Genre Learning:
Resources, Strategies, and Contexts

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Genre-based learning and teaching have increasingly become popular these days in the learning and teaching of second language writing in post-secondary institutions. But what is the nature of genre knowledge? What is genre-based teaching? In what way is it or is it not effective in developing English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' knowledge of disciplinary genres? What factors contribute to the building of expert genre knowledge? These are some of the fascinating questions that have gripped the interest of both researchers and practitioners in the field of second language writing, but many facets of these issues have so far remained elusive as there has been a dearth of empirical research on how genre knowledge is learned and developed. Thus it is timely for the publication of Christine Tardy's book *Building Genre Knowledge*, which attempts to answer the afore-mentioned and other pertinent questions by exploring the challenges ESL learners face in learning disciplinary genre knowledge. BGK is a second book in the series of Second Language Writing edited by Paul Kei Matsuda and published by Parlor Press. In this book, Tardy focuses particularly on the genre learning experience of four international graduate students studying in an American university through their participation in an ESL writing course, disciplinary content courses, and disciplinary research.

The book has nine chapters, with the first and the last chapter devoted to theoretical conceptualization, the second chapter to the description of the research context, and the rest of the book to the graduate students' development of knowledge of six different types of genres (i.e., job application cover letters, student-chosen genres, presentation slides, lab reports, Master's Thesis, and conference papers).

In Chapter 1 Genre and Genre Knowledge, Tardy lays out the theoretical background for the studies in subsequent chapters. While acknowledging the value of the concept of genres in facilitating learners' development of writing

expertise, she does not shy away from the controversy over and criticisms against genre-centered pedagogy. After introducing some related constructs which underline the theory and practice of specialized writing, including practice, task, discourse and genre, Tardy goes on to explicate the concept of genre networks as well as various theoretical models of expertise. On the basis of these theoretical foundations, she then presents a theory of genre knowledge and a descriptive model for developing this knowledge as a multilingual writer. According to Tardy, genre knowledge comprises four dimensions: formal, process, rhetorical, and subject-matter, and genre knowledge development is not a linear accumulation of new structural knowledge but rather a process of restructuring which brings about qualitative changes to the internal organization of knowledge.

In Chapter 2, Tardy introduces her methodology, the research context, the four writers, and the social and individual histories that they brought to their graduate studies. In order to understand the processes of genre knowledge building, she uses situated qualitative research as a primary methodology, trying to follow than control "the often random and unpredictable influences that seeped into the research context, affecting the writers' behaviors and processes in a multitude of ways" (p.28). In understanding ESL writers' genre knowledge construction, Tardy uses multiple data sources, including the writers' texts, texts the writers drew upon or were guided by in their writing tasks, oral interviews with the writers and their writing course instructor, audiotapes of the writers' conference with their writing course instructor, observations and field notes of their writing class sessions, and written feedback from the writers' disciplinary instructors and mentors. The four writers were ESL graduate students studying in a U.S. university. They were required to take a course entitled Written Communication for Graduate Students, in which students wrote five major assignments: a writer's autobiography, a CV/resume, a cover letter, a conference poster or presentation, and a final project chosen by each individual student.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the strategies and resources for genre development that are available in the writing classroom. Chapter 3, Learning through Other People's Words, examines how the four writers built genre knowledge in the classroom as they wrote job application cover letters. These writers had little previous experience in writing this type of genres and approached the assignment in different ways. One writer used sample texts as his most important strategy for learning about cover letters, mining the sample texts for conventional phrases and discursive structures. The second writer, however, wrote his letter by patching it from multiple online sources and learned to re-position himself as a writer and borrow a different discursive identity by adopting writing conventions which would sound selfish or arrogant in Japanese. The third writer made use of both outside resources and class sample texts to organize his letters. The fourth writer also learned which parts to use through exposure to multiple samples and discussion in the classroom. From these genre learning experiences, Tardy concludes that classrooms provide "tremendous opportunities for honing writers' borrowing skills, helping them learn to appropriate other texts in both sound and effective ways as they begin to explore new genres" (p. 99).

In Chapter 4, after reviewing literature on the potential benefits as well as the

pedagogical and theoretical principles of genre-based pedagogy, Tardy goes on to study in what way explicit genre analysis in classroom contexts does or does not help in the four writers' writing in a genre of their choice, with their choices ranging from grant proposals, article reviews, conference abstracts, and graduate school statement of purpose essays. She finds that most of the writers failed to "develop a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between formal textual features and socio-rhetorical context …, generally considered to be the goal of genre-based pedagogy" (p. 126). Tardy proposes some possible reasons for this apparent failure, including students' opting for minimal investment in completing the assignment, and lack of requirement for students to carry out a written genre analysis, collect and analyze a small corpus of sample texts and interview expert users of the genre. She advises that for genre analysis to be beneficial for students, it "cannot stop at the analytic stage," but "should include application of analytic skills to the writing students encounter outside of class and should aim to engage students in the sociorhetorical contexts of the writing" (p. 133).

