissertations (Hyland & Tse, 2005). This is a structure that allows a writer to thematize evaluative meanings by presenting a complement clause following *that* (as in *We believe that this is an interesting construction*). Other recent studies have looked at circumstance adverbials in student presentations (Zareva, 2009), interactive features of undergraduate lectures (Morell, 2004), and the common four-word collocations, or lexical bundles, in student dissertations (Hyland, 2008). In other domains, research has identified genre characteristics such as the use of conjunctive cohesion in EU documents (Trebits, 2009) and metadiscourse markers in professional e-mails (Jensen, 2009). A feature of much recent
work has been to investigate how persuasion in various genres is accomplished not only through the ways ideas are presented, but also by the construction of an appropriate authorial self and the negotiation of participant relationships.

**Genre and Community**

The importance of genre to LSP studies results from the growing body of evidence that professional and academic discourses represent a variety of specific literacies, so that what counts as convincing argument, appropriate tone, persuasive interaction, and so on is managed for a particular audience (Hyland, 2004a). More specifically, researchers have become sensitive to the ways genres are written and responded to by individuals acting in concert with others. This community-based orientation to literacy draws attention to the idea that we communicate as members of social groups, each with its own norms, categorizations, sets of conventions, and ways of doing things.

Essentially, members of a community usually have little difficulty in recognizing similarities in the texts they use frequently, and they are able to draw on their repeated experiences with such texts to read, understand, and perhaps write them relatively easily. This is, in part, because writing is a practice based on expectations. The process of writing involves creating a text that the writer assumes the reader will recognize and expect, and the process of reading involves drawing on assumptions about what the writer is trying to do. Writer and reader assemble sense from a text by anticipating what the other is likely to do by making connections to prior texts.

Genre analysis therefore reveals the ways that genres reflect and construct the communities that use them, as Swales observes:

> In-group abbreviations, acronyms, argots, and other special terms flourish and multiply; beyond that, these discourse communities evolve their own conventions and traditions for such diverse verbal activities as running meetings, producing reports, and publicizing their activities. These recurrent classes of communicative events are the genres that orchestrate verbal life. These genres link the past and the present, and so balance forces for tradition and innovation. They structure the roles of individuals within wider frameworks, and further assist those individuals with the actualization of their communicative plans and purposes. (1998, p. 20)

The idea that people acquire, use, and modify texts while acting as members of academic, occupational, or social groups offers a powerful way of describing communities and understanding the communication needs of students in professional and academic contexts.

A recent development in genre studies has been the growth of ethnographic approaches as a way of accessing features of the context and of the processes of production that may explain particular aspects of genres. Research into situated academic discourse, such as J. Swales’s “textography” (1998) and A. Johns’s “students as researchers” work (1997), indicates how ethnographic methods, such as observation of physical sites of genre activity and interviews with individuals who read or write a genre, can provide access to these communities and their genre use.

**Genre Constellations**

Another aspect of context lies in the ways that texts relate to other texts, forming “constellations” with neighboring genres (Swales, 2004). An important aspect of such constellations is that we almost never find genres in isolation. A useful concept here is that of “genre
sets,” referring to the part of the entire genre constellation that a particular individual or group engages in, either productively or receptively (Devitt, 1991). Textbooks, lab reports, and lectures, for instance, may be key genres for many science students, while discussion postings and online tutorials are genres more familiar to distance-learning students on teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) programs. We can also approach genre constellations through “genre chains,” a term that refers to the way spoken and written texts cluster together in a given social activity. Thus genres sometimes follow each other in a predictable chronological order, such as a job application that involves a step-wise procedure through job advertisement, curriculum vitae, application letter, interview, and so on.

Moving beyond the immediate context to the wider “context of culture,” genres can be seen as institutional social practices. From this perspective, genres are loosely arrayed in a network as each interacts with, draws on, and responds to another in a particular setting. This view refers to Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of intertextuality and the fact that every utterance reacts to other utterances in that domain. While this totality is constantly changing, analysis can help show how text users are linked into a network of prior texts according to their group membership. These interconnections can be characterized as both intertextual and interdiscursive. “Interdiscursivity” concerns the use of elements in a text that carry institutional and social meanings from other discourses, reflecting the conventions, values, and practices of neighboring discourses.

One example of how an institutional genre is linked into a web of interdiscursivity is the undergraduate syllabus (Afros & Schryer, 2009), which is linked not only to other course documents and texts but also to wider understandings of the institution and the discipline itself. As the authors point out:

The syllabus reveals that the social creation of knowledge taking place in the course draws on lectures, textbooks, and other in-class and out-of-class learning/teaching activities as much as on the ongoing discussion in the academic field, adult education, university policies, and many other texts and communities. Instructors utilize the syllabus not only to manifest their membership in multiple discourse communities, but also to socialize students into (at least, some of) them. (p. 231)

Thus, the syllabus highlights the interdependences between the classroom, research, and institutional genres.

