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## Genre-based Writing Instruction and Learning

Roger Palmer\*

### 【Abstract】

This report describes a paper on genre-based writing presented at the National Conference of the Japan Association of Language Teaching (JALT), and gives a brief introduction to the project of which it forms a part. The ideas presented here relate to preliminary observations within an ongoing, two-year-long research project, funded by the Konan University Research Group (*Sogo Kenkyuu*). This research seeks to foster improvements in the teaching and learning of Second Language (L2) writing, and to this aim investigates the ‘Impact on the L2 Writing Ability of Learners by Explicit Teaching of an ICT-mediated Genre-based Approach to Writing.’ It argues that approaches to the teaching and learning of L2 writing hitherto have failed to create enough fluent English communicators in the realm of written discourse, and that what is required is to restore the link between reading and writing, with a greater and clearer emphasis on purpose and audience. Explicit genre-based writing instruction may help learners produce written output demonstrating genre familiarity and knowledge that gives evidence of improved ability in L2 writing.

### 【Keywords】

genre-based approach to writing; Second Language (L2); Information and Communications Technology (ICT); mediation

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- 2 Why genre?
- 3 Teaching and learning through a genre-based approach to writing
- 4 Mediating using technology
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## **1. Introduction**

Several of the main ideas in this paper were contained in an oral presentation under the title, *Genre-based Writing: Learning with Mediation*, delivered at the JALT National Conference in Tokyo in November 2011. Those ideas in turn were first put forward in a workshop, *Teaching Writing through the Genres*, conducted by the author as part of a teacher-training seminar in Kyrgyzstan in September 2011, also under the auspices of JALT.

This ongoing project is being carried out in a Japanese high school and university, in collaboration with researchers at an Indonesian university who are working with a team of local high school teachers. Those teachers are expected to visit Japan to observe classes, while members of the team working in Japan are planning to observe classes in Indonesia. Thus not only is there a cross-fertilization of ideas, but also following Lantolf (2000) a formula for research to find its way into teaching and for teaching practices to inform and feed back into research.

Genre-based pedagogy applied to the teaching of writing lies at the core of the instructional and research efforts outlined above. Bruce (2008) discusses a framework for the teaching of academic writing via what he refers to as social and cognitive genres, in which differing communicative goals for a variety of learners (e.g., for undergraduate as opposed to postgraduate courses) require different focuses and emphases. The distinction between genres as either social or cognitive, however, remains conceptual and has not gained widespread acceptance in genre theory. Researchers such as Bax (2011) have managed to circumvent this theoretical divide by limiting the scope of the discussion to the social processes at work in genres, specifically in the ways they are shared among members of the same speech community, arguing for their definition by the context within which they operate, rather than the formal descriptions which are frequently assigned to them.

This paper addresses the problem of students' L2 communicative ability in writing English which is situated in the kinds of social processes alluded to above. It considers why genre might deserve more attention in writing, how an explicit teaching of a genre-based approach to writing could work,

some possible gains for those learning via a genre-based approach to writing, and some future directions for technological mediation.

## **2. Why genre?**

According to Duke et al (2012), genre can be defined as “a recurring and recognizable communication with particular communicative purposes and particular features to accomplish those purposes.” Hence not only are genres a resource to which a learner turns when writing in order to get things done, they provide a menu of solutions that can be called upon to satisfy varying needs in those recurring situations referred to in the definition (Hyland, 2004).

Much has been written about reestablishing the connection between reader and writer that has been lost in the teaching of L2 writing (Hyland, 2009). Any writer is dependent on an audience, and addresses the message to a perceived reader, hoping and expecting the reader to engage with their written message; and the reader wishes to interpret the writer’s purpose in their own way, without losing sight of what the writer is trying to convey. It follows that the writer may be more likely to succeed in that aim with a clear purpose, and also by predicting what the reader is expecting to read (Hyland, 2009). The reader can base these kinds of predictions on knowledge of similar kinds of texts that he or she has read before. In a study involving discourse analysis of language used in the classroom, Wennerstrom (2003) offers the example of a recipe for rhubarb cake. Upon engaging with the text as a familiar genre, the reader can be expected to identify it, to know almost instantaneously that it is beyond doubt a recipe, to be able to respond to it, and - crucially for the current research - to be able to make her own written text of the same type which would be immediately identifiable to other readers as a recipe. That is precisely what is meant by the connection between reader and writer.