In Chapter 5, Accumulated Exposure and the Learning of a Multimodal Genre, Tardy examines how writers approached the genre of presentation slides in both classroom and disciplinary contexts. She finds that the writing classroom did not seem to exert a big influence on the four writers' understanding of the genre. Rather, the writers seemed to have gained their knowledge of the genre through accumulated exposure and use in their disciplinary contexts. Tardy explains that the apparent lack of impact of the classroom instructions on students' knowledge building for presentation slides is due to the classroom's lack of focus on issues of disciplinary convention or expectation and the assignment's relatively low stakes for the students (i.e., students did not need to present their slides orally and no grade was received).

In Chapter 6, Repeated Practice: Lab Reports in the Graduate Classroom, Tardy explores how two of the four writers built their knowledge of the genre of lab reports in their engineering and science courses. By examining the two writers' experiences with lab report writing, Tardy shows that repeated practice, that is, writing regular lab reports for their disciplinary content courses, played a crucial role in shaping the understanding and development of the two writers' "rhetorical, process, and content knowledge of 'doing lab work'" (p. 200).

In Chapter 7, The Culmination of Graduate Research: Learning to Write a Master's Thesis, Tardy traces the development of one writer's knowledge of the master's thesis genre. At the beginning, the writer had limited knowledge of the thesis genre, but this knowledge gradually grew within a period of 11 months during which he conducted his master's research and wrote his thesis. The development of his knowledge of the thesis genre was attributable to a great part to his advisor, who not only led him to his research topic but also provided him with extensive feedback on his three drafts, with the feedback ranging from language use and thesis organization to technical content and rhetorical structure. The writer's previous experience in the writing classroom also helped him in some way, particularly in his understanding of formality and style in academic writing.

In Chapter 8, Writing for/in a Discipline: First Forays into the Larger Research World, Tardy examines the growth of one of the writers in his process of morphing into a research writer with increasing expertise. To do this, she traces the changes in the writer's knowledge of the conference/research paper genre through the conference or journal papers that he wrote over time and through the oral interviews with him. These changes are manifest in at least two ways: the writer's increasingly more explicit attempts to claim significance for his work and his evolving sense of self as a member of a disciplinary community. According to Tardy, the writer was able to develop greater expertise in research writing by participating in the networks of research genres, moving among and across genres within these networks, and adopting multiple roles and positions of agency (such as research consumer and manuscript reviewer).

Chapter 9, Building Genre Knowledge, is the final chapter of the book. Tardy uses it to outline "a working theory of how writers build genre knowledge, particularly knowledge of very specialized genres used by disciplinary and professional groups" (p. 259). Specifically, she attempts to address three main questions: 1) How do writers move toward expert genre knowledge? 2)What impacts the shape of genre learning? 3) Can genres be taught? To answer the first question, Tardy first isolates six main resources and strategies that learners draw upon to develop their genre knowledge, which include prior experience and repeated practice, textual interactions, oral interactions, mentoring and disciplinary participation, shifting roles within a genre network, and resource availability. Then, Tardy explicates the three main domains where genre knowledge is typically developed: writing classrooms, disciplinary classrooms, and disciplinary practice. To answer the second question (i.e., what impacts the shape of genre learning?), Tardy proposes three parameters of individual, community, and task to provide a framework for understanding the variability in genre learning. As to the third question (i.e., can genres be taught? or more specifically, can genres be taught in writing classrooms?), Tardy's answer is positive. Though she rightly notes that it is not possible for writers to develop genre expertise solely within a classroom, she argues that the writing classroom offers many advantages for genre learning, including the provision of many textual interactions and the availability of simplified classroom writing for ease of learning. In order to promote genre learning within the context of writing classrooms, Tardy provides three useful pedagogical principles: 1) Build a genre-rich environment in which students have access to a range of strategies and resources; 2) help students develop complex and dynamic views of texts—but also recognize that they may at certain points need to simplify texts for ease of learning; and 3) adopt a network-based view of genre.

Genre studies have flourished in the last two decades. But most of these studies tend to be descriptive in nature, seeking to discover the generic features and rhetorical structures of some specialized genres, the most notable example of which would be the research paper genre (e.g., Swales, 1990, 2004; for more recent examples of such studies, see Bhatia & Gotti, 2006). While these descriptive studies have contributed to our understanding of the linguistic and organizational characteristics of these genres and sometimes to the complex relations between

the exhibited formal features and related contextual constraints, the application of these findings to ESL or ESP writing classrooms is not without controversy, despite the fact that genre-based pedagogy has started to gain popularity in the teaching of writing. This is especially the case with the absence of empirical studies to support or discourage such an application. Thus Tardy's longitudinal study of ESL writers' development of specialized genre knowledge in classroom and non-classroom settings makes a tremendous contribution in this respect.

As a research-based monograph, it is self-evident that this book is useful to genre researchers. First, it covers a number of genres that student writers often encounter, including job application cover letters, presentation slides, lab reports, master's thesis, and conference/research papers. It also devotes one chapter to the evaluation of the usefulness of genre analysis typically employed in genre-based writing classrooms. Second, Tardy's choice of situated qualitative research methodology is apt for the untangling of the myriad of factors that contribute to ESL writers' genre learning.

Other than genre researchers, ESL and ESP teachers should also find the book immensely useful. The findings of the case studies reported in the book and its theoretical formulations for genre learning should have very direct relevance for the practitioners when they design their course and conduct their class in maximizing the potential of the course or classroom activity for the development of learners' genre knowledge and expertise.

THE REVIEWER

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