

Original Paper

Teaching Discussion Section Writing through a Genre-Based Approach to Undergraduates across Disciplines in China—A Novice EAP Teacher’s Classroom-Based Empirical Study

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Abstract

This study illuminates the genre-based pedagogy delivered by a novice EAP teacher for teaching discussion section writing to cross-discipline undergraduates in China. Followed by the demonstration of specifics of genre teaching, the researcher tapped into the effectiveness of genre-based pedagogy through an examination of student-produced writing submissions. Autoethnography and qualitative research methods were used to analyze video-recording, teaching journals and students’ writing assignments and it was revealed that the focal Chinese English teacher who specialized in EGP was able to teach genre knowledge and research writing skills through autonomous learning and teaching preparation. Furthermore, the efficacy of genre teaching could be affirmed since most learner-writers successfully transferred genre knowledge and writing skills taught in the classroom to their writing. From this study, pedagogical implications are drawn to shed light on future teacher education that aims to help Chinese English teachers attain better genre-based research writing instruction.

Keywords

undergraduate-level research writing instruction, novice EAP instructors, genre pedagogy, EAP teachers’ professional development; language teaching in genre pedagogy

1. Introduction

The stipulations of the “National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)”, released by the Chinese Ministry of Education early in 2010, apparently foreground the cultivation of students’ academic literacy and skills in higher education, and therefore give rise to an increasing request of research publications among universities in mainland China and a pressing status

quo “publish or perish” that doctoral and graduate students have to struggle with. In tandem with this trend, more and more research-oriented universities inaugurate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at the undergraduate level to complement or even supplant English for General Purposes (EGP) education when students are equipped with required English proficiency. Among the courses in the EAP series, research writing course is undoubtedly reckoned the most challenging one, characterized by considerable genre knowledge and actual writing practices. Apart from difficult course content, teaching in Chinese colleges most of the time takes place in large-size classrooms usually consisting of more than 30 students from various disciplines, thus aggravating teachers’ in-class pedagogy. In this vein, the genre-based approach was conceived as an encouraging alternative pedagogical approach to ameliorate the intensity of learning and teaching of research writing.

Genre-based approach for EAP pedagogy was developed and elaborated by John Swales (1990; 2004) by trial and error based on his perennial teaching career, and it was introduced into China since late 1990s to 2000s (Han & Qin, 2000). Ample previous studies have already demonstrated its validity and efficiency in teaching students’ research writing, featuring in drawing on authentic materials to raise students’ awareness of linguistic and discursual features that research paper as a specific genre (Cargill & O’Connor, 2013; Flowerdew & Wang, 2017; Li, Flowerdew, & Cargill, 2018). From a survey and review of key research published in Chinese core journals in recent two decades, the prominence of accepting and implementing genre-based EAP pedagogies in Chinese universities turns out to be in compliance with its western counterparts (Li & Ma, 2018). However, among the reported studies in Chinese, Li and Ma (2018) found that most of these studies were in nature pedagogical proposals or theoretical analyses but not empirical ones grounded in experimental data. For those studies that contained concrete instructions and writing of students, the abstract was remarkably the sole section addressed by researchers, leaving other major sections of a research paper unfulfilled. Hence, this study aims to fill this gap by presenting focal points the teacher/researcher delivered in her genre instruction and investigate the efficacy of genre-based EAP pedagogy for discussion section teaching in Chinese undergraduate research writing course based on students’ writing. It is also hoped that useful pedagogical implications can be drawn to shed light on future teacher education that aims to help Chinese English teachers attain better genre-based research writing instruction.

2. Methods

2.1 The Course and Participants

“Reading and Writing for Research Paper” (RWRP) is the focal course in this case. As aforementioned, many research universities in mainland China have taken the initiative to develop students’ academic literacy and skills early from undergraduate phase, causing more and more EAP courses including RWRP to be incorporated into undergraduate curriculum. In the fall semester in 2020, the course was taught by the focal teacher for her 2nd run, entailing 16 lectures in total, one lecture each week. Thirty-six undergraduates with advanced-level English proficiency attended the course from all grades

