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A Genre Theory Contextualization for Academic Writing in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores new possibilities for teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing in the context of higher education in China. Using John Swales' Create A Research Space (CARS) model, the paper demonstrates how genre theory can be integrated into undergraduate writing courses in China's EFL settings. This method emphasizes teaching students to structure academic papers effectively, thereby improving their understanding and application of the genre-specific conventions of academic English. The paper illustrates how the CARS model aids students by delineating their research territory, identifying gaps, and positioning their studies within ongoing academic dialogues. Additionally, the teaching cycle guides students from modeling the text, to joint construction, and finally to independent writing. Furthermore, the paper highlights the comprehensive implications of this model, including enhancing intercultural communication skills and developing critical genre awareness among students. It addresses the challenges of adapting this model to the Chinese EFL context, such as linguistic and cultural barriers, and underscores the need for contextualized teaching strategies that meet Chinese learners' needs. To conclude, it is recommended for further research to validate the practical usage of this genre-based EAP instruction in higher education and facilitate future curriculum development.

Keywords: academic writing teaching, CARS model, EAP, genre theory

1. Introduction

In the EFL context, this paper discusses the definition of genre and rationales for using the ESP (EAP) approach to analyse a sample writing of academic introductions. The applications of the genre-based approach in academic writing for undergraduate language education students in China will also be discussed in the last section.

2. Theoretical Framework

As a highly contested notion, the discussion of genres has moved from literature to many fields, especially language studies and language education (Flowerdew, 2013; Handford, 2010). According to Liu, Luo, and Sun (at University of Edinburgh, 2024), a genre is a type of conventionalized communication-oriented discourse with certain lexicogrammatical

features and schematic structure circulated within certain communities. Their eclectic definition of genre includes defining features as discourse-based, communication-driven, schematic structured (Swales, 1990), socially stylised (Johns, 1997), and pragmatic (Miller, 1984).

Based on the aforementioned definition, this paper defines a genre as any structured discourse with goal-driven communication in a contextualised social communication event (Dirgeyasa, 2016; Martin, 1999; Swales, 1990). In specific, genre supports a particular usage of a certain language on a given social occasion (Christie & Martin, 2005). To emphasise, this paper regards a genre as a discourse with an identifiable structure and patterned language use. It emerges from literary, daily, and academic texts (Hammond & Derewianka, 2001).

To support further discussion, it is essential to point out some concerned features of a genre. From the perspective of social communication, communicative purpose is a distinctive feature describing the relation between the social purpose and the language structure of a specific text (Martin, 1993; Flowerdew, 2013). Based on this concept, although Askehave and Swales (2001) and Bhatia (1993, 2004) suspected communicative purpose of inconsistency in identifying genres and incomprehensiveness in explaining hidden purposes, a genre is considered to facilitate communication events before other possible intentions (Swales, 1990).

Concerning structure, a genre is staged in nature (Flowerdew, 2013). A specific genre can be identified by its sequential structure in a discourse. Also, a genre is conventionalised lexicogrammatical, as it entails fixed elements and patterns (Bhatia, 1993, 2004; Swales, 1990). Despite the existence of formulaic genres (Kuiper, 2009), most genres leave space for flexibility, which encourages individual creativity to break generic rules and integrate innovative expressions (Flowerdew, 2013). With staged and conventionalised lexicogrammatical features, a genre develops and adjusts itself over time through fixed schema and flexible adaptation.

As for knowledge building and circulation, a genre is acquired through conventionality and circulated among the communities of practice (Flowerdew, 2013). Once a certain discourse becomes popularized, the repetition and practice of the discourse help store genre-related information within the dissemination range, which is condensed to a kind of schema and gradually builds up the genre knowledge. Through the process, a specific genre is circulated with certain standards within user communities (Bhatia, 1993, 2004; Swales, 1990, 2004), inviting competent stakeholders and excluding incapable outsiders (Bhatia, 2004).

Regarding intercultural communication, genres tend to adapt themselves across borders, bringing intercultural differences in practice (Kaplan, 1966; Paltridge, 2006). To facilitate communication, the discussion of genres should be appropriately concerned with contextual variation and avoidance of miscommunication and misperceptions (Scollon & Scollon, 2012; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Fortanet-Gómez, 2008).

Having explored some key genre features, it is significant to compare the three major schools in genre analysis and match the needs in this paper to their methods and principles (Hyland, 2013). Emerged from systemic functional linguistics (SFL), the Sydney School views genre as "a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activities" (Halliday & Martin, 1993; Martin, 1984; Martin & Rose, 2002), which demonstrates a consensus between the Sydney school and the ESP school on the notion of communicative purposes and schematic structures within genres (Flowerdew, 2013; Martin, 1992).

