ABSTRACT: Today, net-based forums are widely used within various types of educational settings. This article reports on a study of the communication in asynchronous forums by student teachers enrolled in a university course in the teaching of English as a foreign language (didactics) in Norway. The article aims to illustrate the complexity of the interaction going on in the forums in terms of roles, communicative purposes, discourses and genres. Another important aim is to make lecturers more aware of the pragmatic function of the students’ choices of genres and discourses. This type of knowledge may enable lecturers to improve the type of tasks that the students are asked to perform.

KEYWORDS: discourses; genres; computer-mediated communication; student teachers.

1. Introduction

Today, synchronous and asynchronous net-based forums are widely used within educational settings. The communication is asynchronous in the sense that it “is not composed in the same time frame as it is received” (Bloch 2002: 118). Traditionally, analysts have split discourse into two separate varieties: spoken and written. Crystal (2001: 48) calls computer-mediated communication, or Netspeak, a third medium. “Speak” in Crystal’s use of the word involves writing as well as talking, and it also has a receptive element (listening and reading). Computer-mediated communication has elements of both spoken and written language. Consequently, this characteristic cannot be used as a basis for genre identification of this type of communication.

Whereas some researchers usually assign a text as “belonging” to a particular genre, other researchers stress the heterogeneity of a text as to genre. An example of the latter is Fairclough (2003: 66) who says that “A particular text or interaction is not ‘in’ a particular genre – it is likely to involve a combination of different genres.” However, a text may draw upon a main genre. Consequently, a particular (spoken, written or multimodal) text may contain genre mixtures. A parallel to genre mixing is discourse mixing. This article will examine the pragmatic functions of such mixtures of genres and discourses in my data which is electronic group discussions, or communication in asynchronous forums. The article aims to show the complexity of the interaction going on in the forums in terms of roles, communicative purposes, discourses and genres. (A more comprehensive account of the roles is provided in Skulstad 2005.) Another important aim is to make lecturers more aware of reasons why students switch from academic discourse to other types of discourse. Knowledge of such pragmatic functions may enable lecturers to improve the type of tasks that are presented to the students as well as to get a better understanding of what is really going on in these educational settings.

The article starts with a description of the material and method employed in the study. The next section briefly presents different traditions of genre analysis and different views on discourses and genre. Section four examines some examples of discourse and genre mixing in my data and discusses the pragmatic functions of the choices made by the student teachers. In one of the examples a writer comments explicitly on the choice of genre conventions in a fellow student’s analysis of a learner text. In other words, this discussion is on the meta-level and so shows the student’s interpretation and views quite explicitly. The concluding section sums up the findings and gives some recommendations as to practical teaching.
2. Material and method

The interactants in my data have a university degree in English, ranging from the level of a foundation course to an MA course. Having completed their university degrees they enrol for a one-year university program to become a qualified teacher of English as a foreign language and any other school subject in which they have a university degree. During the one-year program the students are enrolled in three different courses: English didactics\(^1\), didactics of their second subject and a course in general pedagogy.

The students in my study were assigned into groups of four to five. This was done randomly apart from the fact that students who did their teaching practice at the same school were usually put in the same group. The reason for this was that it was thought that they might benefit from being able to engage in face-to-face communication with some of the group members in addition to their participation in the asynchronous forum.

The obligatory task presented to the students was to select a learner text, analyse it and post both in the learning management system LUVIT\(^2\). Having read the analyses, the students used LUVIT to send response comments to the other members of the group. The students were asked to comment on the fellow students’ analyses as well as to point out problems and strengths in the learner texts on which the analyses were based. Each student was required to minimally compose one response comment addressed to each of the students in his or her group and to compose online replies to all the postings addressed to him- or herself. The tasks performed in the forum supplemented a two-hour lecture on the analysis of learner texts. My material was collected from two classes of students during the first term of their course in English didactics. The total number of participants was 41. Except for a native speaker of American English and a native speaker of Danish, all the students were native speakers of Norwegian. This was the first time the student teachers participated in an asynchronous colloquium during this university program. Thus, they had no “recurrent situations” to draw on (cf. Miller 1984).

