

Constructing a genre-based instructional model for English academic writing:
A focus on learners' discourse-level errors

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Abstract

Academic writing is acknowledged to be a valuable skill to assist learners and young researchers in succeeding at tertiary level. Furthermore, writing is often considered by scholars of various disciplines, including those of first language writing, second language acquisition (SLA), and second language (L2) writing instruction, to be one of the most difficult skills to master (e.g., Bialystok 1978; Brown & Yule, 1983; Nunan, 1989).

A characteristic of writing, which makes it difficult, is how the written product becomes detached from its original context. Unlike face-to-face communication, writers must be aware that the reader will read the text in a different spatiotemporal context. Consequently, they must ensure that the meaning of the text is conveyed. Efforts related to this characteristic of writing may include referring to things accurately as well as writing in the appropriate tense and aspect because written communication lacks the contextual cues by which spoken face-to-face communication is characterized. Thus, detachment from the original context may pose some difficulties, especially for an L2 writer.

Academic writing is also characterized by its highly conventionalized style of communication. Certain types of language use are expected and considered appropriate in different genres like research papers, and discourse communities. This second characteristic is

closely related to the genre approach to language analysis and instruction, which views language as situated in social contexts.

Thus, the writer must write so as to be understood by the reader who is not present in the same context as the writer. Conversely, the written product is read by readers who have expectations and concepts of appropriateness about what writing should look like in their discourse community. In other words, meaning is socially constructed. Subsequently, if one fails to recognize the social aspect of writing such as the reader, genre, and discourse community, it is possible the written product may not be well understood or accepted.

Therefore, based on the premise that meaning is socially constructed, academic writing in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context is examined in this dissertation. Furthermore, there is a focus on the types of language use that may cause communication to be hindered in a written academic text. It is not the intent of this dissertation to impose imperialistic, native-speaker centered views of correctness on L2 writers. Rather, it seeks to assist L2 writers by focusing on the types of language use, particularly grammar, which may impede communication in written academic discourse.

This research aimed to construct a genre-based instructional model for academic writing in an EFL context by employing the ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development,

Implementation and Evaluation) model. Accordingly, the characteristics of learner writing, especially errors that may impede a reader's understanding, were explored. Subsequently, on the basis of the hypothesis derived from this exploratory study, learners' knowledge of grammatical items was tested. Two types of instruction, feedback and metalinguistic explanation, were compared in an experimental setting, and the role of the teacher–reader was reconsidered. Following this *analysis* phase of the ADDIE model, tasks and rubrics, informed by the identified learner characteristics and from the way in which certain grammatical items pattern in academic texts, were *designed* and *developed*. Finally, a genre-based instructional model was created, and its *implementation* and *evaluation* were discussed.

An outline of the chapters in this dissertation is as follows. After exploring the topics surrounding academic writing in Chapter 1, the features of English for academic purposes (EAP) and writing were further explored in the literature review in Chapter 2. The general–specific nature of discourse in academic writing was connected to scientific thinking, and related grammatical features were identified. In Chapter 3, the characteristics of learner writing, especially errors that may impede readers' understanding were explored. Through a study of qualitative error analysis, it was revealed that learners had difficulties with generic as well as nongeneric reference. Subsequently, based on the hypothesis derived from the exploratory study

in Chapter 3, the learners' knowledge of the grammatical items was tested in Chapter 4. The results revealed that L2 writers at university level had a degree of receptive understanding, but their productive use of generic reference, in particular, was rather inaccurate. Considering these findings, optimal instruction was examined in Chapter 5. Two forms of instruction—feedback and metalinguistic explanation—were compared alongside the control group. In this regard, metalinguistic explanation proved to be more effective. In Chapter 6, an exploratory study on the role of the teacher–reader's feedback and interpretation was conducted. The findings revealed that even experienced teachers and native speakers could not always infer L2 writers' intentions accurately when generic and nongeneric errors were present. These analyses of L2 writers' academic texts were considered when designing and developing tasks and rubrics in Chapter 7. In Chapter 8, the developed tasks were employed to design a genre-based instructional model that was intended to facilitate learners' understanding of the grammatical patterns in a segment of a given discourse. In addition, it was observed that the teaching was effective, which resulted in improvements in learners' writing.

The pedagogical implications of the present study include that teaching the general–specific nature of academic texts through genre-based pedagogy and focusing on the grammatical patterns is effective. Learners, when led with an explicit, metalinguistic

explanation, learned and retained the knowledge that academic writing is general-specific and certain grammatical patterns correspond to the flow of discourse. Feedback, which is considered to induce implicit learning was found to be of little effect. In addition, the exploratory study performed in Chapter 6 warned against the popular practice of written corrective feedback. Because meaning is socially constructed, when L2 writers do not conform to the way general-specific texts are written and also make general-specific errors, comprehension can be hindered. Furthermore, because the teacher-reader is on the receiving end of the communication, they cannot truly know the intentions of the writer even when they have a great deal of experience or are native speakers. Therefore, for an offline skill like writing, written corrective feedback may furnish learners with unintended incorrect answers. Consequently, feedback, if used at all, should be face-to-face, where the teacher and the learner can negotiate the learner's intended meaning. In addition, learners should be asked whether they are writing about the general population such as men in general and dogs as a species, or specific samples such as the men surveyed and the dogs that participated in the study. Furthermore, the finding that metalinguistic explanations were more effective than feedback in EFL contexts and that the designed academic writing course was informed by genre-based pedagogy is of pedagogic and theoretical significance. This demonstrated that explicit learning

was successful with the selected grammatical items under these conditions.

Included in the limitations of the study is the generalizability of the academic writing course model to other L2 or EAP contexts. The course design based on the ADDIE model focused on the analysis of the population considered in this study: EFL writers at tertiary level who were completing an EAP curriculum. The researcher was motivated to accommodate the specific needs of the population, and developed tasks and rubrics that specifically addressed the population's issues in L2 academic writing. However, a certain level of generalizability may be evident because generic and nongeneric reference is often used in SLA studies (Ionin & Montrul, 2009; Perez-Leroux et al., 2004). Whereas romance languages use definite plurals to refer generically, in English, definite plurals are employed to refer nongenerically. If this course model was applied to a different population, tasks and rubrics may need to be adjusted accordingly for different levels of linguistic mastery or for different academic needs.

Though specific tasks and rubrics may need adjustment, the knowledge that academic writing is general-specific as a result of the types of reasoning involved, and the knowledge of specific grammatical forms and functions and how they are used in academic texts may benefit teachers and learners in L2 academic writing contexts.