

Article

Genre Pedagogy and Bilingual Graduate Students' Academic Writing

Teresa Morell *  and Susana Pastor Cesteros 

Universidad de Alicante, 03690 San Vicente del Raspeig, Spain; spc@ua.es

* Correspondence: mt.morell@ua.es; Tel.: +34-590-3439

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Abstract: Genre pedagogy plays an important role in helping graduate students to enter the discourse community of their fields. Although familiarity with research genres benefits graduate students, few studies have explored the influences of instruction on learners' subsequent generic practices. In this study, we describe the genre-based approach used in a bilingual (English and Spanish) Applied Linguistics graduate course, which aimed to enhance students' research genre awareness to allow them to be better able to confront their own work as investigators. The description of the course is followed by a study to determine if and how a research article discourse analysis task influenced the students' academic writing in their own papers. Our research question was the following: To what extent can course instruction influence students' academic writing? The study entails a survey to elicit students' perspectives on the influence of the course and its tasks on their academic writing, as well as teachers' comments on the students' written work. Although learning to do research at the graduate level requires a broad range of competencies that go beyond genre awareness, the findings from the survey confirmed the positive effects of genre knowledge gains in accomplishing further research goals.

Keywords: research article; genre analysis; academic writing; genre awareness raising; genre pedagogy; biliteracy

1. Introduction

Academic genre awareness plays a crucial role in the possibility for graduate students to enter the discourse community of their fields. Novice researchers need to be trained as genre and discourse analysts, so as to become more aware of the socially recognized ways of using language in specific contexts [1–5]. This awareness or familiarity of the academic genres of the particular disciplines may be brought about by the use of a genre-based approach in classroom instruction. Genre pedagogy or genre instruction, according to Hyland [4] (p. 50), pulls together language, content and contexts, while offering teachers a means of presenting students with explicit and systematic explanations of the ways to write works to communicate.

The work on academic genre pedagogy in English and Spanish has been quite profuse in recent years, more than likely due to the increasing numbers of novice researchers and teachers in the two languages. In the case of English, its status as the lingua franca for international academic communication suffices to justify this proliferation [6], whereas in the case of Spanish in Europe and in South America, the increasing number of university exchange students that take courses in Spanish has prompted studies that seek to provide discourse and genre models from linguistic, pragmatic and sociocultural perspectives [7–9]. These two academic languages, English and Spanish, are the focus of this study, in which a genre approach is put into practice to aid students to improve their academic written biliteracy. In the particular case of the bilingual Applied Linguistics graduate course presented here, the participants had some prior experience in teaching either of the two languages, but hardly

any background in doing research. Therefore, they needed to be trained to carry out their own studies and final master's thesis. Consequently, the students' need to improve their research competences, and our wish to fulfill their needs prompted this study, which presents the genre-based course and explores the effects of a research article analysis task (in English) on our graduate students' academic writing (in Spanish).

Academic genre pedagogy in Spanish, although not as long in tradition or as broad as in English, has recently taken on an important role. This predominance owes much to Vázquez, who in 2001 directed ADIEU (*Akademischer Diskurs in der Europäischen Union*), the first European Project on Spanish academic discourse. As a result of Vázquez's pioneering work on this project, for the first time, Spanish academic guides on writing and speaking were published [10–12]. From this time on, as a result of the growing interest in the academic genres used at universities where Spanish is the main vehicular language, several publications have focused on Spanish academic genres in general [13–17], and particularly for non-natives [18], due to the internationalization of the Hispanic universities. Studies specifically on academic writing are predominant [19,20], probably because this is the predominant skill at Spanish universities.

Regarding the genre of research articles in Spanish, several books have been welcomed by the diverse disciplines of the sciences, e.g., [21], and those of psychology and education, e.g., [22]. However, for the purposes of this study, we particularly mention the work of Gallardo [23] on university papers and how they can be helpful in training to write research articles, and that of García Negroni [24] about expressing subjectivity in Spanish research articles. With regard to writing abstracts for research articles, there are also several publications with guidelines [25,26].

In Anglophone academic contexts, in recent years, there have been a number of studies that have dealt with building genre awareness [5,27–34], the effects of genre instruction [35,36], genre knowledge recontextualization [30,37], and approaches to genre tasks in diverse disciplines [38]. In addition, others have looked into academic biliteracy; e.g., Martin Martin [39], Gentil [40], Canagarajah [41], Mein [42], and Pérez-Llantada [43]. Nevertheless, as far as we know, there have not been any academic biliteracy studies on the transfer of generic gains from one language to another as a result of bilingual academic instruction.

