

Genre-based teaching and assessment in secondary English classrooms

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates how genre can be used as an organisational principle to interweave teaching and assessment in the L2 school context. Relying on data from interviews and lesson observations gathered from two Secondary 1 (that is, Grade 7) Hong Kong classrooms, the study sought to discover how teachers implemented genre-based teaching and assessment in traditional product- and exam-oriented writing classrooms, students' and teachers' evaluation of the approach, as well as the factors that might facilitate or restrain the genre innovation. The findings show that teachers worked collaboratively and shared a common vision in implementing genre-based teaching and assessment, making sure that they integrated teaching and assessment through a focus on genre. Although the limitations of the genre approach were noted, the innovation was generally well received by students and teachers, who felt that the innovation had enabled students to improve their writing and helped teachers enhance their practice. A few facilitative and inhibitory factors are discussed. The findings suggest that the implementation of genre-based teaching and assessment has to be considered within the ecology of teachers' work.

KEYWORDS: Genre, assessment, second language writing.

INTRODUCTION

In second language contexts, genre pedagogies are increasingly being recognised as useful ways to help teachers provide targeted instruction to meet the language and writing needs of students (Tardy, 2011). Whether used with older or younger learners, a genre approach can have great relevance for L2 students learning to write, since the identification and analysis of textual features in genre-based classrooms can equip students with knowledge about the linguistic and structural elements of different kinds of writing. In second language (L2) contexts, which this study addresses, student writers tend to focus on lower-level concerns, as writing is primarily used as a vehicle for language practice (Ortega, 2009). A genre-based approach can introduce students to the social dimension of writing and reveal that lexico-grammatical features are not an end in themselves in the learning-to-write process, but rather a means to an end, enabling students to make meaning for the right audience in an appropriate context. Thus, genre is a promising tool to sensitise L2 learners to the purpose, audience and context of writing and help them understand how the structural and language features of written texts can contribute to meaning making.

Much of the existing literature about genre focuses on its application for teaching, while its role in assessment has not received sufficient attention. Informed by recent literature on assessment for learning (for example, Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2004; Crooks, 2011; Jones, 2010; Wiliam, 2011), which uses assessment to improve learning and teaching, the study attempts to explore the role genre can play in assessment and, specifically, how it can be used to

interweave assessment and instruction. Motivated by the paucity of genre research that addresses both instruction and assessment, the study investigates genre-based teaching and assessment in Secondary 1 (that is, Grade 7) writing classrooms in Hong Kong. The bulk of genre research exists at tertiary level in both college composition and L2 writing (Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011). A genre approach to writing and assessment has yet to be widely applied in secondary L2 contexts. By focusing on secondary L2 learners and addressing both instruction and assessment, therefore, the study is able to add new knowledge to existing genre research.

GENRE, GENRE INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT

“Genre” is a term used for identifying different types of text (Hyland, 2004) and describing genre has increasingly taken a central role in writing theory and pedagogy and has been referred to as a “major paradigm shift” (Johns, 2002, p. 3) in literacy studies. In justifying a post-process approach, Atkinson (2003) states that we have reached an era that requires us to view L2 writing research and pedagogy from a broader perspective than that dominated by the process pedagogy of the latter part of the 20th Century.

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts, genre pedagogy is considered the “main institutionalised alternative to process pedagogy currently on offer” (Cheng, 2006, p. 76). While process pedagogies place an emphasis on thinking and composing, learner-centredness, and the facilitative role of teachers in the writing classroom, genre-based approaches emphasise the written product as a means to make meaning for the specific audience and context, with the teacher playing a crucial role in providing instructional scaffolding. Process and genre, however, are not mutually exclusive (see Badger & White, 2000), since the teaching of genre can be combined with a process approach in order to balance thinking and composing with an end product.

The three schools of genre (Hyon, 1996) are well documented in the literature (Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2002) – namely the Australian/Sydney genre approach grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL); the ESP perspective; and New Rhetoric. As a pedagogical tool, SFL and ESP perspectives of genre are premised on the assumption that students learn best when they are provided with explicit knowledge about the types of texts they need to learn to read and write, as well as the language and structural features specific to those texts. As SFL is mostly applied in school settings, the study draws upon this approach to genre. Knowledge of genre can facilitate consciousness-raising (Sengupta, Forey & Hamp-Lyons, 1999), enhance academic literacy (Cheng, 2007; 2008), develop students’ self-efficacy, and improve writing performance (Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011). However, critics point to “low road transfer” as a result of genre pedagogies that inappropriately present text-types as rigid formats (see Johns, 2011). Although useful for novice L2 students, it is argued that generic representations of practices as stable and rigid fail to facilitate transfer to other learning situations (Macbeth, 2009). Johns (2011) therefore suggests that genre pedagogies should help students see texts as “both temporarily structured and evolving”, so that they can “draw from prior knowledge of texts but be open to the demands of a new situation or assignment” (p. 64).

Aside from instruction, a focus on genre has direct ramifications for assessment in the writing classroom. Hyland (2004) outlines some advantages of genre-based assessment, including the generation of a set of explicit genre-specific assessment criteria to guide students' writing, assistance for learners in setting relevant goals for writing based on the explicit criteria, enabling teachers to better prepare students for writing assessment, as well as helping teachers integrate teaching and assessment. Genre-based assessment also lends itself to criterion-referenced assessment to provide clear information about competency levels, for instance, through the use of genre-based assessment forms that include scales for assessing the extent to which assessment criteria or targets are met. Analytic scales for general domains like content, organisation, language and mechanics, therefore, can have greater instructional value if they reflect genre elements (Wolf & Gearhart, 1993).