**Genre Pedagogies**

The findings produced by genre studies have had a major impact on LSP teaching. This is because genre descriptions ground teaching in research and support learners through an explicit understanding of how target texts are structured and the reasons they are written as they are. The potential advantages of genre-based instruction for writing can be summarized as follows (Hyland, 2004b):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explicit</th>
<th>Makes clear what is to be learned to facilitate the acquisition of writing skills.</th>
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<td>Systematic</td>
<td>Provides a coherent framework for focusing on both language and contexts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Needs-based</td>
<td>Ensures that course objectives and content are derived from target needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Gives teachers a central role in scaffolding students’ learning and creativity.</td>
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Empowering

Provides access to the patterns and possibilities of variation in valued texts.

Critical

Gives students the resources to understand and challenge valued discourses.

Consciousness raising

Increases teachers’ awareness of texts and helps them confidently advise students on writing.

While these characteristics are not unique to genre pedagogy, no other approach seeks to realize them all.

LSP practitioners employ genre pedagogies as a means of emphasizing what is to be learned, organizing instruction around the genres that learners need and the social contexts in which they will operate (Hyland, 2004b). This typically involves adopting a scaffolded pedagogy to guide learners toward control of a genre based on whole texts selected in relation to learner needs. Based on sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), scaffolding is a metaphor of learning that refers to the supportive behaviors by which an expert can help a novice learner to gradually achieve higher, independent levels of performance. In LSP classrooms it involves active and sustained support by a teacher who models appropriate strategies for meeting particular purposes, guides students in their use of the strategies, and provides a meaningful and relevant context for using the strategies.

Texts and tasks are therefore selected according to learners’ needs and genres are modeled explicitly to provide learners with something to aim for, namely an understanding of what readers are likely to expect. One approach widely used in Australia is the teaching–learning cycle (e.g., Feez, 1998), which helps inform the planning of classroom activities by showing the process of learning a genre as a series of linked stages. Here the teacher provides initial explicit knowledge and guided practice, moves to sharing responsibility for developing texts, and gradually withdraws support until the learner can work alone. The key stages of the cycle are

• setting the context—to reveal genre purposes and the settings in which it is commonly used,
• modeling—analyzing representative samples of the genre to identify its stages and key features and the variations that are possible,
• joint construction—guided, teacher-supported practice in the genre through tasks that focus on particular stages or functions of the text,
• independent construction—independent writing by students monitored by the teacher,
• comparing—relating what has been learned to other genres and contexts to understand how genres are designed to achieve particular social purposes.

Each of these stages seeks to achieve a different purpose, and so is associated with different types of classroom activities and teacher–learner roles (Hyland, 2004b, pp. 130–40).

Critiques

Genre approaches have not been uncritically adopted in LSP classrooms. Situated-learning theorists (e.g., Dias & Pare, 2000), for example, argue that writing is always part of the goals and occasions that bring it about and that it cannot be learned in the inauthentic context of the classroom. Such a view, however, ignores the fact that second language (L2) students are often at a considerable disadvantage in such unfamiliar naturalistic settings and that genre-based teaching can cut short the long processes of situated acquisition. Critical theorists have also attacked genre teaching, for accommodating learners both to existing modes of practice and to the values and ideologies of the dominant culture that
the valued genres embody (e.g., Benesch, 2001). Genre proponents, however, contend that this argument can be leveled at almost all teaching approaches, and that learning about genres does not preclude critique but, in fact, provides a necessary basis for critical engagement with cultural and textual practices.

Finally, genre teachers have had to defend themselves against process adherents and the charge that genre instruction inhibits writers’ self-expression and straitjackets creativity through conformity and prescriptivism (e.g., Dixon, 1987). Obviously the dangers of a static, decontextualized pedagogy are very real if teachers fail to acknowledge variation and apply what Freedman (1994, p. 46) calls “a recipe theory of genre.” But there is nothing inherently prescriptive in a genre approach. There is no reason why providing students with an understanding of discourse should be any more prescriptive than, say, providing them with a description of a clause or the parts of a sentence. The fact is that genres do have a constraining power that inevitably limits the originality of individual writers. Selecting a particular genre implies the use of certain patterns, but this does not dictate the way we write: it enables us to make choices and facilitates expression. The ability to create meaning is only made possible by the possibility of alternatives. By ensuring these options are available to students we give them the opportunity to make such choices, and for many LSP learners this awareness of regularity and structure is both facilitating and reassuring.

Conclusions

LSP instruction seeks to help demystify prestigious forms of discourse, unlock students’ creative and expressive abilities, and facilitate their access to greater life chances. To accomplish these goals teachers require a systematic means of describing texts and of making their students’ control over them more achievable. In short, a well-formulated theory of how language works in human interaction has become an urgent necessity in the field of teaching languages for specific purposes. Genre pedagogies are a major response to this need, providing teachers with a way of understanding how writing is shaped by individuals making language choices to achieve purposes in social contexts.

SEE ALSO: Critical English for Academic Purposes; Genre-Based Language Teaching; Swales, John M.; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Writing and Genre Studies

References


Suggested Readings