The study forms part of a larger project in which I used a qualitative approach in identifying roles, rhetorical strategies, discourse structure and types of discourses (Skulstad 2005). In the study reported on here I have examined the pragmatic functions of the students’ choices of discourses and genres and how these discourses and genres were utilized to achieve specific communicative purposes.

As for the linguistic analysis, boundary shifts of discourses and genres were identified by examining lexical, semantic and grammatical aspects as to heterogeneity and in terms of their association with different social fields and discourse communities.

3. Discourses and genres

It is not always easy to draw a borderline between discourse and genre. Fairclough (2003: 17) defines a discourse as “a particular way of representing some part of the (physical, social, psychological) world – there are alternative and often competing discourses associated with

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\(^1\) Didactics is here used as a translation of the Norwegian word didaktikk. A course in English didaktikk concentrates on the what, why and how of the teaching of English as a foreign language. Thus, English language teaching methodology is only one part of this type of course (how).

\(^2\) LUVIT is an acronym for Lund University Virtual Interactive Tool. The LUVIT system incorporates a number of interactive tools: chat, e-mail, newsgroups and other asynchronous forums, web-conferencing and internal message systems. It was developed at Lund University in Sweden, but in 1998 LUVIT was established as a company.
different groups of people in different social positions.” Examples of different discourses are football discourse, medical discourse, environmental discourse and academic discourse.

Genre analysis is not a unified set of approaches within linguistics and discourse analysis, and consequently there are also a number of different definitions of genre. Broadly speaking, within the Anglo-American and Australian research traditions three approaches may be identified: ESP studies, (North American) New Rhetoric studies and the Sydney School (Hyon 1996; Yunick 1997; Johns 2002; Skulstad 2006). (For an introduction to German research traditions see Muntigl and Gruber 2005.) The first tradition is rooted in ESP studies (e.g. Swales 1981 and 1990; Dudley-Evans and Henderson 1990; Bhatia 1993; Skulstad 1996 and 2002). It takes an eclectic approach as to theories of linguistics, but Hallidayan ideas of the relationship between language and its social functions are evident. The central relationship between text and context is reflected in Swales’s (1998: 1) term textography by which he refers to “something more than a disembodied textual or discourse analysis, but something less than a full ethnographic account.”


The Sydney School focuses on the social function and social context of genres and relies on central ideas of systemic functional linguistics. Halliday’s theories which identify three simultaneous functions of texts: ideational, interpersonal and textual are prominent.

In critical discourse analysis (CDA) the concept of genre is also central. CDA sees language primarily as social practice and regards the context of language use to be crucial. The relation of language and power is frequently examined, and important studies within CDA have analysed institutional, political, gender and media discourses (Wodak 2002). In the present study, power-relations are not central, and it is not within the CDA paradigm, but what it draws from CDA is their emphasis on heterogeneity of text in terms of mixing of discourses and genres. My research has also been influenced by central studies in each of the three traditions of genre analysis mentioned above: their emphasis on the close relationship between genre and communicative purpose, Swales’s (1990, 1998) research on the relationship between genre and discourse community, Miller’s (1984) notion of typified rhetorical actions and the Sydney School’s emphasis on the social functions and social context of genres.

Swales (1990) identifies at least two criteria of genres: a shared set of communicative purposes and genre names given to classes of communicative events by members of a discourse community. By genre names Swales refers to names indicating communicative purpose. In practice, this means that letters, for instance, would not qualify as a genre, because this term refers to the means of communication rather than to the communicative purpose. Letters of complaint, however, would qualify as a genre as this category refers to the communicative purpose, and both the purpose and the name of this type of letter are recognized by the parent discourse community. The same applies to e-mail messages which also refer to the means of communication. For want of a better term, the data in the present study could be assigned to the genre of asynchronous colloquium messages, although that term might also be seen to primarily refer to the means of communication. What is more interesting than to assign my data to a genre is to look at examples of how the participants choose particular types of discourses and genres according to specific communicative needs. Section four also includes an example of disagreement as to genre which may give valuable insight from the point of view of course design.
4. Functions of discourse and genre mixing