However, the Sydney school and the ESP school hold divergent opinions on the categorization of genres. The ESP school identifies genres through external criteria and the communities in practice (Paltridge, 2002; Swales, 1990), while the Sydney school deals with more subtle macro-genres, which consist of different text types called elemental genres (Lock & Lockhart, 1998).

Different from the two schools with linguistic backgrounds, the rhetorical genre studies school (RGS) rejects the oversimplification of genre forms and the overemphasis on the conventionalisation of forms, putting genres on the lens of social evolution (Johns, 2003).

Concerning language pedagogy, RGS prefers an implicit way of teaching while the other two schools have designed explicit structures and strategies for teaching genres such as Bhatia's (1993) seven moves model for sales letters (Adam & Artemeva, 2002).

As genres are conventionalised and sequenced in partly fixed, historically and culturally adapted forms to fulfil different communicative purposes in specific groups of people, the academic genres are the focus of this paper (Flowerdew, 2013; Swales, 1990). Based on the need to communicate using academic discourse in the Chinese EFL context, the genre analysis matches the framework and principles of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) school (Flowerdew, 2013).

3. Text Analysis

The primary goal of genre analysis is to achieve communicative purposes across different cultures (Kaplan, 1966; Swales, 1990). With an insight into the communicative-oriented adaptation of the academic genre, the text analysed is selected from the introduction of Lai's research paper, *Selection of a topic of a research proposal of emerging academic writers in a blended linked EAP course: An interactional ethnographic perspective* (2024), which is published in TESOL Quarterly, a journal for English language education studies.

Swales's (1990) CARS (Create A Research Space) model is adopted to analyse this academic research article introduction. In academic learning, many subjects have difficulties in helping students to understand not only the structures in the genre but also contextual issues that need to be mentioned and addressed in their research (Devitt, 2015). This structure demonstrates how academic papers are supported by the identification of the field of enquiry, a summary of previous research, the follow-up identification of a gap in the existing work, and a final summary of a new method to fill the gap, which can help students understand the inner structure of the genre. To deconstruct, the model consists of three stages (also move) with three to four steps, which are shown below (Flowerdew, 2013):

Move 1. Establishing a territory:
- Step 1. Claiming centrality
  - and/or
- Step 2. Making topic generalisation
  - and/or
- Step 3. Reviewing items of previous research

Move 2. Establishing a niche:
- Step 1
  - A. Counterclaiming
    - or
  - B. Indicating a gap
    - or
  - C. Question-raising
    - or
  - D. Continuing a tradition.

Move 3. Occupying the niche:
- Step 1
  - A. Outlining purposes
    - or
  - B. Announcing present research;
- Step 2. Announcing principal findings;
- Step 3. Indicating research article structure.

Under the model, the selected introduction, which consists of twenty-one sentences, can be

divided into 3 parts, laying the foundations for the research issue.

The first three sentences demonstrate an idea group in Move 1 and a slight indication of Move 2. The first sentence "Recent years have witnessed… turn in…" locates the topic by pointing out a recent trend, an ethnographic turn in research using two citations, generalising the research topic on the latest research focus. Then, the second sentence "Developing… research experience" further demonstrates a specific issue in the EAL context under the ethnographic turn, which claims the central challenge in this focused field. The third sentence "Previous research… development" reviews the previous research from a specific perspective and indicates a gap in research directions, which detects a missing concern about "multimodal interactions and after-class online consultations". These three sentences establish the research territory at the macro level, eliciting the observation and potential issues from the researcher's perspective.

The next nine sentences form a follow-up idea group in Move 1, supporting the first part in a detailed research review. Sentences from the fourth to the eighth "Genre… practices" (see Appendix) refer to previous research on the definition and approaches to teaching academic writing. Sentences from the ninth to the eleventh "Lillis proposed… research" introduce the three levels of ethnography, which relates back to the "ethnographic turn" in the first sentence, preparing for the review of ethnographically oriented research in the twelfth sentence "Previous literature…". From here, the first twelve sentences establish the research territory before the declaration of Move 2 and Move 3.

The last nine sentences lead to the climax of this research paper, integrating the prepared idea groups in Move 1 and establishing the motivation, questions, and outlines of the research (Move 2 & Move 3). Based on previous research reviews, sentences the thirteenth and the fourteenth "digital era… classroom life" zoom in the research lens and introduce a new integrated method, which is the final step of topic generalisation. With all the settings prepared, the contextualization of existing issues indicates a research gap to fill, which is shown in sentences from the fifteenth to the nineteenth (except the seventeenth). The former two sentences "The IE approach…" state the approach is neglected by previous research for its potential influences in the EAP context. The two latter sentences ("despite", "has not yet been employed", "but have not") reveal the lack of realisation and application of the focused approach in existing studies. Then the present research is motivated to address the research gap and make contributions to the research field. Having established the niche in research, further steps in Move 3 are followed to outline research purposes ("to address these research gaps", "aims to demonstrate"), state principal findings ("demonstrate how IE make visible…") and indicate research article structure ("In the following section", "in Section…") in the remaining sentences.

