THE DEVELOPMENT OF A GENRE-BASED WRITING COURSE FOR STUDENTS IN THREE FIELDS

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ABSTRACT: The purposes of this paper are: a) to discuss the procedures for developing a genre-based writing course for graduation students in Dentistry and Genetics; b) to present the steps of production and the methodology used, based on Hyland 2004 and the contents based on Swales and Feak, 1994 and Aranha 2004; c) to raise questions about specific characteristics of each audience and about the (im)possibility of having one single course that preserves the same characteristics (Canagarajah, 2002). The courses had 30 hours each, being organized in classes and online meetings during one semester. The participants should have an intermediate level of English and a paper in course. The participants were expected to work on their own papers in order to have them “ready” for publication at the end. The awareness raised during the process was expected to help further academic paper writing.

KEYWORDS: genre analysis; academic discourse; ESP; EAP

1. Introduction

Published academic papers have been constantly assigned as a key factor in sharing knowledge from research with peers, promoting researchers in their scientific communities and creating a proper environment for discussion. One of the problems faced by novices is to master the academic genre. Bonini and Figueiredo (2006) state that although many of their students are part of a Master’s program, they show little (or no) familiarity with the effective use of scientific discourse. The authors describe a course that aims at developing students’ skills in academic writing in their mother tongue.

It may be said that the constraints of academic writing would create difficulties for authors of any language. No matter the language the text is written, students have to negotiate the genre conventions, knowledge and values of academic writing to struggle for voice. On one hand, novices want and need to have their papers published and, on the other, they are neither aware of how the community conventions work nor of what may be done to develop academic writing skills.

The need to master academic genre is unquestionable but the means to achieve mastery seem to be limited. Graduation courses in Brazil do not include disciplines whose aims are to develop students’ writing skills not even on their mother tongue (being the one described by Bonini and Figueiredo an exception and not part of the regular graduation program), although students are supposed to publish the results of their investigations. Some programs even consider publication as part of the requirements for obtaining the degree. The programs considered in this paper, i.e., graduation courses in Dentistry, Genetics and Biology, require their students to have papers published in English once the student is about to finish his/her graduation program, that is, after two years the Master’s and after four the Ph.D.

In this context, another problem arises. Besides mastering academic genre conventions in their mother tongue, the students are supposed to have studied English before, since when they decide to start their graduate studies, they are supposed to have skills in this language to be used academically. According to Canagarajah (2005, p. 10), “ESOL students are not aliens to the English language or Anglo-American culture anymore”. However, the fact that one is not alien to a language or its culture does not mean that he/she is able to write texts that are even difficult to be produced in his/her own mother tongue. The gap between knowing (though not being alien) and being able to use it properly seem to be huge. Recognizing and
reading academic texts proficiently is not a guarantee that one is able to produce texts that present the constraints of the academic genre and that would be likely to be accepted by the discourse communities.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how one course in academic English writing has suffered modifications based on students’ background knowledge, needs and motivation to develop academic skills.

2. Methodology and Results

Graduation courses in Genetics, Dentistry and Biology at UNESP (São Paulo State University) require students to have reading proficiency when they enter the program. This proficiency is measured by an exam which is responsible for the continuity of the selection process. If the candidate is not approved at this level, he/she automatically fails.

Reading assignments in English are common for the three courses, once most of the references are in English in those areas are in English. Even some Brazilian journals are published in English in these fields. Besides being able to read, at a certain stage of the course students are required to write in English in order to have the results of their researches published.

In this context, a course that would suffice their needs was first demanded by the Dentistry Faculty of Araraquara in 2004. The professors wanted their students to write papers in English and thought that a 30-hour course would do the job.

A genre-based writing course was planned, first supported by Swales and Feak (1994) proposal, ESP needs analysis, and my own experience in teaching scholars in private schools. Later, I recognized that that course seemed to have the advantages presented by Hyland (2004, p.10), i.e., the instructions of the course were explicit, systematic, needs-based, supportive, empowering, critical and consciousness raising.

Classes were divided in eight weeks with four hours of instructions per week. In order to apply for the course, students were required to be developing a paper to be published, so they would be about to accomplish the whole program. Complete results were not necessary, but the research should be in an advanced stage and the methodology should be complete.

