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# The Contribution of Genre Theory to Theme-based EAP: Navigating Foreign Fiords

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*In this article social constructionist genre theory is utilized to illuminate several issues of debate in theme-based EAP pedagogy, including program goals, course design, and course content. Genre theory shows us that genre mastery requires a student to become enculturated into the community and its values, and that criteria for mastery of a genre are community-determined. It is argued, then, that EAP instructors cannot hope to teach students the specific skills they will require for all their future content courses. What they can do is to give students strategies that will enable them more easily to enter and thus determine the expectations of, any community. Certain genre theorists propose that to give students strategies involves leading them through the processes of acquiring a genre in an authentic social community such as exists in content courses, and this article attempts to show that theme-based pedagogy may be failing to do this in several regards.*

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## Introduction

As practitioners in the English as a second language (ESL) field become increasingly concerned with more realistically meeting their students' needs, many, in particular English for academic purposes (EAP) specialists, have been moving toward content-based language instruction (CBLI) (Benesch, 1988; Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Crandall & Tucker, 1990; Krueger & Ryan, 1993; Mohan, 1986; Oxford, 1993; Shih, 1986; Snow & Brinton, 1988). This is an approach in which the subject matter, processes, and skills of the students' target content courses determine the curriculum and language skills taught in the language class and act as the vehicles through which the target language is acquired. Thus there is an attempt in CBLI to simulate content course processes, as reflected in the pedagogical approaches suggested by various EAP specialists including Currie (1991, 1993), Currie and Cray (1987), and Horowitz (1986).

Brinton et al. (1989) identified three types of CBLI programs normally used in tertiary level EAP courses: adjunct, sheltered, and theme-based language instruction (TBLI). (Also, see Oxford, 1993, for a review of various types of content-based ESL programs at all levels of instruction, including ESP, theme-based, task-based, adjunct, and sheltered.) Sheltered and adjunct courses are similar in that they are linked to one particular academic course:

the curriculum and material of the language course are determined by the content and material of its sister academic course and provide the context for integrating the four traditional language skills as they are required for academic studies. Theme-based programs, on the other hand, are not linked to any specific content course because the students usually come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. One or more minitopics or themes, chosen to best meet the interests of the varied students, replace the subject matter, academic processes, and tasks associated with a sister content course. Instructors must select or design thematic units without an accompanying content course and its disciplinary community to guide them; they are in many ways operating in somewhat of a disciplinary vacuum, trying to guide their students up fiords that are foreign not only to them but also, to some degree, to themselves.

Although theme-based courses are now widely used throughout North America (Oxford, 1993), the fact that instructors are working in such a disciplinary vacuum creates some uncertainty regarding the broader concerns of program goals and general pedagogical approach, and more specific questions regarding choice of skills to be taught, mainly centered around the questions of which skills can be transferred to students' content course writing tasks (Johns, 1988; Spack, 1988), and how best to impart these skills (Adamson, 1990; Currie, 1990, 1993; Johns, 1990; Shih, 1986; Spack, 1988).

In addressing these issues, EAP researchers have turned to several sources. In order to better determine the academic needs of EAP students, and thus EAP program goals and choice of writing tasks, Raimes (1991), for example, expressed the need for a better understanding of the nature of the academic discourse community. Case studies (Currie; 1990, 1993) and surveys (Behrens, 1978; Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Eblen, 1983; Horowitz, 1986; Johns, 1981; Kroll, 1979; Ostler, 1980) have been conducted in response to this need. A case study such as Currie's, however, taps the specifics for only one discourse community; many more such studies would be required to access the features of discourse communities across the disciplines. Surveys conducted to determine what types of tasks students encounter in university courses across the disciplines have generally led to the conclusion that most tasks require a critical synthesis of information from various sources and/or an application of course concepts. Information gained from such surveys, however, cannot provide much more specific guidance—it is limited to the surface features of tasks. Aspects such as application of concepts, lines of argument, and so forth, many of which are discipline-specific, are difficult to determine through this method of investigation. Thus, although the information gained in such case studies and surveys is invaluable, the extent to which they can be useful to EAP practitioners is somewhat limited.

