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Challenges in the Application of Genre Theory to Improve L2 Academic Writing: Effective Reports and Assessment

Maria Martinez Lirola**Universidad De Alicante, Departamento De Filología Inglesa, Campus De San Vicente Del Raspeig, Ap.99-030080 Alicante, Spain.**Research Fellow, Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, University of South Africa (UNISA)**email: maria.lirola@ua.es***Derek S. Irwin***University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, Malaysia**email: derek.irwin@nottingham.edu.my*

Abstract

This paper examines the application of a systemic-functional linguistic (SFL) Genre Theory approach to an L2 classroom in Spain, where English systems and their formal and functional characteristics were explicated in the teaching-learning process in order to help students improve their writing skills. It analyses various facets of the effectiveness of this approach through a careful consideration of student report writing, first by analysing the assessors' marking parameters and concentration, and second by thoroughly going through the papers themselves to summarise the nature and quantity of the various writing issues, paying particular attention to areas in which the existing assessment was questionable, incorrect, or not indicating errors in standard English.

Keywords: *Genre Theory, text types, academic writing, assessment, teaching-learning process, errors, reports.*

1. Introduction

Teaching academic writing is a constant challenge for teachers at any educational level because students are not normally taught to write academically. It is perhaps difficult for them to establish a relationship between the texts they have to write in the university environment and those they have thus far encountered in their daily lives or at school, and as a result, students have trouble contextualising their writing. However, learning how to produce highly-formal texts such as those required of a university student will serve students in good stead in their professional lives. While

a strictly grammatical approach to text is often resisted by students, students may be more amenable to learning how to produce text types with specific potential future purposes. In this sense, it is essential that teachers highlight the fact that students need to understand the communicative purpose of each text, and to keep this purpose in mind when creating their own texts (Butt et al., 2012; Coffin & Donohue, 2012; Irwin & Jovanovic-Krstic, in press). In doing so, the purpose of writing particular genres in a real-world environment is made clear, and there is motivation for students to follow the structures and select the most appropriate language for each one depending on its aim (Biber & Conrad, 2009; Droga, & Humphrey, 2003; Östman, 2005).

Following Halliday (1978, p. 27): “Language, [...] is a potential: it is what the speaker can do”. Consequently, from this perspective it is the teacher’s job to demonstrate the *choices* in language at every level, not just the grammatical. Students choose from the various potential uses of language which are most appropriate to a given context. They therefore must take into consideration both the social purpose of the text they are to write and the structure and features of the text itself. This is true at every level of text, from using the correct morphological forms to create plural nouns, to the understanding of the larger contours of the text patterns: what we will hereafter refer to as “genre.”

Following Martin (1992, p. 505) we will initially define genre as “a staged, goal-oriented social process.” Here, we understand “staged” to mean that there are patterns of text at the discourse level which are essentially semantic in nature, and which are realised through the lexical and grammatical resources to achieve a certain end via interaction between participants: in this case, in writing; staged also refers to being structured and sequenced in particular patterned ways. If a given text does not move through the appropriate stages, using the expected choices in the language to express the appropriate relationship between interlocutors using generally-accepted patterns of language at all levels, then it is in danger of failing as a text. Indeed, in our role as teachers, we consistently assess our students based on the success of their texts, and typical marking rubrics contain the option of assessing these texts according to both microcosmic (i.e., mechanical) and macroscopic (i.e., generic) success. Writing has different risks depending on the stratum of scrutiny by readers, but we believe that success at creating a whole text which follows accepted staging to achieve particular social goals should be a primary focus of the classroom. It is within this sort of framework that the concerns of lexicogrammatical patterning make more sense vis-à-vis how they most effectively realise the needs of that stage, and how that stage fits into the overall genre.

