ACADEMIC GENRES AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE FOR UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS*

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ABSTRACT: This paper reports an experience on course design focusing on academic genres needed by Brazilian students at undergraduate level. Based on needs analysis, three academic genres were selected according to students' needs. Principles of English for specific purposes (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987), genre knowledge (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995), shared knowledge (Johns, 1997) as well as genre principles from a systemic functional perspective (Halliday and Hasan, 1989) were taken into account in the design of the course.

KEYWORDS: genres, genre knowledge, course design, needs analysis, Systemic Functional Grammar.

1. An overview of the situation

Brazilian teachers at undergraduate levels commonly hear complaints from their students about the difficulties faced when dealing with texts from academic genres they have not been exposed to. On the professional ground the same situation happens, mainly when students apply for jobs and they are asked to deal with genres they have never heard of.

Who is to blame? The school that did not present to students genres that are frequently used in academic contexts?; the focus put by school syllabuses on literary genres demanded in college entrance examinations (known as ‘vestibular’, in Brazil), which are not used as frequently as some other everyday genres?; the lack of needs analysis and a greater lack of knowing who the students are and what they need for their academic and/or professional lives? The mismatch between high-school policies and undergraduate practices which do not dialogue and consequently bring issues to be dealt with by the teachers working at these levels?

It is easy to see, by the exposed, that we are in the middle of a catch 22 situation. And also, there is an urgent need for a more continuous dialogue between these two levels of education.

Bearing this scenario in mind, this paper aims to discuss a genre-based experience in which three academic genres were implemented as a way of helping students to develop a more effective performance in their academic life, as well as in their future professional life according to the genres they were supposed to be in contact with.

It is also my intention to discuss some theoretical issues related to the designing of such courses, mainly the contributions Systemic-Functional Linguistics, English for Specific Purposes and New Rhetoric may bring to these courses.

2. Genre, genre knowledge and course design

In order to discuss the experience reported in this paper three theoretical references are used:

* In this text I revisit ideas previously presented in Vian Jr. (2006). I am grateful to Gil Melo for helping me with the first draft of this text.
(1) **genre** from a systemic-functional perspective (Halliday, 1985; Halliday and Hasan, 1989; Martin, 1992; Eggins, 1994; Thompson, 1996; Eggins and Martin, 1997, among others);

(2) **genre knowledge** (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995) together with knowledge shared by writers/readers when using a given genre (Johns, 1997); and

(3) **course design** issues from an ESP perspective (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

(a) Genres

From a systemic functional perspective genre is seen as “*a staged, goal-oriented purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture*” (Martin, 1984, p. 25). Adding to that, Thompson (1996, p. 36) argues that genre can be seen as register plus purpose. Register, as proposed by Halliday (Halliday and Hasan, 1989) indicates variables according to the use, which happens at three levels:

1. **field**: the representation of social activities;
2. **tenor**: roles played by the users of the interaction; and
3. **mode**: the symbolic and rhetoric role of language.

Genres, though, could be summarized as what text producers do when using language in social interactions and how they organize their messages to achieve social purposes.

I have pointed out elsewhere (Vian Jr, 2002) that when a didactic-methodological approach focusing on genre is used as a matrix for planning courses, we should be aware of the gap between theory and practice, not to put pressure on students with a heavy load of theoretical items, otherwise jargons would be inappropriately used and instead of solving a problem we would be creating others.

It should also be clear for teachers working with such theories that the ideas of genre, register and language should be clear to them due to the fact that these concepts should be co-constructed with students.

The next problem would then be: how to explore students’ linguistic knowledge when teaching academic writing?

There is not an easy answer to this question, but some possible solutions may arise. First of all, students are proficient users of genres in their everyday life, which means they are aware of how the sociocultural context they live in function and they are able to deal with some genres in this context.

Studies about service encounters developed by Ventola (1984) and applied to the business context as a tool to the teaching of English for Business Purposes speaking courses (Vian Jr, 2002) adopted fluxograms as a way of describing the target situations in which students were supposed to interact, so that, in prospective situations, these fluxograms could be used as tools for designing courses.