It is clear, then, that academic discourse communities need to be better understood before theme-based EAP instructors can feel more comfortable trying to simulate the academic processes of content courses. Thus I turn to one further valuable source of insight into the nature of writing in academic discourse communities, that of current genre theory, which sees genre as socially constructed. Despite some differences in writing difficulties between first language (L1) and second language (L2) students (see Silva, 1993, for a review of the differences), all students face the same key challenge in learning to write for the university: in order to succeed they must enter the university community and come to understand and share in its values and expectations for writing. Thus, in its attempts to explain much of what is involved in this enculturation process, current genre theory can assist EAP practitioners as they attempt to better understand their undergraduate students' writing needs and how best to meet these needs.

## **Social Constructionist Genre Theory**

Current thinking holds first that it is not its formal, structural features that define a genre, but rather its origin and purpose (Freedman, 1987). Genre is produced, shaped, and transformed in response to what a writer is trying to express (Sawyer & Watson, 1987), and the purpose of that expression "is embedded in the communicative activities of a discipline" (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993, p. 476). For Bakhtin (1986) genres are composed of utterances, which are an act of social communion requiring not only individual speakers and their subject matter, but also their partners in communication, their audience. Hence a second major tenet of current thinking is that genre is socially rather than individually constructed.

Such a view of genre profoundly affects how we define writing competence, the acquisition of such competence, difficulties associated with this acquisition process, and finally, approaches to the teaching of writing. According to the social constructionist view, three aspects are central to a definition of writing competence. First, writing competence requires mastery of the rules of a discourse community.<sup>1</sup> Second, what is crucial here is that the criteria for mastery are community-specific, whether that community be a discipline, a subdiscipline, or a particular university course with a particular instructor, what Herrington (1985) terms a "forum." Finally, in order for students to produce a piece of writing that exhibits the appropriate, socially judged criteria, they must be coparticipants in that social community. And to be a coparticipant, a writer must possess common values created and shared through social means, through communication.

If we assume that community ways are best learned through shared social engagement in the activities of that community, then our knowledge of genre is gained not so much through explicit, formal teaching, but rather through a process of enculturation, as novices become socialized into the ways of

communicating in the target community. It is picked up in the culture of the community. Myers (1988) emphasized that it is immersion in the social milieu of a genre's community, not participation in a general writing preparation course, that enables a student to master a genre. This was observed by Freedman (1987) in a case study of six students learning to write the genre of their first-year law course. Freedman observed that the writing assignment prompt, the lectures, the readings, and the larger institution acted together as the exigence to which students were responding when they wrote. As they came to share their interpretation of these surroundings with the instructor, their writing moved subconsciously toward a genre acceptable in their instructor's community. Thus Freedman (1993) concludes that "full genre knowledge ... only becomes available *as a result of having written*" (p. 236, emphasis added).

For many genre theorists writing must entail intention. According to Hunt (1994), based to a great extent on the ideas of Bakhtin (1986), intention involves creating an utterance as part of a dialogic chain. It necessarily includes the need to communicate meaning. This need or motive "at the level of genre ... becomes a ... social purpose" (Miller, 1984, p. 152). And this need or motive must exist from both the students' and teacher's point of view—a shared set of communicative purposes (Swales, 1990), not just writing for the purpose of evaluating some general writing skill. Such concerns for authentic dialogue are reflected in the pedagogical suggestions made not only by Hunt, but also by Dias (1994) and Freedman (1993). All three believe that genre is best learned in an authentic situational context, through a process of student-student and student-instructor "collaborative investigation" (Hunt, 1994).

Not all students, however, succeed in learning a genre through such inexplicit approaches as collaborative investigation. From a social constructionist view, a substantial part of the problem such students have in meeting the writing expectations of their instructor is related to their inability to "suss out" or interpret those more or less tacit expectations of that instructor's specific community. Genre theory would assert that the root of this problem lies in a difficulty with entering and participating in a community, in coming to share its values and expectations through enculturation. Marsella, Hilgers, and McLaren (1992) proposed that this difficulty may be partly because some students "may hold to values and beliefs that do not readily translate into the styles of learning, thinking and writing ... in the academy" (p. 186). They are bringing to the classroom a background that does not easily dispose them to becoming enculturated into the classrooms of mainstream North American universities. Coe (1994) states that the students who struggle to succeed in determining university expectations are those who do not bring to the university "familial advantages," in other words students who have not been raised in an educated, culturally mainstream household.

