NEGOTIATING GENRE: LECTURER’S AWARENESS IN GENRE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM PROJECT AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT: It has been said that genres created in each “area of human activity” (Bakhtin, 1953-54) or by “discourse communities” (Swales, 1990) are shared by “participants in these various areas” or “expert members of communities”. However, at least in Argentina, conventions of academic genres are not completely done (Moyano, 2000; 2001). Most of the new researchers recognize they have difficulties to produce them and MA students fail in presenting their post-graduation thesis or delay them too much. Pre-graduated students show very short skills at solving writing tasks assigned by their lecturers in Spanish as a mother tongue. Based on that we have detected in an action research project (Moyano & Natale, 2006), it is possible that lecturers are lack of awareness of the genres they want their students to write and—most of them—are not aware that these genres must be taught. Based on J.R. Martin’s Genre & Register Theory, strategies for negotiating genres are being developed in the project mentioned above for the purpose of teaching academic literacy at the university level, what has incidence in construction of knowledge and insertion in the academic community. This negotiation is made between each lecturer and the linguist who is associated to his/her work with students in the context of the subjects they teach. The linguists became mediators between lecturers and students, guiding the production of resources for teaching genres. In this paper we will discuss this negotiation procedure in terms of its theoretical possibility and legitimacy. The argumentation will be made taking into account some results of progressing lecturers’ awareness of genres and their need of being taught.

KEYWORDS: academic genres - negotiating genres - teaching academic literacy.

1. Introduction

It has been said that genres created in each “area of human activity” (BAKHTIN, 1953-54) or by “discourse communities” (SWALES, 1990) are shared by “participants in these various areas” or “expert members of communities”. However, at least in Argentina, conventions of academic genres are not completely done, as we have seen in interaction with post-graduated students and researchers (MOYANO, 2000; 2001). Most of the new researchers realize they have difficulties to produce their scientific/academic texts, and MA students fail in writing their post-graduation thesis or delay them too much. Pre-graduated students show very short skills at solving writing tasks assigned by their lecturers in Spanish as a mother tongue.

It could be said, then, that this shareness of genres does not occur in a kind of a natural process, just being in contact with them. As Swales suggested, new members of each community should be “initiated” by the experts. Or, as Martin & Rose (in press) emphasize, genres must be taught in the education formal system or work places. According with these authors and the Sydney School’s work in primary and secondary schools, industry and administration, teachers don’t have genre consciousness. Then, in their experiences, the job of linguists were to identify and name the different kinds of texts founded, looking closely at the kinds of meaning involved—using global patterns to distinguish one text type from another and more local patterns to distinguish stages within a text—. Recurrent global patterns were recognized as genres, and given names. […] Recurrent local patterns within genres were recognized as schematic structures, and also labelled. (MARTIN & ROSE, in press)

Martin defines genre as “a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture” (1984:25), or “—more technically— as a particular
configuration of register variables of field, tenor and mode” (MARTIN & ROSE, 2003; in press). “This means –they said- that genres are defined as a recurrent configuration of meanings and that they enact the social practices of a given culture”.

So, the global patterns of academic, scientific and professional texts are related to human practices or activities and meanings in each of these cultures. It is known that these specific practices and purposes depend on the field of knowledge, the participants involved and the role of language and multimodality in texts. To be part of these social areas, where language is constitutive of the activities with some participation of multimodality, the students –new members of academic culture and future members of scientific or professional culture- need to know what different kind of texts, and what kind of language they may use to construe meaning. It means that students need to be taught different genres in the academy and “how they relate to one another” (MARTIN & ROSE, in press).

Given this and having found student’s short skills in literacy in Argentina (EZCURRA, 1995; AMEIIDE, MURGA, PADILLA & DOUGLAS, 2000; PEREIRA & DI STEFANO, 2001; UNLu., 2001; ZALBA, 2002; CUBO DE SEVERINO, 2002; MURGA, PADILLA, DOUGLAS & AMEIIDE, 2002; MOYANO, 2003a) the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento (UNGS)1 dictates a compulsory introductory workshop in literacy for all students who wish to do university studies. Although the workshop lasts seven months, there is not enough time to teach all the genres that students will face across the curriculum. Besides, they can’t make a definite change of the way they look at texts, so some “basics genres” that often are combined in academic macro-genres have been selected to be taught (MOYANO, 2005).