The idea I am trying to put forward is that if events are highly predictable in the context they occur, fluxograms may be produced by the students themselves, once they have a working knowledge about how some genres work. In the piece of research mentioned above (Vian Jr, 2002) I presented fluxograms produced by students in professional interactions and some ideas were introduced on how they could be used in classrooms and as a tool in course design.
By using fluxograms, the teacher enhances students collaboration, promotes autonomy and deal with students’ background knowledge at the same time, as opposed to approaches that do not take the students’ role in the learning-teaching process into account. When referring to teaching academic writing, I highlight the discussion and elicitation of students’ background knowledge about textual structure. Experience has shown that at least the structure Exordium-Narratio-Peroratio proposed by Aristotle (1941) is known by the students, however with another terminology, such as beginning-middle-end or introduction-development-conclusion.

Based on this knowledge it is possible to develop tasks in which students can predict the development of the text they are supposed to produce by maintaining their focus on the writing process and its phases and not on writing as a product. Although focusing on writing as a product has been a common practice over the last years in teaching writing in Brazil.

The approach focusing on learning (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) and tailored to the teaching of Portuguese (as I will present in item (c) later) is based on the genres students are supposed to use in their academic life. It raises both students’ awareness and their role as social actors engaged in communicative practices. This also is to take into account, from the theoretical point of view, genre and Generic Structure Potential (Halliday and Hasan, 1989) concepts related to the communicative event they would be interacting in.

(b) Genre knowledge and shared knowledge

Genre knowledge refers to “an individual’s repertoire of situationally appropriate responses to recurrent situations” (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995, p. ix), therefore, every time we interact we use recurrent knowledge commonly used in that situation.

That is to say that genre knowledge is systematic. On the other hand, as we are talking about as abstract concept, once it is not possible to measure one’s genre knowledge, it is, at the same time complex and dichotomous, because it implies social and cognitive elements (Johns, 1997, p. 21). Taking this systematic aspect as reference, some features can be ascribed to genres, among which Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) mention: dynamism, once genres change according to socio-cognitive needs; situatedness, related to the fact that every time we use a genre we are engaged in some situation of our cultural context; form and content, because genres have a structure in which a content is developed; duality of structures, referring to the social aspect we constitute when we engage in professional activities and, finally, the linking to a community, as the components of any given genre varies according to the epistemological, ideological and sociological rules of a group.

Johns (1997) uses a perspective in which she relates teaching writing to the role of the text producer and the text reader. According to her, interaction between readers and writers is determined by sharing some genre knowledge. A similar perspective to that adopted by Berkenkotter and Huckin previously presented.

When we interact socially, it is mandatory that we use one among the several genres in use within our culture. The mere fact of choosing one of them presupposes that my interlocutor is also familiar with the genre and that s/he can interact with me according to the rules prescribed by that genre. Based on this, Johns (1997, p. 22-37) puts forward types of knowledge usually found among those sharing a genre:
(a) name;
(b) communicative purposes;
(c) roles;
(d) context;
(e) formal text features;
(f) text content;
(g) register;
(h) cultural values;
(i) awareness of intertextuality.

It should be taken into account, however, Johns’s work refers to genres in the academic context and when we consider a broader social context, some elements proposed by the author may be questioned. Just as an example, Freire’s (1998) research has shown that the name of the genre is not always shared by the users – at least in the professional context researched by the author. In this context, participants of the research gave different names to the same genre. This is also perceived in classroom practice, mainly in writing tasks when students are asked to produce texts and the results are frequently different from expected. If we ask a person to perform a task they have never performed, their attitude would be to search for a person who has already used that genre hints for its use, that is to say, the knowledge proposed by Johns would be inherent to the new genre. Another issue, we can raise, it is related to the fact that it is not necessarily implied a unidirectional relationship between textual and social conventions.

We could also consider these issues when talking about teaching writing in the mother tongue. The teaching of the genres ‘summary’ and ‘review’ is a common challenge faced by language teachers in the Brazilian context, as teachers of other subjects are used to mixing them up. These teachers ask students to produce texts from one genre, but indicating features of the other. This brings about terminological and practical misconceptions for the students themselves.

In the business context this is also a common trait. The results of the studies carried out by Barbara et alii (1996) and Celan and Scott (1997) reveal that the same documents are used in different companies with different names. For instance what is a “memo” in a company, it is named differently in the other, although the communicative purpose and other formal textual features of the document remains the same.