Writing has often been taught in either a mechanical or process-oriented way, focusing mainly on organization, of how to structure papers, of deciding what to write about, of choosing how to express thoughts on paper (Hyland, 2004). At times, it appears that some of these undefined choices and decisions may be simply too difficult for non-native writers to gain expertise in. They cannot be expected to possess an awareness of the L2 writing to which their instructor is directing them without additional help or genre knowledge. Compounding this, there are clear and obvious dangers inherent in program-driven needs, such as the imperative to fit students into performing to a certain level on standardized tests such as the iBT TOEFL, which can push writing into a box as a skill to be practiced in a controlled, repetitive, mechanistic sense. Certain factors no doubt do need to be explicitly highlighted in instruction, yet as Wennerstrom (2003) shows, the emphasis should be on

writing as what she calls “linguistic structure, ” which needs to be taught and mastered by learners. Hyland (2004) adds that writing is much more than mechanics and process, and writers need to be shown what to put into their texts and what to omit from them. Bentley (2010) suggests a path to demystifying writing, by analyzing different text types, discussing their purpose and to whom they are addressed, and noticing their typical language features. Learners need to understand the purpose of the writing. They also need to know who they can use any one genre with, which presupposes knowledge of the audience. They need to know when they can use a genre. These elements strongly suggest that criteria for what we understand to be good writing are frequently neglected, and hence need to be more explicit (Hyland, 2004).

Agreement on what constitutes an appropriate genre descriptor is a little harder to find. Bruce (2008) offers his own analysis, positing social genre (or text genre) as that containing a social purpose, such as a letter or novel. He contrasts this with cognitive genre (or text type) which operates as a macrofunction, and would include many of the commonly taught text types including narrative and descriptive. He shows that decisions about ‘Why genre?’ can be further refined into questions of course types and outcomes. As such, a general introductory course comprising low-level L2 learners might focus on macrofunctions or cognitive genres only; whereas classes in a single discipline, suited more to specialists, would ideally tackle both social as well as cognitive genres. Clearly then, research points towards some directions for a reappraisal of teaching writing.

### **3. Teaching and learning through a genre-based approach to writing**

By considering what learners do when they write, and identifying the kinds of texts they will need to write in their varied contexts, it is possible to organize courses to meet those needs. Bruce (2008) suggests a sensible starting point is to ask which genres need to be taught, and then how exactly to teach them; while Hyland (2004) considers what learners do when they write, what kinds of texts they need to write, and then the kinds of courses that would be designed to meet those needs. There appears to be some common ground in these positions, and many of the ideas on the social aspect of genre theory are influenced by Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (Christie & Martin, 2007) and Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf, 2000, 2006). Simply put, the social conventions of writing involve language, content, and contexts. Texts and contexts are brought together by genre when choices of which areas of language to use are governed by the writer’s purpose, both in the social sense of using language and by choices of what the writer wishes to do.

To accomplish a task or tell a story, it is expected that writers follow social conventions for conveying and organizing written texts, and these conventions can be taught. The instructor mediates

with content-specific vocabulary and functional (or lexico-) grammar (Bentley, 2010; Byrnes, 2006). If process writing represents the inner world where the L2 writer describes their feelings in a diary, genre-based writing enables the learner to join the target language community by displaying knowledge of and interacting in established ways of written discourse. These are the social processes at work in genres discussed by Bax (2011), shared among members of the same speech community.

If an instructor decides to focus on the *recount* genre (or macrogenre), they first need to decide on what to teach. Duke et al (2012) suggest five principles, comprising (a) communicatively meaningful environments where students learn about the genre, (b) exposure and experience reading model texts and writing examples of the genre, (c) explicit teaching of the genre features to develop metatextuality (how the writer conveys their message), (d) explicit teaching of genre-specific or genre-sensitive strategies, and (e) ongoing coaching and feedback in small groups.