and across disciplines. The teacher insisted on using English as the medium of in-class instruction, while switched to Chinese once students could not express themselves clearly in teacher-student interaction. *Reading and Writing for Research Papers* (Pang & Yang, 2013) was designated as the textbook in partnership with reference books *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (Swales & Feak, 2012) and *Writing Scientific Research Articles* (Cargill & O'Connor, 2011). The textbook itself provided a series of sample research articles from English education to applied linguistics as “a small reference collection” (Swales & Feak, 2009, p. 3), helping students familiarize themselves with rhetorical organization, lexico-grammatical features and underpinning rhetorical rationales of the discussion section within a research article. The two reference books further added a strong flavor of genre-based pedagogy into this course with numerous genre analysis tasks derived from genre theories (Swales, 1990). And the teaching of the discussion section was followed by the teaching and writing of introduction, methods, and results sections, assigning students to accomplish their discussion writing with no less than 500 words.

Among the 36 course participants, 29 of them were sophomores, juniors were six, senior was only one. When it comes to the field of study, technology or engineering topped others to house 24 students, then nine students came from sciences, two students from social sciences and one from arts. Given that *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* preferably caters to social sciences students (Jou, 2017), *Writing Scientific Research Articles* was selected by the teacher to supplement the need of science students in this particular case. Although half of participants alleged previous experience of reading English research articles, only one student did have written English paper before, thus it could be inferred that very few students obtained relevant education or tutorial about research writing.

2.2 The Focal EAP Teacher

The focal EAP teacher herself in this study was also the researcher who wrote autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to conduct the research. As an autoethnographer, the teacher/researcher capitalized on personal reflexive teaching experience (Bruner, 1993; Freeman, 2004) in combination with teaching journals and video-recording to help her recall and transcribe instruction texts (Didion, 2005; Herrmann, 2005). What's striking about the focal teacher was that, although she was assumed to possess a large repertoire of genre knowledge and research writing teaching experience, she was in fact in line with most Chinese university English teachers who held no Ph.D. degrees (Wang & Wang, 2011). The prevalence of this education background resulted in an inevitable insufficiency of Chinese English teachers in research writing experience and expertise, meanwhile revealed an enormous inconsistency between the widespread demand for teaching EAP and teachers' sustained dedication to EGP in reality. In regard of the graduate education program the focal teacher attended, it was also highlighted with applied linguistics and language teaching, leaving theories and practices associated with genre analysis, rhetorical analysis, research and publication training customarily overlooked (Li & Ma, 2018). In this vein, the focal teacher was indeed a novice to take up the course. From her specific teaching demonstration about genre-based EAP pedagogy, teaching preparation for prospective novice teachers

and research writing teacher education will be shed very much light on. Meanwhile, this study will provide as well as analyze students' writing as evidence to attest the efficacy of the teacher's genre teaching.

2.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data collection for this research included multiple sources. The researcher collected 1.5 hours video-recorded lecture, PowerPoint lecture slides, teaching journals and student-produced discussion writing. Thirty-six students were paired to submit a total of 18 pieces of discussion writing for the teacher to review and grade.

Genre-based writing pedagogies in this lecture were retrieved and transcribed by the researcher. More importantly, transcripts of focal content (including authentic PowerPoint lecture slides) that could illustrate the specifics of genre writing pedagogies were manually coded in Excel using an inductive approach (Maxwell, 2013). For student-produced writing, the researcher identified and categorized common problems to generate themes inductively (ibid) so as to investigate the effectiveness of students' receiving of genre pedagogies.

3. Results

3.1 The Teacher's Genre-Based EAP Writing Pedagogies

The focal teacher set out to adopt the Aristotelian model—a widely used distinction between matter and form—to devise her genre teaching for the discussion section primarily from its structure (form) and then the content (matter). At the beginning of the lecture, the teacher drew the frequently cited “hourglass-shaped figure” conceived by Cargill and O'Connor (2009) (see Figure 1) to demonstrate the position and basic function of the discussion section in a whole research paper. As shown in Figure 1, students were encouraged to apprehend a brief definition of the discussion section by substituting “an increasingly generalized account of what has been learned in the study” with answers close to “a summarized version of results”. Then students were instructed to ponder the meaning of “a series of points” and why these “points” particularly interplayed with “statements made in the Introduction”. To illuminate and elaborate on the interrelation between discussion and introduction, the teacher showed Figure 2 to help students recall the function and rhetorical moves of introduction.