Since we are teachers with a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) background, our approach to writing is based on Genre Theory following the Sydney School as per Martin above. This particular approach was considered most useful in comparison to our previous experience teaching academic writing without following a SFL approach, both in this precise Spanish context and in North American Composition and Rhetoric undergraduate classes. Further, this approach has already been well-developed for use in academic environments (see, for example, Martin and Rose

2012). Another advantage of the Sydney School is that it is predicated on the use of authentic texts, which by the very fact of having texture (i.e., what makes a text a text) have certain structural characteristics; in other words, authentic texts have been constructed to have both lexicogrammatical cohesion, using such devices as pronominal substitution, ellipsis, logical structures and lexical chains (to name a few), as well as semantic coherence (for a seminal discussion of these features, refer to Halliday and Hasan (1976)). In essence, to understand such texts, readers take both the communicative situation and the end goals of the text into consideration, and the text's success is predicated on how well it fulfils its role while maintaining its texture. Ultimately, then, as proponents of Genre Theory, we see texts as social products in which there is a connection between form and meaning.

Moreover, the development of students' literacy in general (and writing in particular) demands that teachers keep in mind their own difficulties when they have had to write, so that students can benefit from the fact that teachers can anticipate possible problems (Fecho, 2011; Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2009). In other words, since the teacher has also had the experience of being a learner, she or he is able to empathically self-position as a student, and adjust to particular issues accordingly. As in other facets of the language-learning process, then, the teacher is both leader and practitioner, allowing her or his experience to inform the best approach for the students. Keeping this role in mind, the teacher needs to monitor the students' writing process and supervise the different steps they take in this process; as Edelsky (2006, p. 74) points out: "A human language resource of critical importance for teaching and learning writing is the teacher. We know that in many mainstream classrooms, teachers do not view themselves as writers and do almost no writing either for themselves or with their students. But to develop literacy in others, teachers must see themselves as readers and writers". The ideal classroom is therefore that within which the teacher and the students are oriented towards the same goal, and represent different levels of achievement towards writing proficiency.

Consequently, teachers understand the teaching-learning process as a social process in which students and teachers share the responsibility for learning, and in which social interaction is promoted. Students therefore should be facilitated to participate actively via a metacognitive approach to pedagogy; in other words, they should be aware of the methodology being used to predicate certain social acts involved in the classroom. Language at every level is a social act, from making certain sounds, word choices, semantic meanings, and generic constructions, and that is not limited to the texts that students write, but to all classroom texts, including those created to convey this information to the students. Following Hua et al. (2007, p. 1), we would agree that:

"The central pillar in the social interaction perspective is the belief that language learning and teaching are social acts- the roles and relationships of the learner and the teacher are socially constructed; their social identities are formed and transformed by the very process of learning and teaching; the knowledge of

language that is being acquired and taught is social knowledge that is affected by the roles, relationships, attitudes and ideologies of the learner and the teacher.”

Given the theoretical focus on Genre Theory in the Spanish EFL classroom and its hypothetical effects on writing success, the main research questions guiding this paper are the following:

1. What kinds of writing problems do Spanish students produce when they are asked to write a report after they have been prepared for writing via SFL Genre Theory, and are these issues generally at the level of text structure or mechanics?
2. What kinds of choices or errors are assessed by teachers, what kinds of issues might they be missing given current assessment practices, and how heavily do choices at various levels weigh on the overall grades?
3. Finally, what do the answers to these questions suggest in terms of positive classroom change, with the ultimate goal of empowering students to make the best choices in their written language?

In order to explore these questions, this paper first situates itself in the relevant literature before explaining the particular study, its methods, objectives and results, and finally presents a discussion of implications for the classroom and suggestions for changes in assessment practices.

2. Literature review

This research aimed to make a contribution to genre based pedagogy. Following Drury (2004, p. 233), “This pedagogy engages students in an interactive teaching/learning cycle where they acquire knowledge, understanding, practice in and feedback on the target genres and apply this in producing their own texts for particular purposes”.

There are many theories of genre, and many excellent summaries of the different traditions (Hyon 1996, for example, maps out those of English for Specific Purposes, North American New Rhetoric Studies, and the Sydney School of SFL). In a broad sense, these are roughly compatible approaches, though given their different institutional foci the resultant pedagogies have some significant differences. Here, some of the studies which specifically focus on academic writing will be taken into account, though the approach taken in the classroom study was that of the Sydney SFL tradition, and thus the specifics approach of genre being realised in specific lexicogrammatical patterns is also in fitting with systemic functional grammar as exemplified in Halliday (1985, 1994) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, 2013). Note, however, that Halliday’s approach in general does not deal with genre as a concept, but rather it is the Sydney School as led by Martin’s work and picked up in Martin and Rose (2007, 2008, and 2012) which explicitly does so. The connection in those works which is important to academic writing is that generic stages are directly realised by patterns in the lexicogrammar, and so the holistic approach to language as promoted by Halliday paves the way for a connection between the successes on a microcosmic and macrocosmic text scale.