The present study aims to explore the effects of a research article genre-analysis task, in English, on the academic writing in Spanish of 29 bilingual Applied Linguistics graduate students. The following two research questions guided this study:

1. To what extent can research article genre knowledge gains support students to report on their own research?
2. Can research article genre awareness be transferred from one language to another?

2. Methodology

2.1. The Course and the Participants

The 29 participants of this study were between the ages of 23 and 35; the majority of them (25) were L1 Spanish students with English as their L2. In nearly all cases, they were proficient users of English (C1, according to the Common European Framework Level of Languages—CEFR) and Spanish natives. The remaining four participants were L1 English students with Spanish as their L2. They were enrolled in the Applied Linguistics for Second Languages and Research Methodology core module of the Master of Spanish and English as Second/Foreign Languages at the University of Alicante in Spain. In this master's program, students are trained to teach and to do research in Spanish and English. In addition, they are required to do practice teaching and a master's thesis in either of the two languages. Therefore, academic writing in both languages is needed.

The Applied Linguistics course, within which the study took place, is team-taught by the authors of this paper—a native Spanish-speaking professor and a native English-speaking professor.

The module aims to familiarize students with second-language learning theories, language teaching and research methodologies in both languages.

2.2. Data Collection

The study was conducted during the 15-week fall semester Applied Linguistics course of the 2013–2014 academic year. In this genre-based course, students are required to carry out two main tasks. The first is an analysis of a research article and the second is a group research project on one of the topics of the course. To explore the effects of the tasks on the students' research article genre awareness and to determine if this awareness could be transferred from one language to the other, we carried out a survey and carefully analyzed the students' written work.

2.3. Description of the Implemented Genre Approach

In designing the genre-based approach for the course, we took into account Tardy's [5] (pp. 261–270) framework for moving toward expert genre knowledge by drawing on students' prior experience, providing repeated practice with textual and oral interactions, as well as mentoring and disciplinary participation. In addition, we followed the recommendations found in [4] about how to implement genre pedagogies through the following key elements or stages of learning: (1) planning, (2) sequencing, (3) supporting, and (4) assessing.

- (1) *Planning learning*: To establish the what and how of the course, we carried out a needs analysis, which made clear to us that the students' had some experience with the language teaching genres, e.g., lesson plans and syllabus designs, but were lacking in their familiarity with the research genres, e.g., research articles. Secondly, we decided how we would involve the students in the analysis of the research article and in the design of their final project.
- (2) *Sequencing learning*: To sequence the genres of study, we determined the most critical skills or functions relevant to the students' immediate needs within the master's program, and attempted to follow the order of the set of genres followed by researchers in Applied Linguistics for teaching second/foreign languages [4] (p. 156). Thus, we decided to focus on the research article genre using a top-down task-based approach. For the pre-task, the students were asked to look for a research article from an international Applied Linguistics journal in English and to analyze it. For this analysis, the students were instructed to read recommended course materials [44] and [23], and to have participated in an interactive lecture using a sample research article and an explanatory PowerPoint about the macrostructure and microstructures of research articles. The participants worked in pairs to deduce the macrostructure; for example, the typical introduction–methodology–results–discussion (IMRD) format, or other common formats such as those with a specific section for the literature review (ILMRD), or those that join results and discussion and add conclusions (IM[RD]C). In addition, we wanted them to become more aware of the possible moves (e.g., Swale's CARS—create a research space—for the introduction section) found within each of the parts, and the microstructure or academic language used (i.e., verb tenses, passive voice, discourse markers, citations, hedging, etc.). Each student was then asked to analyze a research article (RA), written in English, of their choice and to hand in a copy of their discourse analysis based on the instructions and guiding questions found in Supplementary Materials. In the meantime, they were asked to prepare for the main task by forming groups of 3–5 students to design and do research on one of the topics of the module. Once they had completed the research, they were to write it up as a research article in Spanish, following through with the more commonly established Swalesian IMRD structure.
- (3) *Supporting learning*: In line with Hyland [4] (p. 158), in this genre-based course, we gave "considerable recognition to the importance of collaboration or peer interaction, and scaffolding or teacher supported learning". The collaborative work entailed interactive lectures, pair-work activities and group tasks, whereas the scaffolding involved aiding the students' in their choice

of RA, holding discussions on Swales & Feak's course book [44] and Gallardo's chapter [23], and providing explicit instruction and models of the macro and micro features of the genre.