Apart from the corresponding sequencing which matches Swales's CARS model, this piece of introduction suggests creativity within conventionality (Flowerdew, 2013). The analysis above mentioned a slight indication of a research gap in the third sentence, which is achieved by the author's self-citation of previous work. This is a natural link to the author's previous observation, which is a part of the research review but functionally more of a hint to establish a niche, making it a combination of Move 1 and Move 2.

4. Discussion

As Flowerdew (2013) mentioned the non-one-to-one relation between each move and realisation pattern, the text analysis above reveals a discrepancy in following the CARS model and its flexibility in organising the introduction structure due to the research enquiry. The application of the CARS model helps non-native speakers establish their understanding of the academic genre, which prepares them for future communication in the English discourse community (Qamariah & Wajyuni, 2017).

To contextualise, the application of the CARS model teaching is suitable for the academic needs of undergraduate language education students in China. From the perspective of intercultural communication, learners can comprehend, interpret, and finally master the writing of introductions in academic genres and avoid cross-cultural misunderstanding, which improves learners' discourse competence and therefore contributes to the development of communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, 2007). Concerning learner motivation, the students are motivated to facilitate

communication with the academic community under the guidance of the CARS model (Gardner, 1982). What's more, this pedagogy provides coherent guidelines for writing academic paper introductions, scaffolds learners' building of academic learning and confidence (Hyland, 2004), and alleviates learning difficulties of genre features inductively (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Tomlinson, 2010).

The teaching application of the CARS model is also suggested by Liu, Luo, and Sun (at University of Edinburgh, 2024), who claimed the effectiveness of teaching the CARS model for Chinese undergraduate students in an English medium instruction (EMI) programme. Through a deconstructed and interactional way of learning the CARS model, learners can develop their reading comprehension by combining exercises of visual and verbal cognitive processes.

Despite the advantages of the CARS model, potential difficulties should be noticed in practice. Although many institutional genres have recurrences of conventionalised patterns (Flowerdew, 2013), given cultural differences, the teaching of academic introductions should be adjusted (Artemeva & Freedman, 2008). In the Chinese EFL context, difficulties in teaching writing include appropriate usage of vocabulary, expressions, and organisation of paragraphs and ideas (Richard & Renandya, 2002), which indicates teacher's scaffolding and exercise should be concerned after the model teaching.

Based on the integration of Swales's CARS model (1990) and the three-stage genre-based teaching model developed by Firkins, Forey, and Sengupta (2007), which sequentially includes modelling a text, joint construction of a text, and independent construction of a text, this paper provides a sample of teaching cycle, which is shown by Figure 1.

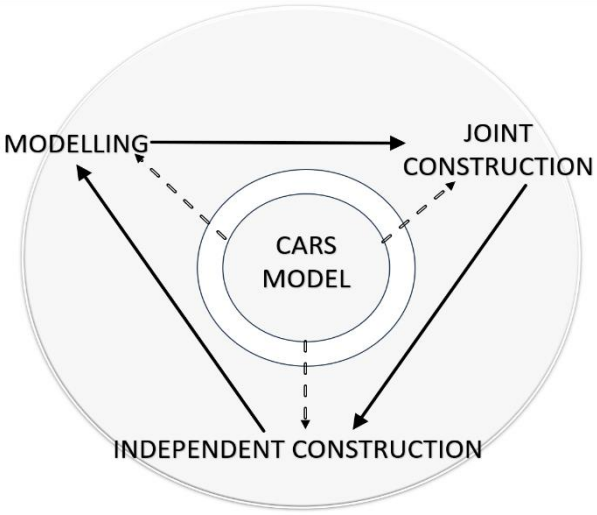

Figure 1. The teaching cycle

In the modelling stage, the teacher first offers the sample text for students and students discuss the text by modelling, deconstructing, and manipulating the text with the CARS model. After that, students are guided to investigate and understand the functioning of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures within the genre.

In the joint construction stage, students are asked to adjust and handle the details and structure for their own academic introduction before independent writing. With the teacher's scaffolding, students will reconstruct the introduction based on their topics, including revision and paraphrasing vocabulary usage, grammatical patterns, and textual devices. A second round of discussion will be held to ensure students' understanding of the introduction genre.

