A Genre-Based Approach to Materials Writing

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Abstract. This paper seeks connections across two required MA-ELT courses (Theory and Practice of Reading and Writing and Materials and Media Development in the Asean Context) taught in the Graduate School of English at Assumption University. The writings include stories/narratives produced in the Reading and Writing course which were used as texts for creating materials in the Materials Development course. The paper also attempts to highlight the importance of integrating the four language skills in the context of language teaching through the curriculum cycle.

Keywords: Materials, reading, writing and genre-based approach

Introduction

A survey of EFL textbooks will reveal the restricted range of texts and narrow focus on bits of language items which often rely on rote memorization. It is worth noting that these textbooks tend to directly or indirectly address structuralist and behaviorist objectives of language learning which treat language as isolated bits of words and sentences rather than a unified entity. Many EFL teachers show a strong preference to teach language, especially reading and writing with a focus on language rather than skills. This problem was addressed by examining theories about reading and writing including the genre-based approach writing. Although the students were aware of theories on reading and writing, they encountered problems in developing reading and writing materials devoid of grammar and vocabulary. Hence the narratives produced in the reading and writing course were used to develop materials which focus on reading and writing skills as opposed to grammar and vocabulary. The narratives produced by the participants were used to motivate student-teachers to have greater involvement and demystify the idea of creative materials writing is not always difficult. The following sections will provide an account of how students learnt and applied the genre-based approach to develop language teaching materials in the Reading/Writing and Materials Development courses.
Theory and Practice of Reading and Writing: Course Overview

The Theory and Practice of Reading and Writing is a required course for the MA-ELT programme in the Graduate School of English at Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand. Students are expected to produce book reviews, argumentative and narrative pieces apart from presentations. I adopted a two-pronged approach in this course: Firstly, I encouraged students to interact with the ideas gained from reading materials and compose new texts after evaluation. Secondly, the students had opportunities to reflect and react on the process of writing new texts through journal writing/presentation and peer group discussion. Tribble’s (1996: 43) four kinds of writing knowledge were used in the course:

a) **Content knowledge**: Knowledge of the concepts involved in the subject area.
b) **Context knowledge**: Knowledge of the context in which the text will be read.
c) **Language system knowledge**: Knowledge of those aspects of the language system necessary for the completion of the task.
d) **Writing process knowledge**: Knowledge of the most appropriate way of preparing for a specific writing task.

According to Tribble (1996), effective writers know how to write in a given context by addressing readers’ expectations with appropriate linguistic choices. The students in my course needed the four kinds of knowledge of Tribble (1996) to produce acceptable pieces of writing as they came from different disciplines and did not have adequate experience in writing a wide range of text types in their education. I tried to achieve this by the following steps:

1. Combine process and genre writing
2. Connect listening, speaking reading and writing
3. Journal Presentations
4. Peer feedback

The course combined process-based and genre-based approaches to assist students in their writing tasks. Theoretical input on these approaches to the teaching of writing was given before the writing tasks. The course participants examined a variety of texts on different genres such as book reviews, academic/professional texts and stories. By examining the texts they understood how writers’ experience, their social contexts, linguistic (lexico-grammatical) choices shape their writings. Later the students used these texts as ‘models’ and tried rewriting or producing their own texts after understanding the structure and conventions of the texts they
were required to produce. Through peer feedback, journal presentations and workshop sessions students were engaged in a process of drafting, editing and revising before they submitted their work for evaluation. Although most of the writing tasks were done outside class, the workshops in class helped them explore the weaknesses in their writing and understand writing as a recursive enterprise. Students had opportunities to apply and practice the concepts discussed in the course by reflecting through presentations, peer discussion and outside writing tasks. In the following section, I will try to explore studies that connect reading and writing.

Exploring the reading and writing connection

According to Krashen (1984), reading in the context of writing is considered as appropriate input for acquiring the skill of writing. Krashen’s theory supports writing develops by large amounts of self-initiated (pleasure) reading. Stotsky’s (1983) findings make a case for reading in the writing classroom. According to Stotsky:

1. Better writers tend to be better readers.
2. Better writers read more than poorer writers.
3. Better readers tend to produce complex/sophisticated writing than poorer readers.

Although the readings served as suitable models for writing, the reading component served to provide useful content and strengthen students’ conceptual knowledge needed for writing. The objective of providing readings in the course was to enable examination of ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ the writer conveys the message. (Raimes 1983). The texts also served as models for the writers to understand the linguistic and text organization features of various genres used in society. (Derewianka 1990).

The Genre-based approach to writing

The functional approach or the genre-based approach is influenced by systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday 1978), which emerged out of literacy research in primary schools in the 1970s and the 80s in Australia. The genre-based approach was introduced to enable students to write a wider range of genres or text-types which have a functional role.

The genre-based/functional approach to writing focuses on meaning and how meaning is constructed through the use of language and highlights the view that
language learning is essentially social. It views that language learning is an interactive process whereby meanings are constantly constructed, reconstructed and deconstructed through negotiation with the so-called ‘meaning experts’ (teachers or care-givers). The process of learning happens through regular scaffolding by the experts in order to facilitate the learners in doing what they could not do (Cullip 1999).