In terms of this macroscopic or top-down view of language events, genres are underlying patterns in texts, and therefore texts in the same genre share the same social purposes and are organised in similar ways. Parodi's definition of genre (2010, p. 25) clarifies the notion: "A genre is a constellation of potential discourse conventions, sustained by previous knowledge of the speakers/writers and listeners/readers (stored in the memory of each subject), based on contextual, social, linguistic, and cognitive possibilities and/or constraints".

Most Genre Theories concentrate on the relationship between the structure and shape of texts in order to communicate effectively in a particular context. In general, Genre Theories highlight that language is used in different ways depending on the social purpose of communication and on the different contexts in which it is used (Biber, 2006; Kress, 2003; Parodi, 2010; Wennerstrom, 2003). In the classroom such an approach is very useful, in that it encourages teachers to share with students good examples of different genres so that they can explicitly learn the structures and the main language characteristics associated with them. According to Wennerstrom (2003, p. 3), following this approach allows emphasizing the following ideas about genres:

"Each genre presents a different set of rhetorical choices- from lexicon and grammar to format, content, and organization- that students can study and adapt to their own writing. [...] Students can become language researchers, or ethnographers, studying the surrounding culture's ways of writing and adapting what they learn for their own purposes".

One of the main purposes of Genre Theory in general is that students become familiar with particular patterns in texts so that their own writing practices are successful (in this case, academically), which will result in texts that are both communicative and self-contained. To achieve this, it is essential to make the genres explicit, so that students are able to be aware of the main grammatical and structural characteristics of each text type (Martin & Rose, 2012; Moyano, 2013). This approach, therefore, is top-down, in the sense that it first asks that students recognise how to form a whole text before attending to the lexico-grammatical realisation of the text itself.

From the perspective of assessment, it should be more important that a base genre such as an anecdote be recognisable as such, rather than all of the grammatical forms within it be flawless. In other words, the reader is more forgiving of errors in the execution of the lexicogrammar than errors in the staging or social roles of a text. The assumption here is that being able to create a well-formed genre structure is what enables students to realise acceptable meanings via word choices, syntax and morphology.

Different studies have concentrated on the importance of teaching academic writing such that students are made aware of the main academic literacies (Coffin & Donohue, 2012; Gardner, 2012; Klein & Unsworth, 2014). There are also studies that assess different approaches to writing (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010; Klein &

Yu, 2013; Martínez Lirola, 2006; Schleppegrell, 2011; Wingate, 2012), including Genre Theory. Moreover, in the last decade there has been research on the combination of Genre Theory and the use of computer assisted language learning (CALL) (Hsien-Chin, 2000; Martínez Lirola & Tabuenca Cuevas, 2008 and 2010; Pérez Gutiérrez & Pérez Torres, 2005).

Such studies indicate that students should be made aware of different genres, and indeed the generic assessment of texts, at all educational levels. In doing so, teachers not only provide them with the ability to analyse the correct structure and grammatical characteristics of each text type, but also provide them with the tools to reproduce these genres. In essence, the *whole* text has a central category in literacy; following Fairclough's words (2003, p. 65), "[...] genres are the specifically discursive aspect of ways of acting and interacting in the course of social events [...]".

Consequently, the text analysis proposed by Genre Theory pays particular attention to those linguistic units and systems which are crucial to texts as a whole. There are elements such as cohesive devices (types of conjunctions, types of reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion), types of verbs, noun groups (including nominalization, extended noun groups), lexical choices (e.g., technical vocabulary, descriptive vocabulary, vocabulary of judgement or attitude), theme and rheme position and the different stages of texts. In this sense, the Genre approach has a crucial role in literacy because it concentrates on both the production and analysis of texts in a given language (Martin & Rose, 2012; Moyano, 2013; Swales, 2002; Wennerstrom, 2003).

3. The study: Objectives, context and participants

Our main objectives in this study were that students were familiar with the main genres in English, and also that they were able to write effectively the different genres analysed in the classroom., we here concentrate on the reports students produced in the middle of the semester. They were also requested to write an explanation at the end of the semester, and an exposition on the day of the exam.