The group was composed of 17 students, who had the characteristics required. The classes happened at every fortnight so that students would have time to prepare their homework.

The weeks were planned as follows:

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<th>Week</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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| 1st week | • A needs analysis questionnaire was applied in order to ratify scholars’ thoughts about students’ previous language knowledge and needs. This stage was also important to verify if all the students who applied for the course had completed part of their investigations.  
• In order to make their background knowledge explicit, an activity which included parts from different sections of academic texts in their field was planned. The parts of papers were presented both in Portuguese and in English and students could recognize all of them, independently of the language.  
• The activity above created environment for the presentation of the concepts of genre and discourse community, which were first introduced informally. |
| 2nd week | • The first chapter of Swales and Feak (1994) was presented so as to introduce ideas of audience, purpose and strategy, organization, style and flow. This activity was prepared in power point and included the |
main parts of the chapter selected by the teacher.

- Excerpts of their own field were selected as examples. The activity intended to make students recognize aspects of the ideas presented earlier in texts of their peers. At this point, both Portuguese and English texts were being used, although the book chapter included only examples in English. It was assumed that the understanding of the ideas would be emphasized if both languages were taken into account.
- Discussions of the rationale of academic genre were carried out at different times and awareness about academic constraints and expectations seemed to be rising. Formal definitions of genre and discourse communities were presented based on Swales (1990).

3rd week

- A handout which included the second chapter of Swales and Feak’s book was prepared. The main purpose of this chapter is to work with different sorts of definitions which could be used in different parts of a paper, but mainly in the introduction. This material followed the authors’ proposal and included texts from different fields to introduce the ideas of general/specific texts, different types of definitions and generalizations.
- The activity used as follow-up was to make students write in English for the first time in the course and aimed at making them describe their field of study.

4th week

- All the paragraphs written by the students as homework were presented to the whole class as a way of letting everybody acquainted with the researches being developed by the members of the group.
- A second moment was to brainstorm the parts of an academic paper. Students were aware of the standard parts of a paper and knew that different journals required specific items. An activity which included sentences from the main parts of a research paper, i.e., abstract, introduction, methods, results and discussion was developed. Students were supposed to label sentences according to the parts they were likely to have appeared. Once again, only examples in English and in their field were considered.
- As homework, students were assigned to write the methods and the results of their papers.

5th week

- The methods and results sections previously assigned as homework were brought to class in a floppy disk to be used in the following class.
- The idea of move analysis was introduced and the constraints of academic genre were once again discussed. The rhetoric moves proposed by Bhatia (1993) for abstracts was presented and verified in many published abstracts from their field.
- As homework, students were supposed to bring the abstract of their papers in a disk.

6th week

- Previously prepared by the teacher, the methods and results sections were presented and discussed with the whole class.
- Once the abstracts were brought in disks, the teacher presented them in power point and verified the presence or absence of the four moves presented earlier and discussed the rationale to the understanding of
the whole paper.
- Students were asked to make final arrangements in the sections already studied.

| 7th week | • The idea of moves was elucidated once again and the CARS model (Swales and Feak, 1994) was introduced. The 1994 model was preferred to the 1990 one based on the discussion on Aranha (2004, p. 28-32)
- Different introductions in their own field were discussed. They did not present grammar problems and they were already published.
- As homework, students were supposed to bring the introductions of their papers in a floppy disk. |

| 8th week | • All the introductions were discussed in power point. Most of them did not present move 2 – establishing a niche.
- Each introduction was discussed with its author in further meetings, not previously set by the program. |

The first week was crucial in raising student’s awareness about their background knowledge. Although they could not explain how they recognized the extracts presented both in Portuguese and in English, they did not present difficulties in labeling the different sections. This fact was used to show them how important it is to think about choices when writing their own papers, since in their case, their writing would probably be recognized by their peers in the future.

The second week brought some interesting situations. Some students, especially from the doctorate program, brought papers of their own to share with their classmates. They were critical about them, although many had already been published. They even suggested alterations that might have been used to improve the content.

The third week of the course presented many questions to be solved. First, when texts from other fields were presented, the background knowledge displayed in the first class was not repeated. It was problematic to them to discuss structure, purposes, points of view, organization in texts alien to their fields. The issue seemed to be the content of texts, not the language. Students did not have opinions to share when the subject was not common to them. It is important to mention that they presented low motivation to perform the tasks proposed.