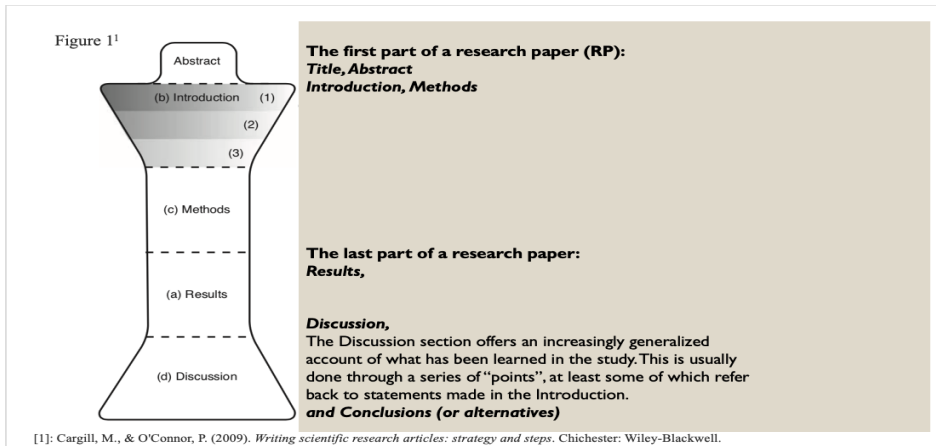


Figure 1. The Illustration of Discussion's Position and Function

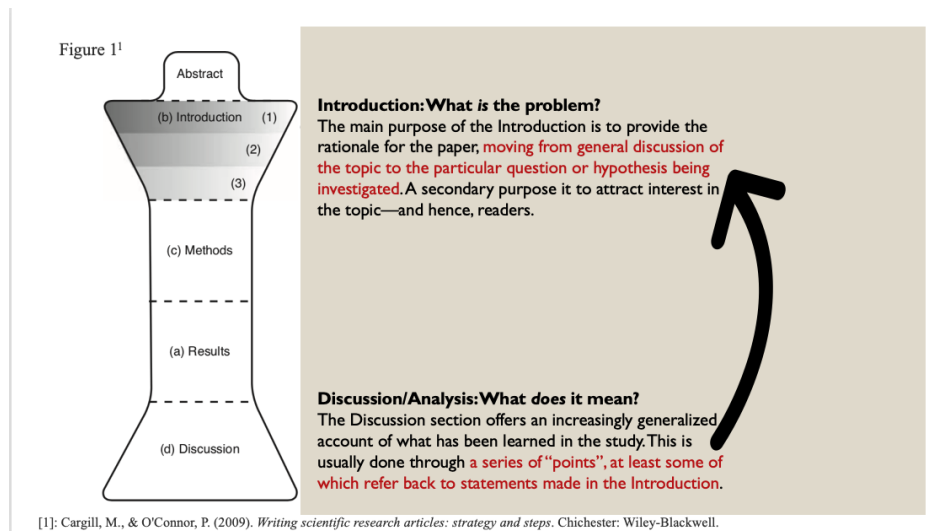


Figure 2. The Interrelation between Discussion and Introduction

Since the organized arrangement of results, discussion, and conclusion usually varied in research papers, the teacher led students to browse sample papers from Unit 1 to 4 in the textbook to explore the structural issue of the discussion section (see Figure 3 & 4) and stated the underlying logic of different organizations.

Structural issues concerning the Discussion No.1

◦ *These sections might be divided in one of these common ways. Do you know of any others?*

1. Results and Discussion (combined) and Conclusions

2. Results and Discussion (separate) with no Conclusions

3. Results, Discussion and Conclusions (all separate)

Other? _____

◦ *Can you try to explain why authors may choose one of the arrangements?*

1- When Discussion is short; Conclusions provide key summary for readers.

2- When Discussion is long; the author feels readers can draw the conclusions themselves and turn to abstract for summary.

3- When Discussion is extensive; the author uses Conclusions to highlight the “take home message” of the study.

Figure 3. Various Structures of the Latter Part of Research Papers

The combined or separate last parts might be attributed to your agreement or disagreement with these statements.

