

A CASE STUDY IN GENRE PEDAGOGY: ACADEMIC WRITING FOR UNDER-GRADUATE STUDENTS*

Vivian Bernardes Margutti – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

ABSTRACT: This is a case study that takes into account the four-month experience with the Academic Writing classes given to English major students. It is grounded on the perspective of genre pedagogy, which regards writing as a purposeful and situated social practice, intended for a specific audience. In addition to that, writing is seen as an ongoing process of thinking and rewriting, opposing the traditional view of writing as a final product. In relation to second language teaching, genre pedagogy is associated to Vygotskian thoughts, that consider the relevance of collaboration (peer interaction) and scaffolding (teacher-supported feedback). In order to facilitate collaborative interaction amongst the participants, Web resources such as e-mail messages, Facebook groups and Wikispaces were used. The results were positive in terms of learning and meaningful academic writing productions.

KEYWORDS: Genre pedagogy. L2 writing. Social-cultural contexts. Web resources.

INTRODUCTION

Genre pedagogy brings forth a different awareness of writing, which results in innovations in L2 teaching methodologies. On the basis of this pedagogy is the notion that writing is an inherently social practice intended for a particular audience, being thus a situated and purposeful interaction. A genre, therefore, is an abstract, socially acknowledged way of using language for a varied number of purposes. Some examples of genres would be e-mail messages, recipes, love letters, blogs, homepages, and so on. A skilful writer, then, is able to identify and reproduce the discursive, semiotic and linguistic features used in each specific genre. In addition, writing is seen as thinking processes, in opposition to the prevailing idea of it as a product: a one draft written text.

In terms of teaching L2 writing, current theories of learning are followed, mostly grounded on Vygotskian views, highlighting, therefore, the importance of collaboration (peer interaction) and scaffolding (teacher-supported feedback). As well as that, students are motivated to follow a number of steps in order to develop their written texts, such as: brainstorming to generate ideas, planning, undertaking an ongoing process of writing

* Acesso ao registro da comunicação em Fórum: <<http://www.textolivre.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=3852>>.

(drafting, rewriting, reviewing, getting feedback, scaffolding), and finally publishing the final version of the text.

This study is concerned with the procedures and results of a practical experience with genre pedagogy, which took place in Faculdade de Letras (FALE) at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), in an Academic Writing class for undergraduate students. The objective of the course was to help students understand the specific content and structure of three academic genres: biodatas, Power Point (PPT) presentations and essays. Students were instructed to work collaboratively and to receive feedback from peers in order to improve their texts to the point that they could be published. In order to facilitate interaction amongst the participants, Web resources such as e-mail messages, Facebook¹ groups and Wikispaces² were used throughout the process.

PROCEDURES

The Academic Writing course is a compulsory subject for the English major at FALE/UFMG. It lasts four months, with two lessons a week, one being face-to-face, and the other online. The classes for the semester in question were planned under the supervision of PhD Professor Reinildes Dias. A site was created in order to organize and share the course material. The chosen academic genres were ordered in relation to the level of difficulty. The first one that was produced was the biodata, followed by the PPT presentations and the essays. Initially, students were presented to each particular genre and they analyzed the structure, the linguistic aspects and the content of model texts. The professor also gave explanatory guidance, followed by instructions on how students should undertake the writing process, including peer editing and teacher's scaffolding.

The biodatas were paragraph long texts, first written individually, and then read by a peer, who suggested changes that were either accepted or not and, finally, edited by the professor, totaling a number of three drafts of the same text. The interactions took place via e-mail messages and the final versions were posted on a Flickr album,³ along with the students' photos.

The PPT presentations were prepared in groups of four to five members and were based on readings about "How to Prepare an Effective PPT Presentation". Some of the sources were suggested by the professor, but the students themselves were prompted to

1 Facebook is a social networking service, for which users register, create a personal profile and add other users as friends. It is possible to exchange messages and send automatic notifications to users' friends. Additionally, users may join common-interest user groups, organized by workplace, school or college, amongst others.

2 Wikispaces is a Private Label that can be used for educational purposes. It is a secure wiki environment where the participants can share texts, images and videos, being able to collaborate by editing, commenting and complementing each other's work.

3 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/academicwritingm4a/sets/72157627548451682/> and <http://www.flickr.com/photos/academicwritingm4a/sets/72157627564703020/>

conduct research on the internet about the topic. The interaction amongst peers took place in Voy Forums that were created for the same purpose. This type of reflective task was very effective because students were taken to act autonomously as actual participants in the learning process. Since they had a good foundation of the points they had to cover, especially because all students presented about the same topic, they were able to critically evaluate their oral performances.

The next step was to understand more about academic and reflective writing, the writing process and collaborative work. Each group was asked to analyze a specific chapter of an open textbook called *Writing Spaces*, and to prepare an effective PPT presentation based on it. The objective of this task, other than consolidate what was previously learnt about PPT slides and oral presentations, was for students to get prepared for developing an argumentative essay, through critical reading and a thorough understanding of source texts. Most of the online interactions were transferred to Facebook groups, because students found the Voy Forums unattractive and difficult to deal with. Their improvements in the actual oral presentations were perceptive. All sets of slides were made available to the whole class mostly via slideshare.⁴

After the tasks took place, the groups were ready to begin writing their essays collaboratively. This part of the course used mainly the procedures described on the chapter of *Writing Spaces* Volume 2, entitled *Walk, Talk, Cook, Eat: A Guide to Using Sources*. Each verb used in the title is a metaphor for a step towards argumentative writing. *Walk* refers to the movement of looking for the sources; *talk* is related to reading texts critically and developing a dialogue with the chosen authors; *cook* is about the process of putting ideas together with the objective of developing an argumentative essay; and *eat* is making the knowledge gained in the process become part of what you are, using it practically and sharing it with others.

The groups of students were given a set of coordinated tasks related to the metaphors described above. A Wikispace⁵ was created for each class with the objective of facilitating the process of sharing and editing written work. All the pages belonging to a group were tagged together under the same name. Students were taught how to create new pages and how to tag them. In addition, they were given instructions on how to keep the space organized as they did each proposed activity. The online discussions continued to take place in Facebook and e-mail messages.

This was one of the most interactive and engaging part of the course, because the students were involved in a big and challenging project that took them roughly two months to accomplish. The written essays underwent many revisions until they were finally adequate in terms of content, structure and linguistic elements. Many options for publishing the texts were considered, until the group finally decided to create the Academic Writing Journal, consisting of all the final essays written as articles. The compilation is still under revision to be

4 All the material produced by the students can be accessed on the Wikispaces links.

5 <http://academicwritingm4a.wikispaces.com/>
<http://academicwritingm4b.wikispaces.com/>
<http://academicwritingn4.wikispaces.com/>

published soon. The idea is that the resulting journal be used with future students of the same subject as model argumentative texts.

One of the tasks that the groups were asked to do was to write a Letter of Intentions, covering what they initially planned to write, how the essay was collaboratively elaborated and their opinion about the final result. Most of the letters reflect a smooth and enriching process of knowledge construction in a social context, similar to Vygotsky's views on education.

CONCLUSION

The experience with the Academic Writing class is an example of the innovations brought by genre pedagogy. The notion that writing is an inherently social practice is very useful for teachers and students, because through simple questioning and a careful analysis of a set of texts belonging to a certain genre, it is possible to understand who the text is intended for, what is its type of content and what the linguistic structures involved in the production of the specific genre are. In addition, the idea of writing as thinking processes gives students an opportunity to improve and learn from their own and from their peer's writing. The use of technology is also very useful for interaction amongst the participants, and also for a good organization of a long oriented process.

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