- (4) *Assessing learning*: For the assessment, we attempted to follow through with Hyland's [4] (p. 163–166) basic principles of explicitness, being integrative and relevant, combining competencies and evaluating the students when they were prepared for it. From the start of the course, the students were informed that assessment would be based on our criteria for analyzing and producing effective academic research papers (Supplementary Materials). The same criteria were used for the research article analysis as for the final project, which was meant to have the same overall format.

2.4. The Survey

The survey (Supplementary Materials) that we carried out at the end of the course aimed to find out the students' perspectives on their RA genre awareness gains, the effects of the RA analysis task on the design of their group research project, and the possible transferability from English to Spanish. The questionnaire was responded to by 29 of the 31 students of the 2013–2014 Applied Linguistics subject, which represents 94% of the participants. The responses were gathered according to the four issues of our concern: namely, (1) prior experience with reading RAs, (2) the usefulness of course resources and activities for RA genre awareness gains, (3) the relevance of the research article analysis task for the design and writing of the group project, (4) the possible transfer of the RA genre features from English to Spanish.

3. Results

3.1. Survey Results

3.1.1. Prior Experience with Reading RAs

Nearly half of the participants (48%) had never read a research article (RA) before taking this course, and of the remaining 52% who had read some, only a small number (28%) could be considered somewhat familiar with them. In any case, the majority were unaware of their structure and had never carried out a discourse analysis prior to this course. Consequently, many claimed to have difficulty understanding them before having done the RA analysis task. With regard to the languages used in the articles that some had read, 56% had read them in English, 31% in Spanish and English, and none had read exclusively in Spanish. In addition, the major reason given (75%) for having read RAs was to do a paper during their undergraduate studies, whereas 19% had consulted articles to obtain information about a specific topic.

3.1.2. Usefulness of Course Resources and Activities

To determine the usefulness of the course activities, we asked about the three main resources: (a) the bibliography, (b) the class instructions, and (c) the multimedia slides. Regarding the recommended bibliography, we wanted to know if they had read the recommended materials, and in which language(s). Due to the bilingual character of the master's program and the specific subject within which this study took place, the recommended bibliography was in both Spanish and English. The latter was based on the classic Swalesian structure, moves, and lexicogrammatical features found in RAs [44], whereas the former focused on Gallardo's [23] and Otañi's [25] chapters, which also describe the structure of a monograph and explain how to produce an effective abstract. We found that 62% had read the recommended bibliography only in English, whereas 38% had read it in Spanish and English. Each of the references was highly regarded by the students not only for this assignment, but also for their work in other subjects. Therefore, we may claim that their overall evaluation of the readings was positive, regardless of the language in which they were written.

With regard to the other two resources, i.e., class instructions and multimedia slides, 96% stated that class explanations had been beneficial, and 89% claimed that they had made use of the audiovisual materials (i.e., PowerPoint slides). According to several survey participants, the visual support helped them to better understand the references they had read, and they had made use of them for other subjects of the master.

3.1.3. Relevance of the Research Article Analysis Task for the Design and Writing of the Group Project

The majority of the students claimed that after having done the analysis of the selected article, they believed that they were much more aware of the features of RAs, and consequently were able to identify their parts and to better understand them. In response to the question of whether having read and analyzed a RA had, or had not, helped them to write their own, 97% claimed that it had. Many commented that the task had enabled them to better establish the macrostructures of their own papers, as well as the moves to be included in each part.

3.1.4. Possible Transfer of the RA Genre Features from English to Spanish

The aforementioned bilingual character of the subject implies that some of the activities are done in one language and some in the other. In this case, the first task, the RA reading and analysis, was done in English and the second task, the group project, was carried out in Spanish. Therefore, from the outset, we were concerned with the transferability of the genre gains between languages. When we asked the students if they had had any problems with reading and understanding in one language, and then applying what they had learned to write in the other language, 89% stated that they had had no problems whatsoever. Furthermore, 93% believed that they had been able to transfer what they had learned in one language to produce their own writing in the other language. However, this transfer of genre gains was at the macro-level and not at the lexicogrammatical or micro-level. This was expressed by one of the participants, as follows:

We must take into account that English and Spanish use different syntactic structures, which we must have clear when writing this kind of texts. It is possible to transfer what is learned from one to the other as far as the overall structure is concerned, but not the language, because the lexicogrammatical aspects are different.