Fairclough (2003: 216) uses the term *genre chain* by which he refers to “[d]ifferent genres which are regularly linked together, involving systematic transformations from genre to genre (e.g. official documents, associated press releases or press conferences, reports in the press or on television)”. In my data, there are also a number of genres which are linked together, although it would not be correct to call this systematic transformations from genre to genre: first each student selected a learner text, then there was a lecture on the analysis and assessment of learner texts followed by the student teachers’ assignments on the analysis of the learner texts posted in the forum, then there were the response comments to each member of the group followed by replies. My findings indicate that in their postings the writers perform two “macro-roles”: student and foreign language teacher (Skulstad 2005). Within the student role the writers may adopt the role of a friend (social role) or a person enrolled in an academic course (institutional role). In the role as a FL teacher the writers may position themselves as a professional or a trainee (novice). These shifting roles result in hybridity in discourses and genres. Skulstad (2005) reports on a number of strategies which are used to avoid face threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson [1978] 1987) such as the presentation of “good news” (praise, agreement) before “bad news” (criticism, disagreement). Below, we shall look at examples of strategies chosen to avoid FTAs which involve switching from one type of discourse to another. Here, the writers discuss genre aspects of a learner text:

Kenneth:
First off, I agree that the pupil has done well in keeping within the limits of the genre. Also, the short and sometimes simple sentences make good sense in the confines of a fairy tale. Spelling mistakes could easily be covered with a minor effort, but as a teacher I would primarily commend the girl’s sense of fairy-tale style and ambience.

Ronny:
If you are really true to the fairytale genre, one should not write real names. DUBLIN. The whole point is that the story is out of time and place. Are you serious? Am I nitpicking now? Sorry!!!!!!!

Ronny anticipates a critical response, and thus he tries to avoid a potential FTA. His exaggerated use of punctuation may be seen as an effort to replace elements of prosody and paralanguage found in speech (Crystal 2001: 34). In his posting, Ronny switches from an academic discussion about a learner text to language typical of face-to-face conversations and language associated with online chatgroups. Kenneth makes the following reply:

Kenneth:
I’m not saying she [the EFL learner]’s the reincarnation of the Grimm-brothers, but she has captured quite a few of the typical features of the fairy tale, and I think that should be rewarded. K-man.

By his choice of the phrase *the reincarnation of the Grimm-brothers*, Kenneth defends his view in an elegant way by means of humour, something which is appreciated by Ronny:

Ronny:
Nice comment!!!!!!

Then Olav joins in and continues the tone of humour:
Olav:
Well, Dublin used to be a fairly mythic and exotic place pre-Christian invasion. All sorts of wonderful pagan activities …

This is an example in which the students discuss an academic matter highly relevant to their future profession as teachers of English as a foreign language. In the discussion the students switch between academic discourse and the style more typical of online chatgroups, and humour plays an important part.

Crystal (2001: 19) points out that sometimes terms from the underlying computer technology may be used in everyday conversation “among young people who want their talk to have a cool cutting-edge”. He gives examples like: “It’s my turn to download now” (I’ve heard all your gossip, now hear mine), “Let’s go offline for a few minutes” (let’s talk in private). In my material there is a similar example where the active members of the group complain about the fact that two of the students have been silent so far despite the fact that participation in this forum is obligatory:

Olav:
Ingrid and Per
Have they lost their way to this forum, hidden in the depths of cyberia?

Kenneth:
RE: Ingrid and Per
Sure is a pity. And now that the dons were mashed by palace on saturday we probably won't see much of Ronny either. K-man, or whatever.

Ronny:
RE: Ingrid and Per
I'm still crying, and trying to understand why –WHY-----WHYYYY????

Here, the joke about “cyberia” is not merely used as a way of giving their Netspeak a cool cutting-edge. This is a way of complaining indirectly about the fact that two of the group members have not yet contributed, and in this way an FTA is avoided. The football discourse functions as a continuation of the joke, and this joke also serves to mitigate a possible FTA in that people may have legitimate reasons for not participating in the forum – reasons which have nothing to do with their university studies. This example illustrates that the introduction of discourses associated with non-academic activities should not be viewed purely as a distraction, but be seen as serving specific communicative purposes. Here the writers switch from the genre of critical commentary to personal message.