This approach focuses on the concept of “genre”, as proposed by Martin (1992), as a device for examining the purposes of different subjects or disciplines and the realisation of these purposes in words and grammar (lexico-grammar) for a purpose. Since this approach focuses on meaning and how language operates in texts, it is strongly against the traditional view of language which stops at the level of individual words and sentences. The genre-based approach is not prescriptive, but provides a framework in four stages for teachers. According to Martin (1992), the flexibility of the approach allows teachers to decide the stages which need special attention in the teaching cycle.

“Field Knowledge” or “Field Building” is the first stage. The main idea of this stage is to build control of the field or topic by talking about the topic. A range of activities that could provide opportunities for students to talk about the topic would be included at this step. This includes reading widely on the topic and discussing the lexico-grammatical features depending on the learners’ needs.

In the second stage, “modeling”, the explicit focus will be on the genre that the students will be writing. In this stage, models of the genre will be presented to the students to be analysed. This stage exposes students to the fixed genre, which allows them to familiarise with the text type.

The third stage is the “joint construction”. Here, the teacher serves as a facilitator in helping the students to construct a model of the genre. The overall knowledge of the field, content and text organization is stressed by the teacher which is likely to help students to practice what they have learned with teacher guidance. Teacher scaffolds in order to encourage learners to apply the knowledge from modeling and teacher input.

Finally, the fourth stage is the “independent construction phase in which the learners write texts independently by drafting, editing and getting feedback from the teacher or peers. The main objective of this stage is to reflect and apply their ideas learnt in the earlier stages to produce an acceptable piece of writing (Martin 1992). The linguistic and organization features of the basic genres as proposed by Derewianka (1990) are given below.
Table 1: Features of Genres

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<th>Basic Genres</th>
<th>Generic Structure</th>
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| Observation/comment   | Orientation  
|                       | Event  
|                       | Description  
|                       | Comment  |
| Recount               | Orientation  
|                       | Event  
|                       | Re-orientation  |
| Narrative             | Orientation  
|                       | Complication  
|                       | Resolution  
|                       | Coda  |
| Report                | General classification  
|                       | Description – parts [and their functions] qualities, habits and behaviour – not always in this order  |
| Procedure             | Goal  
|                       | Steps  
|                       | Diagram [optional]  |
| Explanation           | General statement  
|                       | Sequenced explanation  
|                       | Final state of being or produced  |
| Persuasion            | Thesis (position/preview)  
|                       | Argument (point/elaboration)  
|                       | Reiteration of thesis  |
| Argument              | Issue  |
Figure 1 from Derewianka (1990: 41) below shows the text organisation and language features of a typical narrative. Although all the genres were discussed in the course, only the structure of a narrative is given here as it is the main focus of this paper.

**Figure 1: Narrative Structure**

Owing to time limitations, only the genres of recount, narrative, report and argument were discussed in the course in a detailed way. The reasons for selecting
theses genres are based on students’ needs in the MA-ELT programme and their future needs. Although the course participants are expected to write reports for their courses and put forth arguments in their research, recounts and narratives were explored as part of expressive writing. It is worth mentioning that many of the participants had rarely, if not never explored writing arguments in their previous education, hence it was a challenge for them. The objective of writing narratives was to bring out their creative voices which are likely to be appropriate for the socio-cultural milieu of ASEAN. Although the students wrote many genres in the Reading and Writing course for assessment, only their narratives were used as texts for developing materials in the Materials Development course in the following term.

Overview of Narratives Produced in the Course

The narratives were reviewed by peers and me at various stages of writing. The narratives had to be revised in several areas in terms of grammar, usage, organization, character development and descriptions of people, places and things. The narratives were improved by expanding the nominal groups, which is a grammatical unit to express descriptions. It is widely accepted that the ability to compose a complex nominal group is a mark of control and maturity in writing. Mention must be made that a writer’s first language influences the ability to produce complex nominal groups in the second/foreign language, which is English in the context of this paper. The writers also became aware of the need to use a wide range of processes (verbs) in narratives as shown in Figure 1.

Some of the writers used present tense instead of the past tense and showed a tendency to repeat words and structures instead of synonyms and hyponyms which are characteristic of interesting narratives. In the early stages, the writings were primarily in the first person, but later some of the writers showed control over point of view which altered speech patterns in the narratives from direct to indirect speech to reflect interaction among characters.

Finally, the writers realized the importance of ending their narratives with some sort of resolution. It is worth mentioning that it was hard for some of the course participants to give resolve the conflicts and provide an interesting end to their work as the writers did not have the experience of reading and analyzing stories and narratives in their earlier education.