English Language III is a core subject in the degree in English Studies (*Grado en Estudios Ingleses*). Students need to delve into the language, literature, history and didactics of English during the four years of the degree. This subject is taught in the first semester of the second year of the degree, which means that students have already had two language subjects in their first year, i.e., English Language I and II. This subject was taught by us for four hours a week, which were divided into the following sections: one hour for oral presentations and interaction; another hour for grammar and vocabulary; one hour for reading comprehension; and finally, the last hour was devoted to writing. The main aims of this subject are that students develop the five skills in English (listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction). In sum, English Language III deals with academic writing for upper intermediate students in English.

During the academic year 2014-2015 there were 123 students registered in the subject. There were 100 women and 23 men. Most students were between 19 and 20

years old. At the end of the semester, students should have attained level B2 inside the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) proposed by the Council of Europe in 2001. Most of the subjects were Spanish students, but there were 7 Erasmus students, i.e., from other European Universities, registered in the subject from universities in England, France, Poland and Italy. All the students had studied English in primary and secondary education and during the first year of the degree in the core subjects English Language I and II. Most of the students intended to become secondary school English teachers, though there were also students who intended to work as translators or interpreters.

4. Methodology and Research Design

The participating teachers started the semester introducing students to the main text types in English following the classifications proposed by Butt et al. (2000, 2012), De Silva Joyce & Feez (2012), Droga & Humphrey (2003) and Humphrey et al. (2012): recount, narrative, procedure, information report, explanation, exposition and discussion. This gave students the opportunity to analyse the main structure and linguistic characteristics of these foundational genres so that they could have them in mind for their own writing. The pedagogical connections were thus of two types: theory to analysis, and then to reproduction. In addition, some of the texts they were given for the analysis were anti-examples, containing flaws in the sense that they did not follow the main formal and functional characteristics of the genre they belonged to. This was done in order to give students the space to be critical, and thus propose different ways of improving the texts. After that, students were asked to write a report following the examples and guidelines presented in the classroom (see below). From a generic point of view, a report is a factual text used to organise and store information. The basic structure of this text consists of general statement to identify and classify the topic, and a description of various aspects of it (Butt et al., 2000, 2012; De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2012, Droga & Humphrey, 2003, Humphrey et al. 2012). The parameters of the specific report were as follows:

Task: After spending three months in Africa, you have realised that the situation is absolutely extreme, much more than what the world's leading governments care/dare to understand. You decide to write a report to the World Health Organisation's board to make them aware of the problem and the need to take urgent measures to fight against the unstoppable spread of Ebola, which is running wild in Africa and threatening to put the whole world's health at stake.

The report should **be 200-250 words long**. You must also **stick to this genre's format** and include some of the **structures seen in class**, together with objective data and figures. You are welcome to **provide your own advice** as an experienced medical professional and include your opinion as to **what would happen if your ideas were not heeded**. Remember that you must not copy paragraphs or whole sentences from the internet. Having said that, it would be extremely desirable that you **did some research** on the subject and used **some of the vocabulary** that

you will undoubtedly learn. Because this type of genre requires formal style, **please do not use contractions.**

Students were given several weeks to prepare their reports at home before they had to hand them in to their respective teachers (there were two), each of whom was the person assessing them. So that all students could improve their writing skills, the teacher gave individual feedback in each students' report. Moreover, the main positive aspects and features to improve from the corpus of reports were presented in the classrooms anonymously so that all students could act as teachers, either correcting the mistakes found or pointing out the main positive aspects of the texts under analysis.

Initially, the total number of reports analysed was 123, as all students had to complete this compulsory assignment in order to pass the subject. They were marked taking into consideration the main grammatical characteristics of this text type (i.e., nominal groups to build information about the topic, present tense, circumstances of place, as well as the typical EFL focus on punctuation errors, concord, determiner use, word choice, and spelling). It was also observed if students had followed the structure of reports, because this has a clear effect on the communicative end of this text type.