The suggestion of using genre and genre knowledge is associated with the fact that students, in the academic context, are supposed to produce texts belonging to extremely ritualized situations, whose language and content are predictable. Hence the fact we can teach writing based on the features of the genres students are going to deal with, using their own background knowledge and reinforcing a more collaborative position of the students, enhancing their participation and raising motivation.

(c) Designing ESP courses

Designing a course, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 21), is primarily a matter of elaborating questions as a way of building the foundations for the subsequent phases: planning, producing materials, teaching and evaluation.

Three factors are essential in designing an ESP course: the content, the methodology and the target situation. The professional responsible for designing and
developing the course, though, should be aware of all the elements involved in these three factors, since each one of them brings along a series of others.

When we talk about content, for example, it is required a broad view of teaching methods and linguistic description in order to choose the appropriate method for the course and more specifically, the principles of an ESP approach. Therefore, it is required a macro view of the historical development of methods in order not to run the risk of using unclear criteria to meet students’ needs. In terms of methodology, issues related to theories of learning are also important to assist the course designer on choosing the approach to be used in the course, which can also range from behaviorist theories to more affective and humanistic ones. Finally, when the nature of the target situation is discussed, factors such as who the course is aimed at, why, where it is going to be held and when are elements which should be carefully addressed and which are basically solved through needs analysis.

A content based on linguistic items is commonly found in ESP courses taking as reference the analysis of the target situation and on the identification of the typical linguistic items of that situation. However, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out several deficiencies related to this kind of design. The first one is related to the role of the learner, who is not considered throughout the course, but only used as a means of identifying the target situation; another problem is that there is no room for change as the course is planned based on a previous needs analysis, which can result in mistakes and inaccurateness, leading to necessary changes in the course, but these changes are not always possible. At last, contents based on linguistic items using the target situation as a departing point are only related to a superficial level, not revealing much about the competence required for performance (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 67-68).

Course contents based on strategies are one of the most traditions in Brazil, as is the case, for example, of the Brazilian ESP Project (Celani et alii, 1988). According to the Project, students’ needs in Brazilian universities are centered on reading texts which are not available in their mother tongue.

Two are the principles presented by Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 69) for an approach based on strategies. The first is theoretical focus on the competence that underlies performance, revealing, though, learning objectives both in terms of competence and performance. There could be, for example, the objective of having students to be able to identify and classify a text according to its objective (at performance level), who is also able to extract specific pieces of information from the text (at competence level). The second principle is the pragmatic base of courses courses focusing on strategies. The role of needs analysis, therefore, is two-fold, opening possibilities for discovering competence underlying performance; and secondly, allowing to uncover the backgound knowledge and the strategies brought by students to the ESP classroom.

Finally, the authors put forward the approach centered on learning, once the two previously presented show setbacks: the approach centered on linguistic items considers the student only when identifying the target situation and the linguistic items related to that situation; an approach centered on strategies considers the students by analyzing their needs and in the analysis of the learning situation. However, the approach centered on learning proposed by the authors considers the student at all phases, from the identification of the target situation to its analysis, analysis of the learning, planning materials and contents, its production, its teaching and evaluation.

The authors call our attention to the complexity of this process, but they also highlight the starting point for the adoption of such an approach is in the complexity of
the leaning process itself. That is why I chose a learning-centered approach for the design of the course reported here. I also took into account the differences between designing an ESP course and a course for specific purposes in the mother tongue.

3. The experience, the participants and the activities

The idea for the project described here arose from my experience as a teacher at a private college in the city of São Paulo, where I was in charge of teaching Portuguese for Academic Purposes in Business Administration and Accounting courses.

Due to my experience with languages for specific purposes teaching and my research in systemic functional grammar, I decided to use both experiences and incorporate them in this course, so I could meet the students’, the teachers’ and the college’s needs by focusing on learning.

As the night shift groups had a larger number of students, I decided to pilot the course with the morning shift group. As there were only 25 students in this group, the material could be designed and piloted, not to mention the possibility of changes should there be any mistakes, problems or inconsistencies. The Accounting course group was also chosen because their curriculum included four classes of 50-minute weekly, whereas in Business Administration they had only half of it, what could influence on the scope of the experience.

The most intrincated aspect when working with genres is the selection of the genres. According to Travaglia (2002, p. 203), two are the challenges for the teacher: the decision for the theory which is going to sustain the classroom practice; and the genres to select, according to the myriad of possible genres in a given social context.