Feedback

The course aimed to strengthen students’ writing skills by developing their critical thinking by reading a variety of text types. I gave them a number of texts on several issues related to Southeast Asia and the rest of the world. They were
expected to write a review of a recent book (over 250 pages) during the course apart from journal presentation on reading. The following journal comments are useful to understand the role of reading in the course:

- “Reading helps to improve my vocabulary and writing style. I note down when I come across interesting words. I try to remember new vocabulary and try them in my writing” (Student 1)
- “I have difficulty to express my ideas and emotions in accurate words and sentences because I did very little reading and writing before coming here” (Student 2)
- “These days my parents and family members are shocked to see me reading (book review). I enjoy my book and don’t even take care of my favourite dogs” (Student 3)
- Today’s activity was on writing a 60-word story in class and this is the first time I’m doing creative writing. I find it so interesting that I don’t want to stop.(Student 4)

It is worth noting that journal-based presentations and peer discussions helped them to build a critical framework for reflecting on their progress as writers and being open to evaluate others’ work and accept opinions. The following observations from students’ journal presentations are useful to substantiate this point:

- “Although feedback helps me understand my own writing, sometimes I think my classmate will mistake me for being critical. Also am not sure what I say is correct or not.” (Student 5)
- “I think my friend writes better than me. Her vocabulary is very good. Has great ideas too.” (Student 6).

Materials Development in the Asean Context

This is a compulsory course worth 3-credits for the MA-ELT programme at Assumption University and this course is offered before the students embark on their Teaching Practice also referred to as TP. The course aims are:

- to equip student-teachers with the most essential and interesting pedagogical techniques which make the language classroom a place where learners enjoy the learning process.
- try the materials developed in the course for their Teaching Practice which is offered after the Materials Development course.

Materials Writing Project

The project gave a chance to student-teachers to understand the rich potential of stories as language teaching resources. Most of the participants were not aware of the potential of stories and narratives in the language classroom. The course participants were expected to teach their stories for EFL learners. Students designed reading and writing activities for their stories and there was no
restriction on the number of activities. The class consisted of eight students who were from Thailand, China, Philippines, Myanmar and the U.K.

Initially, the participants had problems in creating original activities for a group of unknown students. At this stage, they needed a lot of feedback from me for ideas, but later the quality improved. Suggestions for various types of activities like predicting, brainstorming, informal discussion with or without pictures and discussion of titles were given. The following are some examples of activities produced in the project.

**Reading Activities (Student 7)**

1) In the first paragraph, the writer is setting the scene. Where do you think this story is taking place? Draw a picture of the setting based on your understanding.

2) Discuss the message of the story with your group members.

**Writing Activities (Student 7)**

1) Write a diary in which you write your personal response to the story in about 100 words

2) If you look at the story as a metaphor, what do you think it might refer to? Explain in 100 words.

**Reading Activities (Student 8)**

1) Draw a picture to describe the setting of the story.

2) Describe the hen’s character with three adjectives. Share them with your friends.

**Writing Activities (Student 8)**

1) Imagine yourself as one of the character in the story. Would you make the same choice as that character? Give your opinions?

2) From the line ‘The old man was quiet for a while, then he slapped his leg and exclaimed. "I know what we can do. My Dear Wife, tomorrow we can kill our hen and use its meat to prepare food for the monk.”’ Continue the story with another paragraph of about 100 words to give it a different ending

**Feedback**

I started off with a discussion of the strengths of their work before pointing out the weaknesses of their activities. The participants had to rephrase and edit the
questions for clarity in many instances. Finally, the course ended after a lot of writing, rewriting and evaluating. I was glad to see that six out of eleven students secured As (over 90%) and the class average was 88% which is an A- in the Graduate School of English grading system.

Finally I would like to conclude the discussion with the students’ experience in the course

- I learnt good lessons and also laughed a lot in this course… you were kind enough to give us a second chance to rewrite our activities. Really appreciate your hard work for the last assignment (Student 9)
- This assignment is not only process-oriented, but also product-oriented. The portfolios with the lessons were available for students for their Teaching Practice. They exchanged interesting and relevant activities from each other. (Student 10)

Conclusion

The participants in the Reading and Writing course were able to use the four skills in the course could be useful for developing language proficiency through engaging content. The course also attempted to demonstrate pre-service teachers to realize the links across the four skills of language which is essential in language teaching as emphasised in the curriculum cycle. The participants were also encouraged to convert their creative works into interesting teaching materials which adds to their self-esteem as language teachers apart from teaching what they have created which may be the right model for their learners.

Mention must be made that the genre-based approach is not a purely linguistic activity, but it is controlled by the wider socio-cultural and learning contexts in which it is applied. Therefore, the outcomes could vary across cultures and even within certain groups of a particular culture. Therefore, the advocates of this approach do not view language learning as a purely cognitive exercise devoid of the social aspect of learning.

The project ended with the course, but the participants were advised to pilot, revise and update their materials whenever they taught for a group of learners. This project was a valuable and rewarding experience for the learners. Here the learners include the trainees and the trainer. Heartfelt thanks to my students for the amount of work invested in this project. I was very impressed with the quality of work.

References