For recount, the following assessment framework has been adapted from Crane (2006):

Structure	Communicative questions
Abstract/Synopsis	What is the story about? (interpersonal/experiential)
Orientation	Who, when, what, where?
Record of Events	What happened?
Reorientation	How did it end? How does it connect to the beginning?
Coda	What does the story look like now?

Figure 1: Recount assessment framework adapted from Crane (2006)

Crane (2006) shows that students would need to know genre-specific information about the Orientation (1), using the present tense for participants and/or setting and the past tense for actions, e.g.,

Taro and Hanako, two friends of mine live in Kobe. Together with my friend Jiro and his cousin, we took the train there from Osaka. Taro and Hanako picked us up in Kobe.

For the Record of Events (2), learners need directing towards using past tense material process verbs for activities and thematic positioning of temporal adverbs, e.g.,

First we went to a restaurant together to eat lunch. Afterwards we drove all the way to Tokushima, since we wanted to see the Bon-odori.

For the Reorientation (3), students need to practice using appraisal attributes to evaluate the event, e.g.,

It was a great summer, the best I've ever had.

Introducing a genre writing syllabus can be achieved through a staged teaching-learning cycle, such as that put forward by Feez (1998): building the context, modeling and deconstructing the text, joint construction of the text, independent construction of the text, and linking with related texts. This cycle has been reformulated by Hyland (2003) as: establishing a context, modeling the genre, noticing, explicit analysis of texts, controlled production, independent writing, and producing the text.



For university students, it might be appropriate to establish the context for a particular genre as getting a job. This can be easily done through searching online job advertisements, and there are numerous models of the genre that can be easily drawn upon:

#### JOB DESCRIPTION:

UPS is hiring individuals to work as part-time Package Handlers. This is a physical, fast-paced position that involves continual lifting, lowering and sliding packages that typically weigh 25 - 35 lbs. and may weigh up to 70 lbs. Part-time employees usually work 3 ½ - 4 hours each weekday (Monday through Friday) and typically do not work on weekends or selected holidays.

Package Handlers receive an hourly rate of \$8.50 – \$9.50.

Source: <https://ups.managehr.com/screening/hourly/apply.aspx?l=LAAL&p=1&src=P1313>

Students are asked to notice the form and language of the job advertisement, and the instructor can help to deconstruct the text. To get a job, students would need to consider all the stages they would have to pass through, such as writing a CV, researching companies, and writing letters of application. Palmer and Todd (2005) provide a simple model for students which they analyse before controlled production of a job application letter:

#### [Text]

Our gift shop at Kansai International Airport is looking for a part-time worker. The successful candidate will be punctual and polite. The job requires being able to speak a little English, but confidence is more important than ability. The pay is 1,600 yen an hour. If you are interested, please write a letter of application in English to Mr. Watanabe.

Dear Mr. Watanabe

I was very interested to read the advertisement you placed in today's newspaper and am writing to apply for the job.

#### [Writing task]

I am...

I think I am the right person for this job because...

Palmer & Todd (2005). Over Yonder

Follow-up stages to complete the cycle are independent writing followed by writing a text typical of the genre that would be recognizable to the reader as a job description. A genre-based approach to writing draws attention to the different kinds of text types that exist, and that language and functional grammar change according to those text types. Students as learners need to recognize, understand and be able to replicate various kinds of texts; they need to know the purpose of each text, and the audience or readership it is appealing to; and they need to know which language features are to be included with each text type (Hyland, 2003).