Following our research questions, we examined the overall tendencies in the writing in terms of general strengths and weakness, what aspects of the writing were being assessed, how heavily different aspects of the writing were being weighed, and if there were any relations between certain kinds of writing problems and the overall success of the reports. In theory, by taking a generic, or top-down approach to writing, the students would have a clearer idea of the features which comprise a report; therefore, we hypothesized that an error in the generic structure would have a greater impact on the mark than smaller grammatical errors. In order to measure whether this was indeed the case, a random selection of 49 papers were subjected to secondary analysis by the teachers to determine the following:

1. How many of the problems pointed out by the original markers were due to grammatical errors of various kinds, such as Subject-Verb concord.
2. How many of the writing issues indicated by the original markers were representative of vocabulary problems, such as incorrect word choices.
3. Which problems were indicated as structural, related directly to the generic medium of the report.
4. How many assessed errors were of a semantic nature, in the sense of poor phrasing or syntactically questionable constructions (as opposed to outright word choice errors indicated in #1 above).
5. Whether there were issues being pointed out as "wrong" which were, in fact, within the realm of possibility: in other words, suggested corrections which were in fact a possible choice in the language. These we regarded simply as unnecessary corrections.
6. Whether there were any corrections being pointed out which were simply mistaken, such as grammatical errors which were in fact not incorrect.

7. How many errors were being missed, and if there was there any pattern in terms of which ones were indicated and which ones were not.

Our notion of “error” here was informed both by what the teachers were assessing as conventions not being adhered to, as well as those typically defined as so in writing guides (Irwin, Jovanovic-Krstic & Watson, 2013 provides numerous explanations of various writing issues; Irwin and Jovanovic-Krstic (in press) provides a chapter on prescriptive ‘rules’ in academic writing from a grammatical perspective by employing an SFL approach to explication). The existing marking rubric took into account the following features to provide a score out of ten: Content (2 marks), Structure (2 marks) Vocabulary and Grammar (3 marks), Spelling and Punctuation (3 marks).

It is interesting to note here that the mechanics of the work (as represented by the categories of “Vocabulary and Grammar” and “Spelling and Punctuation”: total of 6 marks) were being assessed disproportionate to the text-level features which were part of the genre-based pedagogy (a total of 4 marks). Such a disproportion is typically a constraint in assessment practices in any classroom, but particularly the L2 classroom where the end assessment aims are often grammatical in nature due to constraints of standardised testing. However, it is actually the nearly-universal success that the students were having in the first two categories (“Content” and “Structure”) which argues for the overall success of the project. Because of the students’ achievements at the generic level, the assessors were able to concentrate more closely on the lexicogrammatical issues which are the focus of most corrective English writing training, and which in these cases were indeed the less successful in terms of the assessment. However, by succeeding at the levels of Content and Structure, students were more likely to also succeed in their mechanics. In fact, when a student made mistakes at the levels of content and structure, he or she jeopardised the success of a text much more than when there were simply issues at the lexical and grammatical levels – and this is despite these being a heavier point of focus in assessment.

The focus here is less on the specifics of grammatical problems in the writing, and more on how those problems are manifested and assessed, though we do examine all of the various issues in the student writing sample, both in those assessed and those not pointed out by the instructors. This approach indicates how successful the Genre-based focus might be in scaffolding L2 student writing, as well as where classrooms might benefit from a further shift in focus so that the assessment is more in line with the approach, and students are given slightly more credit for genre-based knowledge. Despite this, the results do show an indication of several forms of success at both the contextual and content planes. To put it plainly, it appears that when teachers help their students first understand the genre of a text, this provides those students with the scaffolding needed to make better choices at the lexicogrammatical level.

5. Results

This section offers an analysis of students' writing, both in terms of the assessment it received in the class and our own interpretation of that assessment. Our particular focus here are the reports that students wrote during the first part of the semester.