In the third stage, students will write independently based on what they have learned from the CARS model and the sample text. At the end of each stage, the teacher should review the features of an academic introduction. With feedback and reviews, this teaching cycle circulates as learners improve their writing in the academic genre.

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Appendix

Introduction: *Selection of a topic of a research proposal of emerging academic writers in a blended linked EAP course: An interactional ethnographic perspective* (Lai, 2024).

Recent years have witnessed an ethnographic turn in academic writing research, particularly second language academic writing teaching and research on genre (Paltridge, 2014; Paltridge & Starfield, 2016). Developing a viable research proposal has posed a great challenge for English as an Additional Language (EAL, hereafter) postgraduate learners without first-hand research experience. Previous research on the postgraduate research proposal genre (Cadman, 2002; Punch, 2012; Starfield, 2019) has focused on providing guidelines (e.g., the generic structure of title, introduction, literature review, and methodology) but not on actual multimodal classroom interactions and after-class online consultations on proposal development (Lai, 2018).

Genre is conceptualized as surface linguistic features and form, established norms for disciplinary communication, and contextualized social practices (Russel, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2009), respectively, in three approaches (i.e., study skills, academic socialization, academic literacies) to student writing (Lea & Street, 1998). The academic literacies approach emerged by responding to the widening participation of new students in higher education in the UK, was rooted in anthropology and New Literacy Studies (NLS), and was influenced by North American WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) research. Despite not excluding textual skills-based mastery, it moves beyond the normative and autonomous model of literacy of instrumental textual skills acquisition and acculturation into disciplinary discourses to the ideological and transformative model of literacy of unraveling the complexity of meaning-making practices (e.g., identity, power relations) in a social context. A principal empirical methodology in the ideological model of literacy (i.e., academic literacies research) is ethnography involving observation of text production practices and "participants' perspectives on texts and practices" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 11). The ethnographic approach complements textually-oriented genre analysis by providing a situated and "insider" account of writers' writing experiences and practices in sociocultural contexts and narrowing the ontological gap between text and context (Lillis, 2008; Paltridge, Starfield, & Tardy, 2016). Lillis (2008) proposed three levels of ethnography in academic writing research: (1) ethnography as method, notably, interview, specifically, talk around text, emphasizing the writer's perspectives about texts; (2) ethnography as methodology, including multiple methods (e.g., observation, interview, case study) and long-term engagement in contexts of writing production, which involves the exploration of "the dynamic and complex situated meanings and practices" (p. 355); (3) ethnography as "deep theorizing" (Blommaert, 2007), viewing ethnography as a specific epistemology and ontology, and aiming to develop analytic tools

that close the gap between text and context, which is often neglected in academic writing research. Previous literature on ethnographically oriented research in teaching and learning of academic writing (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2003; Paltridge & Starfield, 2016; Tuck, 2015) followed the levels of ethnography as method and methodology and adopted research methods such as participant observation, interview, case study, and analysis of documents, photographs of classroom interiors, and literacy practices outside the classroom. In this digital era, classroom discourse analysis has been moving from mono-modal (e.g., spoken) to multimodal (e.g., the deployment of semiotic resources such as visual images, verbal texts, and gestures, Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001). A more multimodal interactional discourse-based and ethnographic way of inquiry—interactional ethnography (hereafter, IE) such as video recording dynamic group discussions in medical classrooms (Bridges, Botelho, Green, & Chau, 2012) or teacher–student interactions in science classrooms (Sezen-Barrie & Mulvaney, 2019) has been used to uncover bits of classroom life. The IE approach may be beneficial for unveiling the classroom interactional processes of an interventional English for Academic Purposes (EAP, hereafter) program because it may offer an in-depth and moment-by-moment account of tutor–student interactions and developmental processes of a target genre in a blended learning mode from multimodal and emic perspectives. IE logic-of-inquiry also visualizes the historical context of the EAP program and the whole interactional process of academic literacy developmental practices, which may help identify patterns of learning processes in the EAP community and (re)theorize educational phenomena. I will clarify this in Section "Discussion". Despite its helpful, rich, contextualized multimodal micro-ethnographic analytic nature, IE as an epistemology has not been employed to reveal the EAP classroom teaching process and online consultative practices. Furthermore, previous EAP interventional studies have only provided pre- and postintervention learning outcomes but have not investigated in-depth classroom teaching and after-class consultative processes. To address these research gaps, this article follows the view of "genre as contextualized social practices" (Russel et al., 2009, p. 405) and aims to demonstrate how IE as an epistemology makes visible the developmental processes involved in selecting a topic for the research proposal genre of emerging academic writers by examining interactive scaffolding practices throughout the linked EAP curriculum in a blended learning mode.

In the following section, I will explain what IE is and how I utilize IE as an epistemology to uncover the "black box" of the linked EAP program interventional processes.