#### 4. Mediating using technology

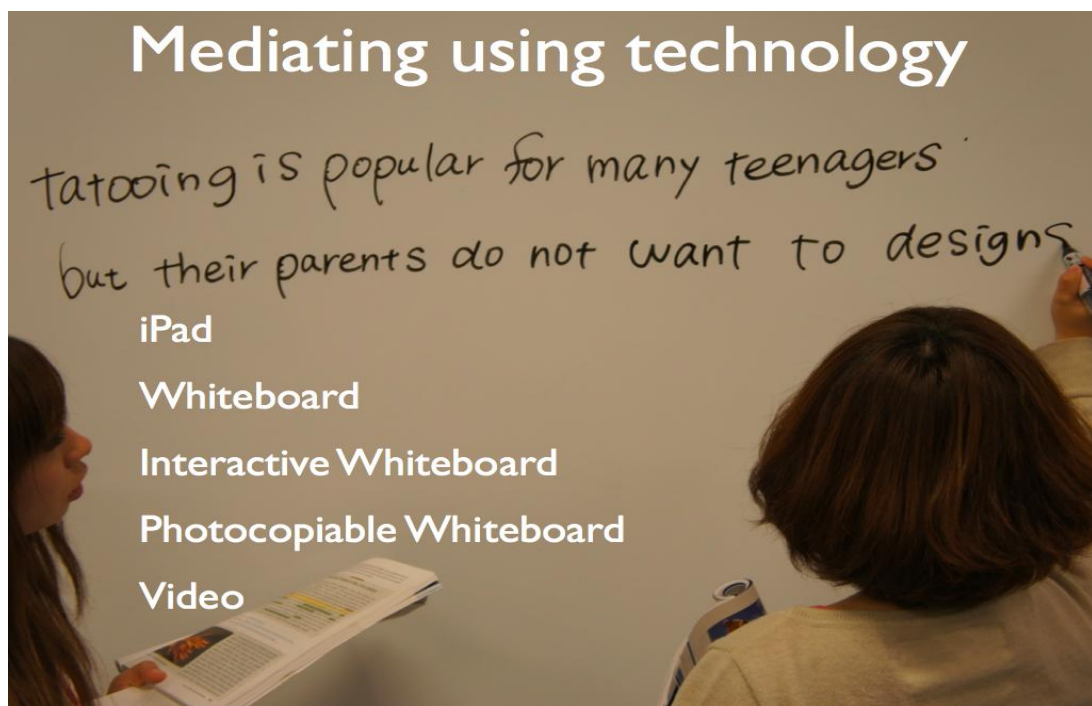


Figure 2: Types of mediated communication

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and computer-mediated discourse analysis are central to writing in the 21st century. Computer-mediated-writing instruction is at the core of many courses, while Moodle - variously described as an Open Source Course Management System (CMS), a Learning Management System (LMS), and a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) - would be a common interface replacing print materials with blogs and forums, where the reader and writer interact. Course materials and written communication, whether between student and student, teacher and teacher, student to teacher or teacher to student, take place within the CMS. The effects of electronic technologies on writing (Hyland, 2009) are numerous, and include hypertext adding to text forms normally associated with writing, readers responding to texts as writers and writers correspondingly responding to their readers via social networking forums, hitherto disparate groups binding together online into virtual communities, and genres of writing like blogs springing up. Indeed, technology and the ways it affects multimodality - “approaches that understand communication and representation to be more than about language” (Jewitt, 2011) - pushes images and writing on screens into new forms of writing. Bax (2011) points to text messaging as one of the new, technological genres, and identifies as its “main maxims” those of speed and its concise forms (2morrow), its “paralinguistic restitution” through the use of emoticons and punctuation (???!!!) that take the place of seeing the face and gestures of the discourse partner, and the use of colloquial expressions such as *gonna* or *wanna* for going to or want to.

Hardware and software may similarly impact on other areas that are harder to quantify, such as motivation to learn and increased output. The current study thus adopts ICT tools (such as iPads) for visibility, integration, and a permanent log of writing and editing. Digital technology supports applications designed to aid and improve the visual representation of notes (Figure 3), making the process of writing more stimulating for learners.

# Software: Notes Plus, Infinote



Figure 3: Notes Plus and Infinote iPad apps

Questions arise as to whether the use of a tablet or word processing software affects either the quality and/or quantity of revisions, or indeed of the total written output. Intriguingly, a small sample of classroom observations of iPad use have thus far revealed a different dynamic from the conventional notebook, with a greater degree of collaboration amongst peers in evidence (Figure 4). One of the next steps is thus to video in-task writing processes, to make a permanent record of samples of output through diverse media looking at a single task (e.g., iPad, video, photocopyable whiteboard), and to explore written output on whiteboards that is not normally recorded, including multiple drafts and the brainstorming of ideas.