The fourth week was crucial to analyze their own production. It was astounding to verify how they managed the vocabulary, the syntax and the content of their papers. As a one paragraph writing, the results of the activity were promising. Great interest concerning the subjects of some works was obvious. The apathy of the previous class was definitely over.

The fifth week emphasized the fact that some of their previous papers had not been adequately prepared and did not display the language and constraints of the academic genre. Broad discussions were carried out and many examples were brought to class and evaluated by peers. Doctorate students were enthusiastic in re-evaluating their own production and Masters took advantage in the discussion so as not to make the same mistakes. Genre awareness seemed to be improving and students were very motivated.

According to Swales and Feak (2004, p. 159) “the methods is usually the easiest section to write and, in fact, it is often the section that the researchers write first”. As this part of the research was supposed to have been carried out before applying for the course, it was assumed that students would not present difficulties. The methods and results sections presented by the students followed the rhetoric structure of the papers they were used to read. Except for a few grammar inadequacies, such as lack of verb-agreement and the use of passive voice, the texts did not present problems that could impair reading comprehension.
The fact that students were evaluating their own production and that the subject interested most of them was relevant for the success of the class, once most of them participated and contributed.

Bhatia’s (1993, p. 79) proposal for abstract content includes four moves, i.e., introducing purposes, describing methodology, summarizing results and presenting conclusions. Abstracts from published papers presented them in most of the cases, but the ones selected from other students’ papers did not. It was very common to find abstracts with contents proper to introductions – as the establishment of the field-, or with just the methodology move. The awareness of the different occurrences seem to have helped students improve their own, since, at the end, most of final abstracts did present four moves and did not contain any relevant grammar mistake.

According to the model proposed by Swales and Feak (1994), an introduction of an academic paper has three moves\(^1\). The first move (M1) establishes the territory of the research and can be expressed by a review of previous research (considered obligatory to the realization of this move) or by showing that the area of research is central, important, relevant (considered optional). The second move (M2) establishes the niche of the research and is expressed either by a gap, or questions, or by knowledge extension (all obligatory to the realization of the move, but one excluding the other). The third move (M3) occupies the niche previously stated by showing purposes or establishing the nature of the research being presented (obligatory) and by optional occurrences: announcing principal findings or indicating the structure of the paper. The model – Moves in Research Papers Introductions, as proposed by Swales and Feak (1994, p. 175) is described as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move 1</th>
<th>Establishing a research territory</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) showing that the area of study is relevant, important, crucial or making general comments (optional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) introducing or review items of previous research (obligatory)</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Move 2</th>
<th>Establishing a niche</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) indicating a gap in previous research, raising questions about previous research, or expanding previous knowledge. (obligatory)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move 3</th>
<th>Occupying the niche</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) showing purposes or establishing the nature of the research (obligatory)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) announcing principal findings (optional).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) indicating the structure of the research paper. (optional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Move 2 – establishing a niche – is considered the “hinge” that connects M1 – what has already been done – to M3 – what is going to be done by that specific paper (Swales and Feak, 1994, p. 185). During this class, the idea developed by Aranha (2004; 2005) which assumes that a) M2 is the most difficult move in an introduction because it is not short at most times (as suggested by Swales and Feak, 1994, p. 186); b) all the arguments in M1 and M3 depend upon the purpose of M2, i.e., whether M2 is introducing a gap or extending knowledge.

It is important to notice that especially for Masters students, it is very complicated to question established previous research results once they are novices in the discourse community and the risk of being naïve is high. It is safer to continue tradition. Another fact is that the Dentistry program develops some projects to which most of students are related and

\(^1\) Similarly to the model proposed in 1990 (CARS) the model is explained by an ecological metaphor.
the results of their papers will be part of a broader project and, therefore, depend on the
previous works developed by others in the same issue.

At the end of the course, students felt the need for more explicit grammar rules,
although not many problems were detected. Because the group was relatively big, students
also felt the need for more individual attention, as in the class on introduction that was not
scheduled. Most of them had the sections studied ready for publication after long individual
discussions in the introduction sections, mainly considering the need of M2 and the
relationship that this presence would imply.