- a. Discussion sections should be short and to the point. It is better to let Results sections speak largely for themselves. **(Results and Discussion combined)**
- b. A long Discussion section shows that the author or authors are able to reflect intelligently on what was found. **(Results and Discussion separate)**
- c. A long Discussion section is just an opportunity for authors to promote their own research and thus themselves. **(Results and Discussion separate)**
- d. Conclusions are rarely necessary. Readers can draw their own conclusions. If readers want a summary, they can always read the abstract. **(Conclusions is included in Discussion)**
- e. In these days of rapidly increasing numbers of published research papers, Conclusions are valuable because they can highlight the “take home message” of the study. **(Discussion & Conclusions separate)**
- f. There is no point in trying to decide whether short or long Discussion sections in a particular field are better. It all depends on the piece of research being reported. Some research projects will need an extensive Discussion section; others will not. **(depends on research)**

Figure 4. The Mechanisms Worked for Various Structures

When it comes to the teaching of the content of discussion, the teacher kept resorting to authentic materials from Unit 5 (see Figure 5) for excerpts to raise students' awareness of rhetorical and linguistic features of discussion in a research paper as a specific genre. By juxtaposing the excerpt “Content of communication” in the results section and its corresponding analysis in the discussion section, students were required to compare and contrast how discussion differed from results in terms of content. Apart from texts, different colors were also imposed to help signify different rhetorical meanings and distinguish similarities and differences. In consequence, students were able to produce answers such as “Red-colored phrases are result statements which become less in discussion.” “Blue-colored phrases provide detailed and illustrative information.” “Green- and purple-colored

statements containing in-text citations are exclusive in discussion.”, enabling the teacher to point out the two obligatory rhetorical moves that students should deal with in writing discussion—“results statements reported in according to a level of generality as Move 1” and “new knowledge claims along with arguments that support the claims beyond results statements as Move 2” (see Figure 6 & 7).

The content of the Discussion section: Results? Explanations? What exactly?

<p>Results Content of communication. Chinese parents communicated with their children's schools for reasons largely different than those of Caucasian parents. Table 2 shows that most Chinese parents communicated solely about their children's academic progress to determine what extra academic support to provide at home. A smaller number of Chinese parents discussed both their children's general academic work and social relationships. In contrast to Chinese parents, none of the Caucasian parents communicated with schools about their child's academic progress alone. The same number (four) of Caucasian parents as the Chinese parents discussed their children's academic work and social relationships together. However, the Caucasian parents devoted much more of their communication to the school's public events and welfare (e.g., sports events, school concerts, and fundraising such as bake sales) or a combination of their children's academic progress and the school's public and social events.</p>	<p>Discussion The most distinctive feature of Chinese parents' communication was their high level of expectations for their children's academic achievement. Chinese parents communicated more for the sake of their children's academic progress than for the school's public events, such as fundraising, which was more the focus of communication for non-immigrant parents. Emphasis on education as a means for an individual's advancing in society (Stevenson et al., 1994) may have distracted the Chinese parents from their traditional valuation of group well-being, and hence from contributing to such public school events as fundraising. Real and perceived language barriers may also have reduced Chinese parents' involvement in school events. Researchers have observed that Asian-American parents often feel reluctant to participate in school functions because of their lack of confidence in English (Lee & Manning, 2001).</p>
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Figure 5. The Juxtaposition and Comparison of Results and Discussion

Results in Results & Discussion sections: Differ in levels of generalization

<p>Table 2 shows that most Chinese parents communicated solely about their children's academic progress to determine what extra academic support to provide at home.</p> <p>A smaller number of Chinese parents discussed both their children's general academic work and social relationships. In contrast to Chinese parents, none of the Caucasian parents communicated with schools about their child's academic progress alone.</p> <p>The same number (four) of Caucasian parents as the Chinese parents discussed their children's academic work and social relationships together.</p> <p>□ In the Results sections, results statements may be more specific and closely tied to the data or facts.</p> <p>➤ “phrases of generality”: Overall, .../In general, .../On the whole, .../In the main, .../With ... exception(s), ... The overall results indicate/The results indicate, overall, that/In general, the experimental samples resisted/With one exception, the experimental samples resisted</p>	<p>The most distinctive feature of Chinese parents' communication was their high level of expectations for their children's academic achievement.</p> <p>Chinese parents communicated more for the sake of their children's academic progress than for the school's public events, such as fundraising, which was more the focus of communication for non-immigrant parents.</p> <p>□ On the other hand, in the Discussion, results statements are usually key findings reported according to a level of generality.</p>
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Figure 6. Results Statements Respectively Reported in Results and Discussion

Beyond results statements— what a Discussion section should provide?