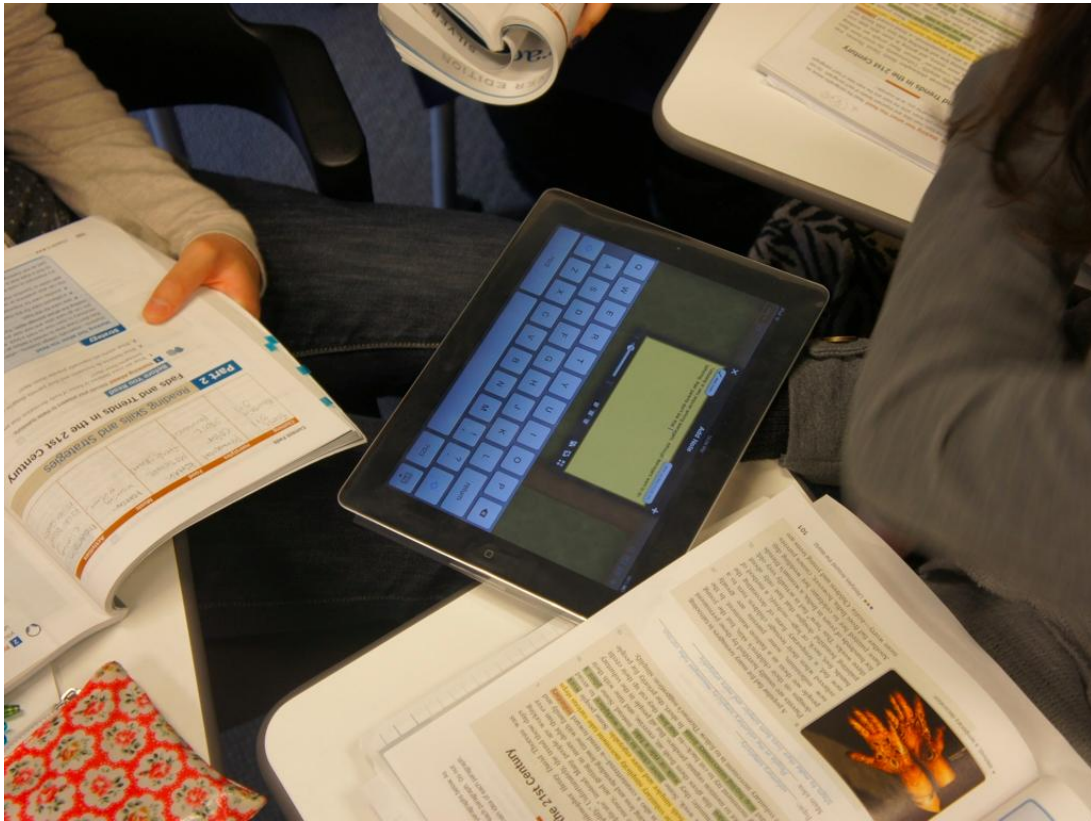


Figure 4: iPad as a writing tablet and collaborative tool

## 5. Conclusion

This report has described the ideas contained in a paper on genre-based writing presented orally at the JALT National Conference. It has tried to show the importance of restoring the link between reading and writing, with a greater and clearer emphasis on purpose and audience, and gone some way to show how this might be done. Explicit genre-based writing instruction by instructors appears to be a key component of helping L2 learners with their writing output. If such teaching can be shown to be effective, then it adds impetus to the need to redesign materials currently used in writing courses to include a greater awareness of genres, functional grammar, and social and communicative purpose. Another area that requires improvement is in regard to the fast-evolving use of CMC. In asking why genre should be adopted, what teaching and learning through a genre-based approach to writing are, and how best to mediate using technology, it has attempted to show the possibilities inherent in writing.

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