One of the students in the data collected the next academic year takes on an authoritative voice. This is unusual in my material since the students usually try to avoid or to mitigate a possible threat to face. However, as it appears Hanna was annoyed with Lars at the point in time when she posted her comments. She voiced the opinion that he should have informed her about the fact that there would not be an ordinary lecture this particular day. Instead the students could spend time in the computer lab posting their comments, or simply work from home. Hanna had wanted to do the latter had she known that there would not be an ordinary class that day. Then she switches to critical commentary:

Hanna:
Interesting angle. I can see you have put in a lot of work, but do you really master the field yourself? There is some lack of cohesion in your analysis, and some of your explanations are a bit confusing … Other things I find worth noting in your analysis are: Firstly, you need to work a bit on your concord. … Secondly, I would advice you to use the spell check.
Lars:
Dear Hanna!
Thankyou for your thorrogh comment! It proved to be upmost insightful to me. I do hope it was not a lot of nonsense.
You are also right about me having concord problems, it has been a leitmotiv in my quest for correctness. Hopefully, this this passiar will give an impetus to my verdue mastery of the English tongue.

It is rather a tough claim to make that a future teacher of English does not master the field of foreign language teaching. The FTA is “softened” somewhat by first giving praise and making the claim into a question. In his reply Lars uses formal, archaic and literary language to signal that he is in control of the situation (despite the fact that his posting contains spelling mistakes) and that he resists being positioned as a novice.

As mentioned above, one of the obligatory tasks for each individual student was to write an analysis of a learner text commenting on problems and strengths. Not all of these texts observe conventions of academic writing. Hilde, one of the students in the data collected the next academic year, has written a text which does observe such conventions. A fellow student (Else) makes the following comment on Hilde’s text:

Else:
I find your analysis very thorough and cleverly written. Still, I find your numerable references to our text curriculum a bit disturbing, and not helping your analysis. To me, this constant focus serves as name dropping. As I understood it, the pupil’s text was here meant to be the most important.

The analysis of a learner text was meant to serve as a first draft of one of the texts that would go into the exam portfolio, although the student could choose to include a different text. Having studied at university for three to six years, all of the students are familiar with the conventions of academic papers and written exams. Thus, it may seem unexpected that Else finds Hilde’s referencing disturbing. The reason may be that Else thinks that the writers should frame their responses as teachers of English and not as writers in an academic community at university. In other words, Else thinks that the text should be written as a teacher’s feedback to a learner and not as an academic paper. The exchange between Hilde and Else is interesting because it is on the meta-level, and it documents the fact that students are confused as to genre. This will effect their learning process.

5. Conclusion

An important function of asynchronous net-based forums within an educational setting is to provide opportunities for academic discussions which may enhance the learning process. The asynchronous colloquium messages in my data contain a number of different discourses: academic discourse, football discourse, lifeworld discourse, discourse associated with online chatgroups, etc. In this article I have selected some interesting examples which show that sometimes the reason for switching from one type of discourse to another is to mitigate a possible threat to face. This in turn, is related to the fact that these writers have different roles simultaneously. As a student they have a social role as well as an institutional role, and as a foreign language teacher they may position themselves as a trainee or a professional. What complicates the matter even more is that these roles cut across two different discourse communities: an academic community at university and a community of EFL school teachers. As we saw above, Hanna took an authoritative voice and so positioned herself as a professional. But in that particular example she positioned her fellow student Lars as a trainee. In his reply Lars switched to archaic language and discourse associated with literary
texts. This way he brought in an element of humour, but he also wanted to show that he mastered a wider set of registers to prove that he was not totally ignorant as a future language teacher. The final example I chose was one about explicit disagreement as to genre. One consequence of this disagreement is that the feedback from fellow students may be confusing and thus less useful.

Heterogeneity as to discourses and genres is a “natural” feature of any online forum within an educational setting. Still, the different roles which the writers in this data play simultaneously may lower the learning process because there are so many things going on at the same time. In terms of practical teaching, one could split the task into two separate activities: to give peer reviews and to play the role of an EFL teacher discussing strengths and weaknesses in learner texts. However, lecturers should expect that interactants in forums of this type will not limit the discussion to academic issues, and accept that these postings will include strategies which aim to create and maintain social relationships as a way of establishing a classroom discourse community.

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