After deciding on a systemic functional approach as the theory underpinning the project, the following step was to select the genres, among those commonly asked by the teachers, required in the academic context meeting students needs more efficiently. So three genres were picked out:

1. summaries;
2. argumentative responses;
3. academic article;

As students have a great deal of texts to read throughout the semester and final exams or term papers are based on these texts, they should be able to retrieve information from the texts, so summaries are used as a tool to store the information required for exams and papers. The argumentative responses were selected mainly due to teachers’ complaint that students are not able to answer questions in exams as effectively as they are expected to. Another related factor is the national exam known as “Provão”, applied by the Ministry of Education aiming to evaluate undergraduate courses, and one of the most common difficulties students face is answering questions based on analysis and reasoning of problems. For this specific genre I used the exams applied in 2002, 2003 and 2004 as well as two other pieces of research which worked with the same genre: Machado (2000), who analysed instructions for the “Provão” in Business Administration, Dentistry, Law, Languages, Journalism, Civil Engineer, Chemical Engineer and Veterinary Medicine and also the research carried out by Fonseca (2002), in which the author studied the genre for Languages, History and Pedagogy courses and, based on them, she proposed an approach aiming at developing
reading and writing skills for that genre, both pieces of research, though, use sociodiscursive interactionism as the underlying theory for their studies.

Finally, the academic article was chosen because teachers constantly assign tasks related to the reading of such articles. It should be pointed out that I worked only with text structure and language, once later in their course students would have a specific subject in which they would be requested to write a final paper under the supervision of one of professors in the course.

Having selected these three genres, the tasks were designed striving to raise students’ awareness to the texts belonging to these genres. I will present three tasks, from three different moments of the course, in order to illustrate how concepts from systemic functional grammar were operationalized and how they were pedagogically implemented, so students would be able to develop the tasks assigned. By operationalized, I mean transforming a theoretical concept into teaching material to be used in the classroom.

(a) Awareness-raising activities

After selecting the three genres, it was necessary to operationalize the concept of genre, as well as the ideas of context of culture and context of situation and other related concepts derived from the systemic functional tradition, such as field, tenor, mode (Halliday and Hasan, 1989) of paramount importance when approaching language systemic functionally. Only then, the genres were introduced to the students so I could later refer to the terminology in activities developed later.

The first awareness-raising activity, aiming at working the concept of genre and as a way of showing them the knowledge they had about genres circulating in their socio-cultural context. Students were given different samples of texts, belonging to several genres, such as: horoscope of a star sign for the day, a prescription, an electronic device manual, a recipe, part of a lease agreement, an excerpt from a chat, a message from a cleaning lady to her employer, an excerpt from the Bible, a message to the boss, a message to the mother and an email message to a friend.

After presenting the sample texts, students were asked to analyze the text from the textual, discursive and generic point of view and, to reach such goals, students should comment on vocabulary, layout, structure, the writer and the reader of each text, the source, the intention, the age group the text was aimed at, grammatical aspects, differences concerning language use or jargons or any other aspect that would call their attention, focusing on why they recognized the texts and indicating the previous knowledge they had about those genres.

As a follow-up for these activities, students should present their results to the group and discuss similarities and differences, but targeting the differences between texts and genres. Up to this point, I worked with the objective of showing them that our daily interactions are based on genres and, while using them, we use our knowledge about genres as well as some knowledge we share with the community we belong to, as suggested by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) and Johns (1997), besides providing students with other tools for their studies, guiding them to realize that the texts they use share common characteristics.

As a supplementary activity, groups analyzed a chapter from a book they used for the other subjects in their curriculum, as a way of understanding how the chapters of the books are organized and they also produced a table comparing the features of the different books. This kind of activity guided them to develop learning strategies to
better use the information for other genres, such as the summary, for example and they ended up paying attention to the role their background knowledge played in their academic life, which was also a way of promoting interdisciplinarity.

The theoretical concepts of genre and register supported these activities. From the pedagogical viewpoint, my aim was to have students understand the role the context play in a text and how context intertwine the text. From the designing point of view, I was trying to bridge the gap between theory and practice, by operationalizing a theoretical construct and transforming it in a practical issue so, in a later moment, I could use it in teaching.

(b) Text and genre awareness-raising activities

Another activity piloted was associated to awareness and handling a text as well as guiding students to notice it belonged to a given genre.