Genre awareness increased a great deal with this individual work. Demand for more
classes was mentioned by all students but they said they could feel improvement in the way
they wrote and in the way they viewed the use of language for academic purposes. Unfortunately, the discussion section could not be studied, although many students sent theirs
by mail later and I corrected and suggested modifications.

3. Reviewing the results

The ideal design of any course would take into account “what the students know, what
they are able to do, and what they are interested in learning” (HYLAND, 2004, 93). The first
version of the course described in this paper considered this ideal. It was supposed that
students were fully aware of the constraints of the academic genre in their mother tongue and
partially in English, since they could recognize parts of different sections in academic papers,
so, it was assumed that they would be able to write, especially sections as methodology. It
was also assumed that learners were interested in learning due to the pressure for publishing
or perishing. Thus, the problem would be to make them aware of the linguistic constraints in
a foreign language; hence, the problems were expected to be in the language level, in the
realization of the moves through steps and not in the academic genre level. Besides, we
believed that recognizing different parts of academic papers meant being likely to produce
them.

Most of these assumptions were proved wrong but the one concerning students’
interest in learning. However, all of them did not come out of the blue. They were based on
previous work that described workshops in which similar activities were used, i.e., activities
which aimed at recognizing and labeling different sections of academic papers (ARANHA,
2002). This previous experience showed us that students usually knew more than they thought
but could not express this knowledge maybe because of shyness, lack of confidence, fear. In
addition, the absence of foreign language proficiency seemed to prevent them from expressing
themselves. The awareness process of recognition used to make them more confident and
served, at that time, as a positive start for deepening the study of academic texts.

Unfortunately, a clear separation between the other’s academic discourse (the one
students were used to reading) and one’s own (the one students were expected to produce)
was evident after the end of the first course. Canagarajah (2005, p.17) states that “ESOL
writers have to be made reflexively aware of the medium they are using, developing a critical
understanding of its potentialities and limitation as they appropriate and reconstruct the
language to represent their interests”. It was realized that being aware did not mean being
“reflexively aware”; therefore, it seemed that the reflexive part somehow depended upon
considering academic discourse part of their lives and not something that belonged to the
other, i.e., the authors they were expected to read.

The following assumptions served as basis for the reformulation of the course:

a) The act of recognizing (reading) is different from the act of producing (writing)
academic genre regardless language;
b) Students needed more individual attention, once the subject was crucial for the understanding of linguistic and discourse aspects;

c) Students seemed to have very different linguistic background knowledge, although all of them had been previously considered competent by an entrance test, so more grammar and vocabulary were essential for writing production.

In other words, it was assumed that their alleged background in reading could not definitely contribute to their production and different linguistic background needed particular attention, forms of correction and awareness raising.

3.1 Some improvements based on results

The course “Redação Acadêmica em Língua Inglesa” was offered in 2005 for the graduation course in Genetics at Instituto de Biociências, Letras e Ciências Exatas at UNESP, São José do Rio Preto as an elective course required by its coordinator.

The schedule of the course was maintained, with classes every other week. The first week and the second weeks were condensed into only one, once the needs analysis questionnaire was asked to be answered at home and sent by mail until the end of the first week to serve as a guide for the following classes. Students were also asked to send their methodology part to be discussed in class without previous explanation. The methodology was changed once Dentistry students had showed little problems with this section. Thus, it was assumed that this part would not contain basic mistakes. Moreover, it was assumed that students’ linguistic background knowledge would allow them to write this part properly.

Once the questionnaires arrived, it was detected that this group had lower knowledge of the language than the one in Dentistry. Besides, they did not have as much contact with papers published in English as the other group. Their methodology part expressed exactly that, with mistakes that ranged from basic noun-verb agreement to complete unexpected syntax and vocabulary inadequacies. Some examples:

1) The Schiff’s reactive were throw out and the gels washed with sodium metabissulfit at 0,5% overnight.

In this example, a basic lack of noun-verb agreement can be detected in the use of were instead of was to agree with a singular subject. Besides, in vocabulary level, the use of throw out in order of discard shows little or no awareness of academic constraints in relation to proper register. Another point to be considered is the misplacement of the adverb overnight. Examples with the same type of occurrence were common.