As Bizzell (1986) pointed out regarding L1 basic writers, some students are more alienated from the academic community than others. Not surprisingly, this alienation is a more acute problem for ESL students than for native speakers. First, ESL students have weaker listening and notetaking skills (Adamson, 1990). However, even if students understand what they hear, a larger problem lies in the fact that they may interpret what they hear differently from those with backgrounds in the English-speaking mainstream culture because they do not bring to the classroom the same background schemata, culture, educational values, and attitudes to academia (see the L2 studies of Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Basham, Ray, & Walley, 1993, which have illustrated the cross-cultural differences that give rise to differing interpretations). Thus it is difficult for them to assess the expectations of the written assignment, specifically regarding the application of course concepts and the way in which arguments should be presented. This assumption, then, that enculturation is the key difficulty facing ESL students, has important ramifications for the goals and general approach of theme-based EAP and for the more specific issues of debate with which this article is concerned.

## **Application of Genre Theory to Theme-based EAP Pedagogy**

### *Simulation of Community and Academic Processes*

The main goal of TBLI is to give ESL students language use skills for their academic content courses through a generally communicative approach (Crandall & Tucker, 1990; Mohan, 1986). Genre theory supports this belief. In genre acquisition the final goal is successful language use (an appropriate genre). This is acquired through communication among novices and between novice and expert as novices become initiated into the community for which they will produce the language (the genre). As discussed above, however, essential to this communication is the existence of a community, one with intention and dialogic writing.

Although TBLI attempts to simulate the academic process—a writing assignment usually follows listening and reading activities, and requires students to synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources (Currie, 1991; Currie & Cray, 1987; Horowitz, 1986; Shih, 1986)—it does not appear to be occurring in a situation in which there is a real sense of community and community-related purpose.<sup>2</sup> The course comprises a set of different, unrelated topics, making difficult the creation of a consistent community and making it difficult for students to see a consistent social purpose for communicating.

The extent to which theme-based EAP instructors and courses can simulate academic processes and communities may be limited in several additional respects. First, the theme-based approach seems to see learners as isolated individuals—as long as they can master content course processes or skills,

they can succeed in their content courses. This view, however, ignores the fact that according to genre theory these discipline-specific skills are manifestations of socially determined ways of sharing knowledge, of arguing, and of carrying out conceptual activities. Mastery of isolated language or rhetorical entities does not provide a complete sense of what production of genre entails and is insufficient to allow a student to reinvent new genres in new contexts. Knowledge of the skills alone limits transferability and usefulness; successful social interaction in a community is also essential.

Second, although the tasks in TBLI are set up to simulate those of content courses, they are not surrounded by the necessary social community that exists in content courses, a community that acts to elicit those tasks and guides students in determining the tasks' expectations. The nature of the tasks for each thematic unit is determined not by a set of natural social exigencies, but by what the instructor believes simulates a content course writing task. For example, one approach to writing task design is the application of "basic expository schemata" (defining, classifying, etc.) to the content being studied in the thematic unit (suggested by Shih, 1986). The social constructionist view, however, is that genre does not arise from a rhetorical pattern; rather, the pattern is the result of how knowledge is shared in a community, more an incidental result of the nature of what needs to be communicated, why, and to whom. Rather than imposing a rhetorical pattern or expository schemata on content, genre theory would say the pattern is the final result. This type of TBLI approach to task design, then, would not accurately simulate what occurs in content courses.

Regarding task interpretation, in the social constructionist view it is the social ways of a community that guide a student in interpreting a writing task, in determining what a writing assignment's expectations are. The way the content is dealt with by instructors, texts, and other forms of input in any given course provides writers with clues as to how to respond to essay questions, and successful students can determine the task expectations from these clues. To do this students require a sense of the community, its members, and its goals; to acquire this sense a socialization period is needed for students to enter the community. And, as Dias (1994) asserts, such a socialization period will be gradual.

However, in a thematic unit of only several weeks there may be insufficient time for such socialization; hence students cannot rely on this socialization process to determine the expectations of their written assignment. Students may learn informational content, but they may not have sufficient time to learn how that information should be discussed, argued, and presented. Before they can assess the expectations for the piece of writing for unit X, they are faced with unit Y, with a different set of expectations. Such time-related problems can be seen in the difficulties Adamson's (1990) ESL participants experienced in writing a paper for their adjunct content course:

lack of reference to research covered in lectures and readings and a tendency to philosophize from personal experience. In the social constructionist view both problems can be interpreted as arising from the fact that these students had not been socialized away from general, personal, nonacademic writing and into the genre of the course. Adamson's students spent only three weeks in the content course; time may have been insufficient for the students to enter the community and undergo the socialization necessary to acquire a mastery of this community's genre.