In the First Cycle of the curriculum, professors say that students have problems in reading the literature recommended in their classes, based on writing examinations, which consist in answering a few questions about fundamental concepts and relationships between them. In the Second Cycle, lecturers complain about student’s writing and oral skills in using academic language and structuring more complex texts. Therefore, some lecturers –specially from the Industry Institute of the UNGS- asked for help to us as linguists, because in a University where the use of language has been seen as a relevant practice since its foundation (CORAGGIO, 1994), professors have failed helping students to improve their academic literacy.

Based on theoretical assumptions about genres and how to be taught, and taking into account lecturer’s complaints and requests from students, we design a Project to Develop Literacy Across the Curriculum (PRODEAC) to apply in the Second Cycle (MOYANO & NATALE, 2003)2. This project was refused two times by the Consejo Superior -the collegiate organ of government in the University-. However, when all the three Institutes in charged of the Second Cycle of the diverse curricula joined to support and demand this Project, the Consejo Superior approved a new version (MOYANO & NATALE, 2004) as an Institutional Program in 2005, under the condition to be evaluated during its first application.

These facts mentioned above confirm several propositions about the lack of institutional support for these kind of Programs in Argentina (UNLu, 2001; CARLINO, 2005; 2004; 2003), against the general consensus in other countries, especially the anglo-speakers, like Canada, USA, Australia and the UK (CARLINO, 2001a; 2001b; 2002; 2003; 2006; MARINKOVICH RAVENA & MIRÁN RAMÍREZ, 1998). In consequence, we have to say

1 The Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento is located in the 2º Cordón del Conurbano Bonaerense, what means “the second line of Buenos Aires suburbs”. The main population comes from disadvantaged schools and workers’ families, so in terms of Bernstein (1971;1981), they have restrictive codes.

2 This doesn’t mean that we don’t think that this Program should be applied all across the curriculum, included the First Cycle, but political issues didn’t allowed us to do a complete design.
that PRODEAC is the first Institutional Program of this kind in Argentina with institutional support, without this the Program couldn’t be in progress.

The theoretical frame of this work is Genre & Register Genre Theory, developed by Martin and the Sydney School in Systemic Functional Linguistics, and its pedagogical proposal (MARTIN & ROSE, in press; MARTIN & ROSE, 2005; EGGINS & MARTIN, 2003; MARTIN & ROSE, 2003; EGGINS & MARTIN, 2001; MARTIN, 2000; 1999; 1993; CHRISTIE & MARTIN, 1997; EGGINS, 1994; MARTIN & ROTHERY, 1993; COPE & KALANTZIS, 1993; HALLIDAY & MARTIN, 1993). This pedagogical proposal was adapted to our context and different levels of education in the course of a research during 2004-2005. (MOYANO, in process of writing; MOYANO & NATALE, 2004).

2. The Program

There are different proposals about how to do the work of teaching academic literacy at the University: to offer writing courses outside the subjects (in charge of linguistics lecturers); to teach academic literacy inside the subjects (in charge of the subject lecturer as member of the discourse community); to give special formation to advanced students who want to become tutors. These several proposals are registered in the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, specially installed in the United States (MC. LEOD & SOVEN, 1992; MARINKOVICH RAVENA & MIRÁN RAMÍREZ, 1998; FULLWILER & YOUNG, 1982) but repeated in some isolated practices in Argentina (UNLu, 2001). However, there are others approaches that focus on teaching genre in other traditions: New Rhetoric (also applied in Argentina for teaching literacy in the mother tongue), ESP (applied specially in teaching academic literacy in English as a foreign language in our country) and SFL (HYON, 1996; HYLAND, 2002).

PRODEAC—as we have said- has assumed the theoretical frame of the Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Sydney’s School pedagogical proposal. Moreover, we have decided to create the figure of an assistant linguistics professor who has the role of accompanying the process of teaching literacy inside the subject. This means that the linguist has to: a) negotiate with lecturers the genres they consider their students should produce, b) intervene in classes to teach students by resources as joint deconstruction, joint design of texts and joint editing for the first time, c) leave students to deal with individual work, with the possibility of consult in individual sessions. What is mentioned above will function as modeling classes for specific subject’s professor, because after three semesters of intervention they will have to do alone the entire alone job. The texts produced by students are revised by both: the linguist and the professor in charge of the subject.