In the same manner in which we assessed the macrostructural features, we evaluated the specific language use with item 4 of the grid (Supplementary Materials). The most common errors were related to citing, quoting, referencing, and linguistic style.

4. Discussion

On the whole, the 29 participants' responses to the questionnaire (Supplementary Materials) have confirmed our convictions regarding the advantages of improved genre knowledge in accomplishing further research goals. All students highly valued the task of analyzing a RA and many claimed that it had helped them in various ways. Their positive feedback on the task referred to the following aspects: locating articles, becoming aware of the diverse types of articles, designing and structuring their own papers, imitating writing styles, and enhancing their own discourse analysis. As a consequence of the task, they stated that they felt more confident to write not only their group project, but also their final master's thesis. In general, the students claimed that the most outstanding support for their writing came from their understanding of the possible moves of each section of the article and the general macrostructure (or information structure). The results obtained from the survey and the interviews were backed up by the comparison and assessment of the students' performance on the two tasks, where we noted that the errors were mostly found within the microstructure (or lexicogrammatical aspects) and the references, but not especially among the macrostructure or the moves. However, we cannot be excessively optimistic concerning students' gains in academic writing abilities. Our careful analysis and evaluation of students' performance on the individual RA

analysis tasks (Supplementary Materials) was generally better than on their group research project, which involved a much more complex process that included, for example, reading with a critical perspective, relating and summarizing the state of the art, selecting appropriate methods, interpreting data, developing rhetorical and strategic competences, etc. Therefore, we believe, as do Artemeva & Fox [29], that students' learned ability to identify and characterize textual features seems to be a requirement; however, it does not guarantee success in their academic writing.

Nevertheless, students' responses to the questions about the usefulness of the class activities, recommended bibliography, on-line materials and classroom instructions demonstrated not only the students' positive feedback and evaluation of the overall implemented methodology, but also their perceived gains in RA genre knowledge. In this case, much like in Chang and Kuo's [35] and Huttner et al.'s [36] studies, the hypothesis of the positive effects of a genre-based approach may be confirmed. Although our model of genre pedagogy was used for a specific graduate course in Applied Linguistics, it could be adapted to other contexts. This is a reasonable claim if we consider that the graduate students of this particular study have the same needs as many others, namely to become critical readers of the bibliography, to be capable of carrying out their own studies and, in essence, to enter the discourse community of researchers of their field.

Concerning the transferability of RA awareness gains from one language to the other, the majority of the students believed that reading in one language and writing in another does not cause much difficulty, as long as the writer is proficient in the two languages. Furthermore, they believe that it is possible to transfer some genre concepts from one language to the other, despite the differences in academic traditions. However, many underlined the fact that, when writing for academic purposes, the lexicogrammatical aspects are unique in each language and, thus, careful attention must be paid to the linguistic elaboration of the discourse. Consequently, we might affirm that RA genre features at the global level could possibly be transferrable, but not at the linguistic level. Therefore, further studies on how to teach the microstructural aspects are needed. However, prior to focusing on the pedagogy, corpora that gather academic writing by L1 and L2 writers, such as the Spanish English Research Corpus (SERAC) [43], could be useful to determine how the academic community does, in fact, communicate their research through the information structure, as well as the formulaic expressions, syntactic structures, hedging, etc.

Among the limitations of our work, we might point out that it was carried out with only one group of students within one specific MA program and context. Further research could take into account a control group working in one language versus an experimental group in both. Nevertheless, in previous academic years, we had piloted the same study and had found similar results. Consequently, we might claim, as in [31–33] and [5], that a genre-based approach proves to be beneficial for graduate students' gains in academic literacy.

As do Chang and Kuo [35], we suggest that a genre-based approach to the information structure (i.e., macrostructure) of RAs is effective for developing genre awareness. Furthermore, much like [42], we point to the possibility of transferring genre awareness from one language to another. However, further work on bilingual corpora may broaden the view of the needs of novice L1 or L2 speakers of English or Spanish in native-speaking or in L2 academic contexts concerning aspects of microstructure transferability. We hope that the present study may contribute to further research in genre pedagogy, especially in multilingual university settings [45], where students are required to develop their academic biliteracy.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at <http://www.mdpi.com/2304-6775/7/1/8/s1>.

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