2) We added 0,8g basic fucsin and 1,6g sodium metabissulfit 200mL HCl solutions. This mixture was shaked for two hours at environmental temperature in the dark and conserved this manner overnight. After this we added at solution 2,0g active coal filtered and stocked at 2°C. Subsequently were proceeded like in Ceron et al. (1992), to keep the gels permanent.

In this example, the use of an active subject – we – in the methodology part shows that the writer is not acquainted with reading this section or does not pay attention to the language used. Many occurrences of interlanguage can be detected as in the conserved this manner which would be a literal translation from Portuguese. The absence of subject as in Subsequently were proceeded may also have been influenced by Portuguese and by lack of awareness. More basic mistakes as the use of the verb shake as a regular verb can also be noticed.
The following issues had to be considered before the course could continue:

a) After the first class, it was noticed that students did not have a well developed level of English language to start studying genre in English. Genre, as a concept, would have to be introduced in texts in Portuguese.

b) Twenty-six remaining hours would be insufficient to develop a paper as a whole, although many of the students were in the last year and needed to have their papers done. It had to be clear that the proposal they applied for had to be changed.

c) The grammar points which had been previously selected for this course, based on the requirements from Dentistry students, would have to be expanded and more detailed, because a wider knowledge had been taken into account.

The second week began as a result of the evaluation of these issues. Students were made aware of the limitations of the course and the impossibility of having their papers ready for publication after finishing it due to lack of hours in the course. It was stated that they would have to spend more time on their papers than they had expected outside class. Although they had their researches almost finished and were about to end the course, English and genre were subjects to be discussed and implemented before they risk submitting their papers to be published. It seemed that papers had been just translated from Portuguese and it might be concluded that they did not look like an academic paper not even in students’ mother tongue.

Awareness raising about genre was carried out in texts in Portuguese in order to let students recognize the differences between the language they spoke and the language they were supposed to write. Besides, much reading of papers was assigned and students were asked to find out characteristics that seemed singular to the genre. What was considered unnecessary for Dentistry students had to be emphasized for Genetics ones.

The following weeks suffered reformulation in terms of methodology as well. Two classes on grammar were planned and included items as passive voice, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, countable and non-countable nouns, sentence order, parallelism. As far as possible, examples were taken from their own methodology section sent in the first class. An accurate selection was made based on the “language focus” sections from Swales and Feak (1994) and from Aranha’s (2004) results about transitivity and verb usage.

The classes were divided in two moments: in the first, students brought questions and findings from the papers they read and, in the second, it was time for the teacher to present the selected material. After three classes that concentrated mainly on awareness raising about genre and discourse communities and how language plays a role in both, the methodology was supposed to be rewritten for the fourth class. It was expected that students had realized how they could improve that part.

The ideas of audience, purpose and strategy, organization, style and flow, formerly part of the second class, were just introduced in the fourth class, before each section was discussed and reviewed by all students. Style and flow could then be analyzed in their own texts. Students showed to be more aware of their own production and of the need of improving their background knowledge to start writing about their research. Language was not alien just because it was a foreign one but because it belonged to a specific genre. The awareness that discourse conventions must help publishing results of research, introducing them to discourse communities, stating points of view and being heard and read was crucial for the students.

The following classes (from the 5th to the 8th) focused basically on two sections: abstracts and introductions. Students’ productions were brought to class and served as examples for discussions about appropriateness, context and mutual understanding. The idea of background information required by different audiences was extensively discussed because selecting information was considered a crucial aspect by the whole group. Texts were rewritten many times and in some cases not only for meeting teacher’s demands, when there
were, but for reformulating papers considered inadequate by their own authors after discussions and awareness raising. The fact that students read and reread their own work contributed a lot for the final quality of the sections.

4. Final Remarks

It is safe to say that there was an increasing interest in the studies of genre in these academic contexts, once the concept improved the texts of scholars a great deal. The boundaries between genre and register, or rather, between language appropriateness and information selection and organization are still open and need further research.

Another point to be emphasized is the fact that pedagogical genre potential may vary according to the proficiency in the language texts are written, but the awareness of the concept of genre would help any scholar to write, seek to publish and perish less.

References