Then, PRODEAC has three pedagogical objectives:
1) To guide the improvement of students’ academic development through teaching genres in relationship with their activity as university fellows.
2) To give assistance to specifics subjects’ lecturers in writing and oral tasks planning, assignment and evaluation, in order to increase the knowledge construe by their students about the field and the academic practices, and then evaluate them on it.
3) To guide specifics subjects’ lecturers in teaching genres into their discipline.

The research project developed to evaluate this kind of intervention (PRODEAC) has three main objectives:
1) To contribute to the construction of a theoretical frame for teaching academic literacy across the university curriculum.
2) To contribute to the construction of a pedagogical proposal for teaching academic genres across the university curriculum and make students to go forward to scientific and professional writing and oral genres.

3) To evaluate the pedagogical proposal for teaching genres into the context of the specific subjects across the curriculum.

For the last objective, we specifically pay attention to students’ evolution in literacy, the evolution of the subjects’ lecturers in skills of teaching literacy and the usefulness of a specific space for students who want to do individual consults.

For the second pedagogical objective, strategies for negotiating genres are being developed in the Program mentioned above for the purpose of teaching academic literacy at the university level, what has incidence in the construction of knowledge and insertion in the academic community. This negotiation is made between each lecturer and the linguist who assists to his/her work with students in the context of the subjects they teach. The linguists become mediators between lecturers and students, guiding the production of resources for teaching genres.

Each of the points mentioned deserve to be developed, but in this paper we will discuss only the negotiation procedure in terms of its theoretical possibility and legitimacy.

3. The negotiation

At the beginning of the Program we have detected in the subjects’ lecturers three degrees of comprehension of the role of language in the construction of knowledge (VIGOTSKY, 1998) and the value of the conceptualization of genres as social activities (MARTIN, 1984: 25):

1. We have found one group which appreciate the language practices in science and recognize some scientific genres, but don’t have pedagogical resources to teach them. In general, they are experienced writers and researchers who have also guided post-graduated thesis, so their consciousness about academic and working practices are very vivid.

2. The second group also appreciates the language practices, but doesn’t know clearly neither how it could help their students to learn better the concepts of the subject nor what kind of texts they need to write to achieve this purpose. They are not aware about the concept of genre, although they know the more complexes ones, which they, as professionals, are used to write. At the beginning, some lecturers of this group were not very interested in our proposal because they understood that we were going to put the emphasis in the XIX century style of writing and norms.

3. The third group hasn’t got any consciousness about the participation of the natural language in the knowledge construction, whether they consider that “numbers speaks by their own” –as some economists do- or whether they say the only thing they teach is “activity” or “how to do things” in the professional life –as some engineers-.

These different levels of comprehension about that genres as activity in the university or in working contexts are realised by language as constitutive of the text, and the concept of language as a resource to construe reality or technical or scientific knowledge, are another problems which we have to deal with before interact with students or, sometimes, while teaching students is in progress.

The way we found to work with lecturers is called “negotiation”. By negotiation we understand the dialogue between linguists and the other professors about the texts they want to assign their students to write. These texts –following Genre & Register Theory- are exemplars of a genre, so are social activities with a clear purpose that members of a culture relate to another in a specific context of situation. These genres are developed by stages and
faces and it is expected that students might recognize their realisation by language. So, it is necessary that the lecturer has got clear these aspects of genre to formulate the assignments and the usefulness of this kind of work in learning the subject and the practice.

The negotiation begins with private encounters between both the linguist and the lecturer, who is acknowledged about the Program. They talk about the subject and how the Program and the evaluation will be developed. Then, appears the topic about the writing or oral text the lecturer will assign to their students.

The development of the negotiation takes different ways, depending on the group in which the lecturer is included. Some professors of the first group have changed the program and the way of evaluation in the moment they have notified that are going to participate of PRODEAC. One of these lecturers said:

> Until the last semester, the evaluation of the regular course has been consisted in two individual, presential writing exams, with some assessments proposed by the professors. The definition of the mark the student obtains in the subject was emerged from an oral examination, which consisted in an individual oral exposition about a special topic, that integrates the contents of the subject.