The activity I present below is just a way of showing how students worked with the sample of an academic article form the Accounting area. The focus was on presenting the contextualization of an activity which would be later developed, exploring practical issues, as I show on the following example:

The text you are going to read is the introduction of the academic article Auditing creative accounting, by J.P. Cosenza and I.R.G. Grateron, published in the Brazilian Journal of Accounting, nr. 143. Read it and answer the questions that follow.

**Before** reading the text, answer the following questions:

1. What is the social role of an academic article?
2. Have you ever read an academic article from the Accounting area?
3. Who reads academic articles? Why?
4. Who writes academic articles? Why?
5. Where is it common to find this kind of article?

Now read the text to answer the other questions:

1. How is the text organized from the structure of the paragraphs point of view?  
2. What is the main idea of each paragraph?  
3. Why does auditing have an important role internationally?  
4. The authors say that “the auditing activity is being largely questioned”. Why do these questionings exist?  
5. The authors named 3 objectives for their work. Which are they?  
6. How do they intend to reach these goals?  
7. The authors pointed 3 parameters to discuss the incidences creative accounting practices have over the decision-making process. List them.

The main aim of this activity was to try to make students aware of social and cultural factors related to genre, not to mention the three register variables which also influence the genre, namely, in systemic functional terms: field, tenor and mode (Halliday and Hasan, 1989).

This activity was also intended to help students reflect upon the relationship between genre and text, since the questions to be answered before reading the text were related to genre and the latter to text itself.

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1 The tasks presented here were originally written in Portuguese and were first presented in Vian Jr (2006). They were translated into English only to show the reader how the activities were designed.
(c) Activities dealing with the academic article genre

After the activity dealing with the introduction of an article, students were asked to read the whole article, and then they were to explore the social purpose of the genre, which had been previously analyzed and also the idea that genres are structured in stages was developed, hence it is a socio-semiotic activity in which meaning is gradually constructed, and as so we can not convey meanings simultaneously, once the need for structuring the genre in stages, as proposed by Martin (1992). Here is the activity:

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This activity was also a preparation for the following step, in which the stages structuring the academic article text were dealt with.

Concerning the grammatical items, only aspects of sentence structure and cohesion based on Halliday and Hasan’s 1976 work were dealt with, recovering elements from the structure of the argumentative response, a genre worked before the academic article.

4. Final remarks

My objective in this text was to show how I have worked with systemic functional grammar by operationalizing its use, that is, transforming the theoretical concept in something practical and useful for students. Then, I could later develop its pedagogical implementation, i.e., use those concepts in activities and tasks in the classroom. My intention was, even in a very subtle fashion way, to bridge the gap between theory and practice, between teaching and research.

I presented, specifically, how the concept of genre, according to systemic functional grammar (Halliday and Hasan, 1989), the concept of genre knowledge (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995), from new rhetoric, and the knowledge shared by users of a given genre (Johns, 1997) may be used in the teaching of Portuguese for academic purposes.
While discussing genre-based approaches in the teaching of foreign languages, Ramos (2004) says that although there is much theory about the concept of genre, “not much has been done in the Brazilian context in the field of course design based on genres, mainly for foreign language teaching”. I can add to that, using my own experience as reference, that even less has been done for the operationalization of concepts of the systemic functional theory in the teaching of Portuguese as mother tongue, and an even a lesser amount for the teaching of Portuguese for academic purposes.

What one can see, based on what was presented here, is that the teaching of writing in mother tongue should take into account students’ background knowledge but, on the other hand, it should, at the same time, raise their awareness towards their social roles. Teachers should not insist on a view that language is something apart from the real world or as a set or rules. Language is to be seem as a cohesive and coherent whole, to which several elements belong, such as grammar, but not as an end in itself, but as a means, among other co-textual and contextual elements which contribute to the texture of a text and for communication as a human activity.

Another relevant aspect is the role of research in the learning-teaching of mother tongue, once we need more incentive and development of research to bridge, as I have already pointed out, the gap between theory and practice, between research and teaching, as there seem to be no dialogue in this area in our country.

I do hope the experiences presented here may help other teachers and/or professionals involved in course design to profit from my own experience and, based on their own socio-historical context, may be able to adapt or implement such activities.

References


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2 My free version of the text written in Portuguese.