Apart from insufficient time, students may also be hindered by a series of thematic units with no consistent body of knowledge recognizable as a discipline or community. This inconsistency can be used to interpret why, for example, Luc, the ESL student subject of Johns' (1991a) case study, had trouble with the final essay test in his composition class. Unable to recognize a discipline from the varied body of readings he was presented with in his composition course, he could not predict the expectations for the final writing assignment. He could not find a focus: "I don't know how to talk about it ... my mind wanders ... I just write anything on the paper" (p. 390). It may be reasonable to assume that there is a general across-units set of consistent expectations in a theme-based or composition course, in the form of general essay writing and language skills; still, there may not be a body of subject matter with a consistent set of expectations about how that knowledge is valued, as exists in a content course.

If, then, social community cannot be used in TBLI either to design writing tasks or to determine their expectations, writing for a full-term content course cannot be accurately simulated. In theme-based courses teachers and students may be forced to return to more traditional guiding frameworks including form, modes of discourse (such as the five-paragraph essay), or rhetorical patterns to design and interpret writing tasks and to evaluate the success of student writing.

### *Explicit Writing Instruction*

As the studies of Freedman (1987) and Herrington (1985) have revealed, a mainstream NS student may succeed in reinventing the genre of a new university course with no explicit instruction. However, as I discussed above, ESL students are disadvantaged in comparison with their counterparts from the English-speaking mainstream culture and thus cannot so easily (and implicitly) become socialized into the tacit ways of a university community. Currie (1993) recommends that "at least for NNSs with little prior exposure to or explicit knowledge of such tasks and genres, and with conceptual resources already heavily taxed by having to operate in their second language, explicit instruction in conceptual activities would be helpful" (p. 115). A further argument for explicit instruction of academic skills comes from Adamson (1990), who argues that appropriate academic skills

should be taught explicitly to ESL students in an attempt to prevent them from using inappropriate strategies they bring from their own culture or developing inappropriate or ineffective ones. These arguments would lend support to the explicit genre analysis approaches suggested by certain EAP practitioners, including Davies (1988) and Swales (1990).

### **Teaching General versus Discourse-specific Academic Skills**

One contentious issue in EAP pedagogy is the question of teaching general or more discourse-specific skills. Spack (1988), for one, supports the idea of teaching more general academic skills, because she feels that it is too much to expect of EAP teachers (and in fact it is not their role) to learn enough content-area specifics to hope to simulate them accurately in their EAP courses. The social constructionist view of genre would seem to support this recommendation, in stating that discourse communities and the genres that arise from them are tacit, unstable, socially determined and interpreted entities, whose specifics are difficult to capture and describe. They are not "amenable to ready description by the outsider" (Leki & Carson, 1994, p. 81). Thus only general skills may be accessible and usefully transferable. Perhaps EAP researchers cannot hope to try to capture these specifics, nor should EAP instructors try to simulate or teach them (Leki & Carson, 1994; Spack, 1988).

Despite the temptation to teach only general academic skills, however, we cannot ignore the danger that these skills may be too vague, general, or superficial, and thus not transferable: "Is it reasonable to suppose that students will learn to write by working on [neutral] topics outside their field of study?" (Wall, Nickson, Jordan, Allwright, & Houghton, 1988, p. 128). This danger is illustrated, it seems, in the composition course taken by Luc (Johns, 1991a). Luc found the models for the tasks vague and "frustrating" (p. 391)—all they had in common was the basic five-paragraph essay structure. Johns explains that "although he had learned that he needed three 'reasons' to support an argument, he still didn't know how to present them" (p. 391). These problems of superficial tasks were also raised by ESL students interviewed by Leki and Carson (1994) regarding the EAP course they had completed.

Genre theory suggests, however, that it is not so much the vague, general task that is problematic, but perhaps rather the lack of a real discourse community. If the writing topics are not associated with consistent communities, task creation by instructors may become arbitrary, random, or vague.