From the moment we have started working with PRODEAC, this lecturer decided to change strategies of evaluation: he assigned one exam to do at home, a second one in the traditional way and a final written work to do at home with an oral defense. He expected to get written academic texts with similar characteristics of professional or scientific texts. Then, we could say they trust in the action of the Program in favor of a better development of literacy abilities of their students.

Other professors of the same group had high expectations about the goals they students could achieve, asking as a final work, texts for presentation in academic conferences or for publication. In this kind of work they expected the students to write a scientific essay, in which might appear the contents of the whole program to solve an issue related with the subject in question.

In another case, the lecturers propose to the students to write a text similar to a research article, based in field experiences and incorporating technical and scientific concepts included in literature.

In this case, it is interesting to say that the professor in charge of the subject is a very experienced research, who is assisted by two younger professionals. The first assignment was designed by one of these assistants and consisted in determine, after observation, variables which have incidence in an ecological site and their indicators. When the assistant linguist asked him what he thinks the students will write, he said: “two lists linked by arrows”. Then, after the activity was made, the linguist suggested the professor to ask students to transform this kind of schemata in a full text, which could be a “case analysis”.

For this purpose, the linguist asked for the lecturer an exemplar of this genre, but he couldn’t find anyone. The fact is that this is the most common genre in this area of knowledge, and the thesis of this professor was itself an exemplar of it. The linguist decided to design the schematic structure of the genre to show it to the subject’s professors, who consider it very adequate for the task. Finally, the linguist made the negotiation of the genre with the students. As result of these actions, the students wrote case analysis of 20 -25 pages long.

The matter of negotiation in these cases was to establish the phases and stages of the genre and to solve how to reach to this kind of writing and oral texts when the students were not aware neither about scientific language nor about genres.

The linguists made suggestions about the possibilities of the students to solve these assignments, or about the need of removing or add some task to prepare the final one, which
always was the most difficult. The lecturers always discussed the point, but finally agree with the assistant linguist.

The fact is that with this group was really easy the negotiation and they allowed the linguist to assist the students with joint deconstructions of academic texts. In the cases in doing that was not possible to find a text for deconstruction, the linguist made a schemata in a joint work with students (previous consensus with the professors), to guide the production. This group of lecturers participates of the classes assigned to the linguists, making comments and explaining matters about the discipline and the way to make decisions about what kind of contents include in the text.

When the students have written their text, they –the linguist, the lecturer and the students- make a joint edition of one or two texts produced by the students. Sometimes, this is a first text they produced in the genre, so the next activity could be to produce the same genre about another topic as final evaluation.

The second group is indeed the most difficult to negotiate with. Some of them consider that they cannot assign more than one written text because the students don’t have enough time to read the bibliography, which –they affirm- is the most important thing in the course. However, in two cases we could convene hat writing is as important as reading, because the students can relate concepts and apply them for a case analysis or a project, e.g.

One of these lecturers accepted to assign as a final evaluation to write what he called “a report of changes in an enterprise”. When the linguist asked if the students will analyse some cases visiting some enterprises, and then make the report, the lecturer answered that they won’t. Then, the assistant linguist suggested him that the students could make better a “project of change”, if the professor give an example of an issue in a certain context. Then, the lecturer understood what kind of proposal imply the Program and accept this change and negotiate with the linguist the genre -defining faces and stages- taking into account his experience in this area of work. After that, both participants of the negotiation prepared the assignment for the students.

In other case, the professor assigned a bibliographic report, without knowing what kind of genre was this and not giving the time for negotiation. The students made different texts as resumes of each text of the bibliography, and the lecturer accepted them as if they made the task correctly. The linguist keep her attention telling that the genre was not realised, and the answer of the lecturer was that she didn’t know indeed what a bibliographic report was, that she had heard the name and decided to assign it to the students. It is obvious to say that we couldn’t reach any result in the two semesters she worked with PRODEAC.

A third professor of this group, by the reverse, was growing in comprehension gradually. She started assigning tasks as “fresh writing”, that she defined as a text written about a case took from newspapers, applying concepts of the literature in a proper way for students criteria. But she finished the process analyzing each assignment with the associated linguist, after seeing the results of the complete process proposed in the negotiation –which includes the complete process of teaching literacy- and compared the results with the text coming from the first task.