As Figure 1 illustrates, there is a highly-skewed distribution in the marks from the original markers. This skew is due to the parameters delineated in the assignment description and the subsequent assessment procedure, which has a condition for automatic failure: any of the reports which contained more than six grammatical errors were automatically assigned a mark of 4/10, which ensured a cluster of marks by the teacher at that point. So, while a normal distribution is depicted by something resembling a Bell Curve, we instead have the following left-skewed curve in these marks:

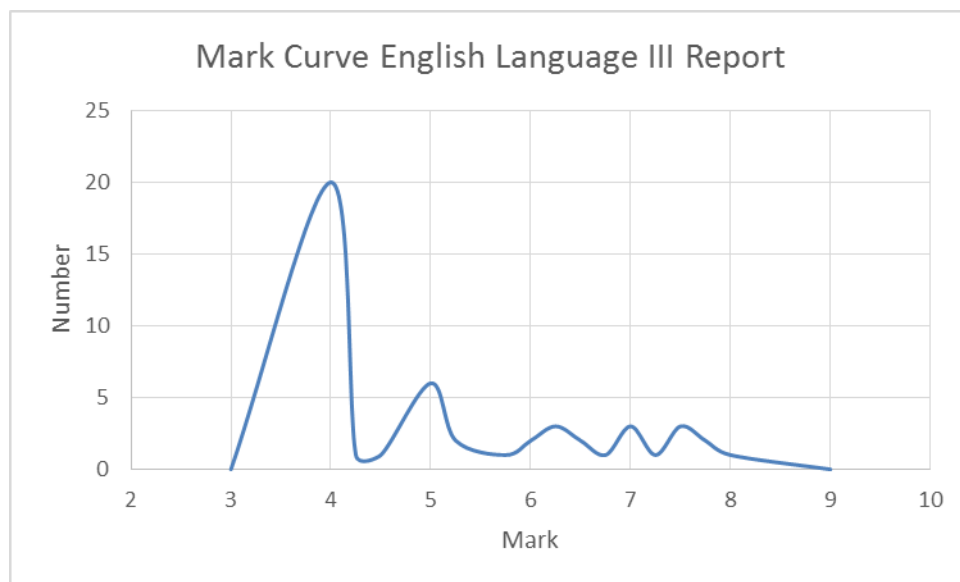


Figure 1. Mark curve in reports written in the subject English Language III.

The mean average mark for the assignment was 5.3/10, with a median of 5. Because not all of the assignments indicated the mark breakdowns in terms of the aforementioned categories of Content, Structure, Grammar and Vocabulary, Spelling and Punctuation, the picture in terms of the distribution of these is a little sketchier. However, discounting the failing assignments without a clear breakdown in the areas of failure, there are 31 assignments with the following average assessment within each of these categories:

- Content: 1.40/2 (70%)
- Structure: 1.31/2 (65.5%)
- Vocabulary and Grammar: 1.84/3 (61.3%)
- Spelling and Punctuation: 1.56/3 (52%)

This reflects that in general, the most successful assignments are being assessed by the instructors as having strong content and structure, but weaker mechanics. “Successful assignments” means those that follow the formal and functional characteristics of the text type and are assessed as such. This observation is also in line with the overall thrust of the programme, in which the genre-based pedagogy brings to the forefront consideration of how structure can best be staged to achieve communicative goals, with a particular focus in terms of topic (thus the clear success in terms of “Content” above).

The error analysis we conducted shows some interesting patterns, particularly in terms of the reasons such a significant number of these reports did not succeed in terms of the assignment parameters: in other words, the reason for the large spike of assignments receiving 4/10 for having 6 or more errors. On average, the markers themselves were making less than one error per paper, with clusters of incorrect corrections predominating on those assignments which were having more trouble with grammar overall – perhaps indicating a kind of “grammar fatigue” on the part of teachers who were trying to point out errors exhaustively. Such fatigue is also evident in the missed errors, though less clearly: on average, there were 4.3 grammatical problems not pointed out on a given paper, though these ranged widely, with some assessments having missed as many as 13, and several being complete. Similarly, there were relatively few unnecessary corrections, with just over 1.5 on average per paper, though in some cases there were as many as 8 of these being pointed out in a single text.

The markers therefore were in general accurate in their corrections, though not completely thorough in them; note, though, that this is not a criticism in the sense that markers *should* attempt to correct absolutely everything in a given submission. Where it is significant, though, is in a marking policy in which those papers with more than six errors are to be given a failing grade. In fact, none of the papers in this data set included fewer than six grammatical errors, though this is more of a criticism of the assessment methodology than of a lack of rigour in marking: most errors are not serious enough impediments to clear writing that they would warrant failing grades beyond what the assessors have already awarded.