- Emphasis on education as a means for an individual's advancing in society may have distracted the Chinese parents from their traditional valuation of group well-being, and hence from contributing to such public school events as fundraising. Real and perceived language barriers may also have reduced Chinese parents' involvement in school events. Researchers have observed that Asian-American parents often feel reluctant to participate in school functions because of their lack of confidence in English.
- Discussion sections deal with the **claims** that might be made, especially **new knowledge claims**.
- Discussion sections provide **an argument** that leads the reader from **the proof of the data** (open to be inspected in tables or figures in Results sections) to **the support for the claims**.
- Emphasis on education as a means for an individual's advancing in society (Stevenson et al., 1994)
- ...because of their lack of confidence in English (Lee & Manning, 2001).
- **So, in contrast to Results sections, we might expect Discussion sections to be**
 - more theoretical.
 - more abstract.
 - more general.
 - more integrated with the field.
 - more connected to the real world.
 - more concerned with implications and applications.
 - more likely to discuss the limitations of the study.

Figure 7. How to Analyze/Interpret the Results in Discussion

Followed by this bottom-up teacher-guided genre-based analysis, students would be reinforced with rhetorical Move 1 and Move 2, along with the regular somehow optional Move 3 (research limitations) and Move 4 (future research directions) by memorizing the pyramid infographic illustrated in Figure 8. After such in-class guidance, students needed to independently finish another set of genre analyses for the discussion section in Unit 5 (see Figure 9). Once students accomplished one paragraph's tasks, the teacher would promptly reveal the answers on the right-hand column as references for possible discussions. Except for genre analysis, questions about tenses (e.g., Question 5 on Figure 9) were also set to raise students' awareness of linguistic features so that students would be more attentive to the distinction between the use of past tense for results statements and present tense for the successive analyses.