The third group was difficult too, but in all the cases the linguists were involved could solve the problems. In one case, the subject’s professor, an economist, said that natural language did not intervene in the teaching process: he put on the board some charts with economic data and select some numbers to put into relation and made conclusions with the students. The assistant linguist decided to assist to his classes and show him, in private, that they needed do the work using language to construe meaning from the related data of the chart. Finally, at the end of the semester, the lecturer realize that this was truth, and search some reports from the other institution were he works, the Center of Studies for Latin America (CEPAL). Then, the linguist could make the deconstruction of some of these texts
and the students produced a brief report as a final work of the course. In the second semester he worked with PRODEAC, this lecturer modified the program, including activities of joint deconstruction to show how the expert writers use the economical data of the charts to construe their text as an exposition (thesis and arguments). Then, the students wrote their texts following this exemplar of the genre, the linguist could do the joint edition of one text, and the students wrote another text of this kind for examination.

The last case we are going to mention is a subject of Industrial Engineering, were the principal task is to make a product. The students must design it, justify its needed for the society and make the product itself. The negotiation with the lecturers in charge was very difficult, because they understood that they need to change the objectives of the subject to work with PRODEAC. The assistant linguist made an effort to make this negotiation needing the assistance of the director of the Program. First, she asked the lecturers if the students have to write any text during the semester, and they said that they have to write weekly what they were doing in order to reach the objectives of the subject. Then, the linguist asked for texts produced by students of the past semester. The professors argued that there were great differences between one text and another, what was, in fact, the truth.

The assistant linguist analysed the texts provided and made a proposal for the schematic structure of the genre, that is very complex, because —as a macro-genre— includes different types of texts: one to tell how the idea was generated, the second one for justify the need of the product and its lack in the market, a third one to describe the product and the materials used for make it, etc.

When the negotiation reached an agreement between the lecturers involved, the linguist had the opportunity to intervene in some classes to describe the genre and give some orientation to write it. In this case, the joint evaluation had the most relevant function, because it helped the students to work with the text until the last version.

Finally, the students were interested in the oral presentation of the products, what required that the linguist teach how to make a Power Point presentation and how to give a talk supported by this resource. The presentations were made with public and very well considered.

4. Lecturers' evolution

It is necessary to say that the evolution of the lecturers involved in the Program is not as fast as it looks in this presentation. It requires a slow and subtle work from the linguist, since the proposal is not clearly understood from the beginning. Some of the professors feel the process as invasive, and put their barriers, avoiding encounters or being absent in the linguist’s classes. But after a period of interaction, things change: the lecturers start to see how can the Program helps the teaching-learning process and the plus it gives the students’ texts and for their university lives and their projection as professionals.

To sum up, the negotiation consists in guiding the lecturers to define clearly, in interaction with the assistant linguist, the genre the students need to learn, its faces and stages, the kind of language that realise the meanings they try to construe, the kind of relationship of interactants in the text and its realisation, the organization of this meanings in a text, the information flow as well the function of multimodality, sometimes represented by the use of charts, schemata, graphics, maps, etc.

In consequence, the lecturers acquire consciousness of genre, generally in the second time of participation in the Program, when they establish agreements from the first moment and make proposals as alternatives instead of that done in the first time of joint labour. They also grow in the comprehension of the possibility of teaching genres and take the habit of
working in this way, recognizing that the students’ productions show deeper reflection about theoretical contents and their application.

5. Conclusion

Now we reach the moment to discuss if this negotiation procedure is theoretical acceptable. It is supposed that the members of a community share genres that create to follow their own purpose (SWALES, 1990) or that in each area of activity the speakers-listeners know genres as they know the system of language (BAKHTIN, 1952-53). The fact is that in the academy this is not for sure, as we try to show in this paper. So, in the theoretical frame we have chosen (G&R Theory), it is possible to say that a linguist can make the job of increase the awareness about genres of the members of a certain social activity space in a culture. Negotiation seems to be an adequate procedure for this purpose.

About the legitimacy of this practice we can say that almost all the university community express the interest of this Program to accomplish the foundational purposes of the UNGS. The professors increase they awareness about the importance of the category of genre to teach academic literacy, and the role of language in construe knowledge. The students improve their skills in academic literacy and can manage better the concepts of the different subjects they study.

Of course, there are many things to do in order to perform the Program and its impact, but we are still starting this process.

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