## Conclusions and Implications

As Johns (1991b) observes, “we must continue to attempt to understand what it means to be academically literate” (p. 178) and to understand the principles of academic literacy. It is clear that genre theory and the implications it has for writing pedagogy provide important insights into what this literacy involves and thus into the questions surrounding TBLI.

What genre theory adds to TBLI pedagogy is the reminder that “writing ... is the textual realization of a wide range of human interactions” (Bazerman, 1994) and that the challenge facing students is to become coparticipants in these interactions. Thus genre theory would seem to suggest that the goal for EAP instructors would be to better enable students to become coparticipants. They need to provide “disadvantaged” students with the “familial advantages” their mainstream counterparts already possess, and to do so explicitly. They must give students not only the grammatical and discourse building blocks, but also, more importantly, the skills needed to learn and use those building blocks in community-appropriate interactions in order to build a genre. To do this instructors must strive to create a real social purpose for writing tasks, and this real purpose entails creating a community with intentions and dialogue revolving around learning and working with content knowledge.

It is clear, then, that in meeting this need an adjunct-type EAP course is more effective than a multiunit TBLI one. Although TBLI classrooms are already creating communities in which teachers and students interact to produce genres, the amount of time devoted to each topic or unit in TBLI is perhaps not long enough for students to learn the community ways essential to producing a genre. What is more desirable is a theme-based course developed around only one topic throughout the term, with a more consistent focus on the learning and discussion of content. Leading students through such a simulated content course and all that that entails—a community, and its values, purposes, interactions, and genre expectations and conventions (whether these come from a content area or EAP instructor)—would allow them to experience first hand the features of North American academia that EAP instructors are trying to impart. By learning to write through participating and interacting with their classmates, their professors, and the texts they read, students could learn general academic skills, discourse community processes, and Western academic strategies and ways of dealing with knowledge. They would, in fact, be gaining familial advantages.

How, then, do students come to demystify the tacit expectations of any given community? One approach has been offered by Currie (1990, 1993), who suggested that students be required in their EAP courses to perform data-based conceptual analyses that would enable them “to examine, and therefore better understand, the conceptual activities they must undertake at

university" (1993, p. 116). Currie's approach not only gives students specific academic discourse knowledge, but also an operational awareness that can be transferred and employed in their content courses. This transferable awareness is central to the argument of other researchers and practitioners who focus on skills that allow for the demystification of disciplinary or course-specific expectations (Johns, 1988, 1990; McKenna, 1987). McKenna suggested that EAP instructors teach students question-posing skills in order to enhance their ability to determine the expectations of any given course. Johns (1990) suggested students in an adjunct EAP course write what she terms "journalogs" in which students reflect on aspects of their adjunct content course in order to increase their awareness of North American academic community and discourse expectations, and to give them the "pragmatic competence" (p. 211) necessary for community membership. Although the use of such journalogs is suggested for adjunct EAP programs, the principles behind them are also relevant to TBLI. Johns' journalogs and McKenna's question-posing skills, rather than placing the onus on EAP instructors to determine the ways of various disciplinary communities, would teach students to assess these ways for themselves. In other words, teachers should be giving students interpretation skills that would enable them to better pick up the tacit clues that would allow students to enter the community and share its values. This is echoed in Perelman's (1986) suggestion that "The most effective way to teach students how to write in all the institutional contexts ... is to teach them the basic strategies for uncovering the rules that govern discourse in any particular context" (p. 478), and that "the ability to decipher the rules governing any type of institutional writing is not only transferable to other writing contexts, but is one of the most essential skills we can give our students" (p.476).

The tools of experience and explicit knowledge gained by ESL learners in such an EAP course could then be employed in other university classrooms as students gradually became initiated into new social spheres. Possessing these general tools and having experienced employing them elsewhere, students would find it easier to adapt to and participate in new communities. They would be better equipped to navigate the unfamiliar waters of foreign fiords.

## *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>This can be seen in the definition of communicative competence offered by sociolinguist Hymes (1972): the successful mastery and application of the ways of speaking, reading, and writing appropriate for each community.

<sup>2</sup>When I state that a composition or EAP course and its community are not "real" I am not denying that a community does exist in such courses. What I wish to express is the fact that they may not comprise a consistent, recognizable community in the sense that a content course does.

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