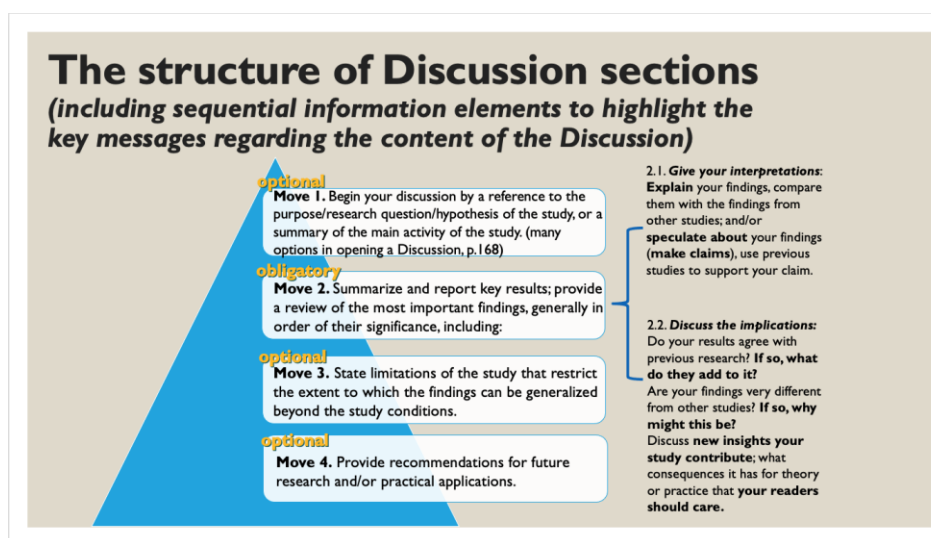


Figure 8. The internal Structure and Discoursal Elements of Discussion

Discussion	Questions
<p>1 In this study, I examined the home-school communication of Chinese families who recently immigrated to Canada. 2 As expected, even in the absence of socio-economic difficulties, cultural and linguistic uniqueness created a largely distinct pattern of parental communication with schools. 3 Thus, in comparison with non-immigrants, immigrant parents communicated with schools less often, had more difficulty understanding the communication, and were less satisfied with the school's communication style and multicultural education program. 4 However, immigrant parents also circumvented the language barrier by using an interpreter (e.g., their own children, friends, or school appointee) to facilitate their communication with schools.</p> <p>5 The most distinctive feature of Chinese parents' communication was their high level of expectations for their children's academic achievement. 6 Chinese parents communicated more for the sake of their children's academic progress than for the school's public events, such as fundraising, which was more the focus of communication for non-immigrant parents. 7 Emphasis on education as a means for an individual's advancing in society (Stevenson et al., 1994) may have distracted the Chinese parents from their traditional valuation of group well-being, and hence from contributing to such public school events as fundraising. 8 Real and perceived language barriers may also have reduced Chinese parents' involvement in school events. 9 Researchers have observed that Asian-American parents often feel reluctant to participate in school functions because of their lack of confidence in English (Lee & Manning, 2001).</p>	<p>1. How do you feel the personal pronoun "I" used by the researcher? 2. What is the purpose of the opening sentence? A general conclusion of the main activity of the study. 3. What seems to be the purpose of Sentence 2-4? Restatements of main results. 4. Which move can be identified in this paragraph? Move 1</p> <p>5. From Sentence 5-9, what verb tenses are used? Can you explain the reason for each tense use? S5-6 past tense; S7-9 present tense S5-6 are aligned to Results section, the study is complete, results should be stated in past tense. S7-9 are claims (speculations) about the results made with comparison or support of other studies. 6. What information elements and move are presented in this paragraph? Report the most important results; Interpret the results by making claims and citing previous studies to support. Move 2</p>

Figure 9. In-Class Activity: Analyzing Authentic Materials and Answering Questions on the Right-Hand Side

3.2 Findings of Student-Produced Discussion Section Writing

First and foremost, student-produced submissions of discussion showed a remarkable level of completion in structure and rhetorical moves construction. Among a total of 18 pieces of writing from 36 students who worked in pairs, 83.3% (i.e., 15) of the samples were discovered to include all four rhetorical moves. When it comes to the three problematic pieces of writing, two of which fell short of prioritizing analysis (Move 2) while emphasizing on reiterating results in a detailed manner (Move 1) or elaborating unnecessary research limitations (Move 3), resulting in a discrepancy between Move 1 and 2/Move 2 and 3. As for the last piece of writing, it was considered comparatively valid but would be better if Move 3 and 4 were involved.

Within the genre framework, an eye-catching feature that emerged from students' writing was a distinctive variety of in-text citation forms in discussion. In Yuan and Si's (students' pseudonyms, same below) writing, examples such as

- 1) Cheng and Yu (2005) explain that this can be attributed to both psychological factors, such as desire for love, burden of study, and the function of the internet...
- 2) One possible explanation given by Blackhart et al. (2014) was that men are less likely than women to worry about being physically harmed when meeting someone face-to-face.
- 3) Homosexual users were predicted to look for a wider range of gratifications from online dating sites than their heterosexual counterparts and can have a diversity of motivations (Clemens et al., 2015).

clearly showed that sources of materials were skillfully cited as grammatical components at the beginning or midst of a sentence (Example 1 & 2), or as acknowledgment in parentheses at the end of a sentence (Example 3). Such variations on in-text citation not only illuminate students' satisfactory acquisition of formulating in-text citations but also to a large extent evince students' consideration of

producing better writing flows.

Furthermore, 61.1% of the samples (i.e., 11) were fulfilled to make wealthy conversation with other scholars by virtue of associating published discoveries and notably, utilizing useful stock phrases to inform readers of different rhetorical meanings. This could be exemplified by an array of instances in student-produced writing as follows—

- 1) However, the extreme statistics indicating that females were more negative than males suggested the potential gender inequality, which was consistent with the study conducted by Feingold and Mazzella (1998). (*by Hua & Yao*)
- 2) That result corroborated that the elder people accepted latest stickers, an important aspect of the pop culture, in a passive way and tended to choose those with positive meanings in most of the time (Comblain et al., 2004; Martin & Johannes, 2020). (*by Qian & Guo*)
- 3) The inconsistency between the subtle change in living conditions and the significant change in psychological conditions may allude that although the reduction in outing had a certain impact, the greater impact on students' psychological states was caused by the epidemic control measures themselves. (*by Zou & Kun*)

In Example 4, “was consistent with” signaled that one of Hua and Yao’s findings could be convinced in a comparison with what Feingold and Mazzella found out in 1998. Likewise, Qian and Guo in Example 5 chose to back up their finding with two other studies through the phraseology “That result corroborated that...”. Although there was no citation in Example 6, the combination of modal verb plus phrase of reasoning “may allude that” effectively helped Zou and Kun achieve their rhetorical purpose of making a conjecture about the inconsistency in their finding.