Even looking at the summary of those grammatical issues pointed out from the original assessors, we note that on average, these papers contain 7.88 indicated errors. There are also 2.39 problems per paper dealing with vocabulary, often as a result of direct translation leading to a word not commonly used in English (and indeed, a few of the students seemed to have been using Google Translate or a similar resource to complete their reports). This could also potentially explain the similar problems with semantic problems which were often labelled as issues in “style”: this was manifested by students phrasing in marginal or unacceptable ways, of which there were also on average 2.39 per report. These had a slightly flatter distribution over the data set, although the range was still between zero and nine, and those assignments which had a large number of such errors were more likely to be assessed as failing the objectives of the assignment.

Where the error analysis becomes interesting is in the rarer issue of structure. In fact, given the marks awarded in the original assessment, we could expect these categories to be relatively problematic: the structural assessment even in the successful papers was an average mark of 1.31 out of 2. However, many of these types of problems were left unstated, though when they did appear they were indeed significant. On average, there were .37 structural comments per paper, many of which pointed out the problems of confusing the report with a letter – although this report was indeed in the form of a letter to the World Health Organization, which is a potential site of student confusion. Given that the genre had already been discussed, though, it was the texts which lacked specific stages which were ultimately deemed unsuccessful, and as such these were often automatic failures at the task.

5. Discussion

These reports were largely successful in terms of the adherence to generic conventions. The challenges faced by both students and teachers were predominantly relegated to the realm of lexicogrammar. However, this is not a criticism of the teaching method; in fact, the very concentration on genre largely freed the instructors to concentrate on their assessments in terms of realisation and to assess whether the structures chosen in terms of style and mechanics served the purposes of the overall text type.

Genre Theory specifically uses materials and tasks based on authentic language data in order to promote student awareness of the conventions and procedures of the genre in question, and how writers can utilise language in various ways to make use of these specific language patterns. Using the Genre approach to teach about whole texts in context makes it possible to:

- establish a relationship between the meanings we want to express, the language chosen to express them and the context in which those meanings make sense.
- observe how language elements in a text are related to and depended on each other so that the construction of the whole text makes sense in context.
- show students that to construct effective texts they need to make conscious choices depending on the purpose(s) they want to accomplish with the text.

After students have been exposed to some good examples of text and they have analysed their structure and grammatical characteristics following Genre Theory, they are able to select the appropriate lexicogrammatical choices depending on the subject matter and the text type they are asked to write, which makes them competent to establish a relationship between text and context.

In response to the research questions, then, the data demonstrates that the problems these students are producing tend to be at the lexicogrammatical level, but that those students who have successfully mastered the genre do have fewer problems of this type as well. Teachers still tend to be focused on these lexicogrammatical errors due to the nature of assessment practices in this context, but even so, multiple

lexicogrammatical errors were discounted, particularly when the overall text was a more successful example of its type. This is the case even despite the fact that generic elements do not explicitly form the criteria for the assessment. Thus, in terms of positive classroom change, a focus on genre does assist the students even with traditional assessments still in place; however, a shift to take some of the stress away from the content plane towards the context plane would improve the chances for success for all students. Further, such an approach would empower them in seeing how understanding texts via a theoretically top-down perspective (i.e., whole text instead of comprising simple sets of elements) is actually an important contribution to the kinds of meaning normally relegated to the study of lexis and grammar.

6. Conclusions

This paper has explored the application of SFL genre theory to writing practice, and the successes and challenges of doing so in the specific context of an English L2 classroom in Spain. The analysis of the data set has indicated that the approach of Genre Theory also has positive results on the relatively more extensive errors in mechanics, while allowing students to contextualise these issues in terms of the overall success of the text as per communicative purpose staged along generic expectations. In this way, when students understand the contextual parameters of a particular text type and its path to achieving its goal, they are more likely to write effectively. The majority of this data set presents successful reports, although the requirement of indicating the other errors in the writing leads to average marks which do not necessarily reflect the success at this level.

Genre Theory helps students keep in mind that people write texts within a specific context and for a specific audience. Moreover, this approach is useful so that students can become aware of the different meaning potentials (all the choices that can be made) in English depending on the social purpose of the text and the communicative end. We are convinced that a larger study, which can take into account student development through such a course, will provide evidence of the success of this theory in contextualising and motivating students in their writing.

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