However, writing critically and analytically poses persistent challenges for most research writers no matter whether they are experienced or not. Thus, it was not surprising that among the 18 writing assignments, 27.8% of the samples (i.e., 5) were inadequate in generating personal analysis or hypothesis.

What’s more, several linguistic problems were typical and permeated in students’ writing, including tense issue and language style problem. Two of students’ samples failed to distinguish the use of tenses for results statements and successive analysis, which might be attributed to students’ carelessness or the incompetence of genre teaching. Another problem that could not be overlooked was the inappropriate word use that students employed in light of colloquial or academic style. For example, a great number of expressions such as “It’s Ok to...” “the participant can’t feel...” scattered in Jie and Peng’s writing, in which “Ok” was considered highly spoken for research writing as a genre; contractions “It’s” and “can’t” should also be avoided in academic writing.

4. Discussion

The researcher in this study, at the same time the focal teacher who incorporated and implemented genre-based EAP pedagogy in discussion writing instruction, adopted autoethnography and qualitative research methods to examine and analyze collected resources and data in an inductive manner. From students' writing submissions, the efficacy of her genre teaching was attested. Further pedagogical implications for future novice EAP teachers as well as teacher education could also be drawn.

From the results, it is distinct that the genre-based pedagogical approach exerts a very positive influence on helping students frame the discussion section and fulfill the content epitomized by the four rhetorical moves. This can be affirmed by the overwhelming number of student-produced writing possessed of due structure and discursal elements. Also, it could be asserted that students grasp the essence of being critical or analytical in writing discussion through conversing with other scholars by means of associating with previous discoveries after receiving genre instructions. It is explicitly reflected in students' flexible use of in-text citation forms and practical stock phrases that help them achieve different rhetorical goals. In this case, despite no mention of detailed language teaching, tense use and word choice were intertwined in genre analysis tasks as question-raising to strengthen students' prior acquisition. Nonetheless, the quite common use of inappropriate tense and words in writing assignments still flags students' ubiquitous weaknesses in writing academic English, especially taking account of students' second language background. This problem might be resolved by teachers' continual reinforcement in following language teaching and students' sustaining correction to their writing.

Concerning the aforementioned results, they on the one side attest to the satisfactory efficacy of genre-based EAP pedagogy in teaching discussion, on the other side are capable of convincing the focal teacher's endeavor on self-learning and preparation of genre knowledge and research writing skills. As illustrated in Section 3.1, without opportunities of receiving degree program or teacher training of genre analysis, the teacher sought consultation from reliable sources ranging from theoretical publications to writing manuals from John Swales, Margaret Cargill, Patrick O'Connor and other prestigious scholars. During her preparation process, it was noteworthy that the teacher herself in fact started learning and acquiring genre knowledge initially from practicing genre analysis tasks that students would take in class before she contacted and construed any theoretical underpinning, which eminently supports Tardy's (2017) speculation that for novice EAP teachers, "concrete examples of instructional strategies may be even more important than theoretical explorations" (p. 79). Moreover, the focal teacher's bottom-up, in Hyland's (2004) term "inductive, discovery-based" approach for learning and teaching genre, is also utilized in her language teaching to sensitize students to the language style of research paper with a stress on tense use and word choice. Due to the relatively agreeable results, it can be suggested that precise language use in research writing should be set as a long-term goal considering learners' second language background.

From this empirical classroom study incorporated with genre-based EAP pedagogy, the results from

student-produced discussion writing confirm that learner-writers can transfer genre knowledge and writing skills taught in the classroom to their writing, as exemplified by the rhetorical moves consistently and appropriately manifested in their writing, which may alleviate some EAP researchers' concerns about students' inability for such transfer (Tardy, 2017).

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