Integration between instruction and assessment through a focus on genre finds theoretical support from the literature on assessment for learning, whose "first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning" (Black et al., 2004, p. 2) through interweaving assessment and instruction. In assessment for learning, assessment is a "central process in effective instruction" (Wiliam, 2011, p. 3); students need to be clear of the learning goals, task criteria and performance standards (Crooks, 2011), so that they know how to improve on their work (Jones, 2010). In genre-based classrooms, articulating a set of genre-specific assessment criteria enables teachers to unify teaching and assessment by making sure that they teach according to the assessment criteria and share learning goals with students. This is in line with one of the major principles of assessment for learning. Also, assessment for learning is part of effective planning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). In implementing genre-based teaching and assessment, teachers' planning is crucial, since genre-specific assessment criteria have to be drawn up before teaching and guide teachers' instruction. In genre-based classrooms, the primary purpose is to improve student learning of writing through integrating assessment with instruction.

While many studies have investigated the effectiveness of genre-based instruction (Tardy, 2006), less attention has been paid to the use of genre-based assessment to support instruction. The literature on the inter-relationship between teaching and assessment in genre pedagogy, though limited, has underlined the relevance of genre theory to both teaching and assessment (Wyatt-Smith, 1997). Research on teaching expressive writing to students with learning disabilities in the USA (Gersten & Baker, 2001), for example, has highlighted that a key factor to effective writing instruction is a strong link between assessment and instruction, where provision of feedback is informed by explicit instruction in genre conventions. To shed light on the inter-relationship between genre-based teaching and assessment, the study reported on here aimed to address not only instruction but also assessment in a genre approach, mainly to find out how teachers undertook an innovation to integrate genre-based instruction and assessment in the L2 school context, how such an innovation was perceived by students and teachers, and the factors that facilitated or inhibited the innovation.

GENRE, WRITING AND ASSESSMENT IN THE HONG KONG CONTEXT

In Hong Kong, the notion of genre is relatively new to teachers. In recent years, it has begun to occupy a more significant place in the writing classroom, mainly as a result

of curriculum reform (Curriculum Development Council & the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2007). In 2009, a new senior secondary (NSS) curriculum was implemented in Hong Kong schools (reducing secondary schooling from seven to six years and increasing university education from three to four years). In the NSS curriculum guide for English Language, it is clearly stipulated that one of the goals of writing is to produce texts “using appropriate tone, style, and register, as well as the salient features of different genres” (Curriculum Development Council & the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2007, p. 49). Secondary teachers in Hong Kong have, therefore, become aware that their instruction has to, in one way or another, address genres, which are often used interchangeably with “text-types”.

In Hong Kong schools, writing as a language skill is mostly carried out in traditional, product- and exam-oriented classrooms that emphasise summative assessment, where instruction is under-emphasised (Carless, 2011; Lo & Hyland, 2007). With assessment for learning being promulgated in the recent English language assessment reform locally (see Curriculum Development Institute, 2004), the potential of genre as a pedagogical and assessment tool to integrate instruction and assessment and to improve student learning is worth exploring. Given that initiatives for change in education tend to be met with obstacles (Cheng & Townsend, 2000; Fullan, 1991, 1993) such as teachers’ heavy workload (Cheng, 2008; Morris, Lo & Adamson, 2000), school leaders’ poor management of change, teachers’ lack of understanding of change, and weak teacher collaboration (Tong, 2010), it was seen as interesting to find out how teachers might strengthen writing instruction through a focus on genre in traditional exam-oriented writing classrooms, and specifically how genre-based instruction and assessment, as an innovation, might be received by both teachers and students.

THE STUDY

Context of the study

The study was part of a larger multi-site case study that investigated secondary English teachers’ attempts to implement assessment for learning in the writing classroom. One of the participating schools selected genre as its focus and organisational principle for their implementation of assessment for learning, and this paper reports the findings of the case study conducted in this school, focusing specifically on the genre approach and how it was adopted to interweave assessment and instruction. The school is a band one secondary school in Hong Kong (band one being the best of three bands, that is bands 1, 2 and 3, in terms of students’ academic abilities) using English as a medium of instruction. The school was selected not because of its banding but because of my personal contact with the teachers as a teacher educator, and hence ease of access to the school. Both before and at the time of the study, none of the participating teachers was my student. In the study I did not provide assistance with the development of genre-based teaching and assessment materials, nor did I choose the genre focus and interfere with the instructional and assessment practices. My only input was provided about a month before the commencement of the study, where I was invited, as a teacher educator, to give a school-based workshop on assessment for learning in writing; however, I did not focus specifically on a genre approach in the workshop. Throughout the study, I

positioned myself as an outsider, primarily a researcher who approached the naturalistic investigation with an open mind. The understanding of the participating teachers was that I would look into their genre-based practice and shared salient findings and insights with them at the end of the study.

The genre innovation was implemented in all the S1 classes (four in total) of the participating school. As two of the S1 English teachers volunteered to participate in the study, data of the case study was collected from two S1 classes, each with about 35 students. In Hong Kong, by the time students enter S1, they have studied English (as a subject) for about 10 years – three to four years at the pre-school and six years at the primary level. It is hard to generalise the English abilities of S1 students in Hong Kong English-medium schools, but they are among the top 25% of students admitted to English medium secondary schools. As far as writing is concerned, students at S1 level are able to produce short pieces of about 100 words.

For years, the participating school had been adopting conventional approaches in the writing classrooms, with teachers focusing mainly on the formal aspects of language, assigning topics, and asking students to write in relatively exam-like situations (that is, requiring single drafts within a set time limit). When marking student writing, teachers used general assessment criteria including content, language and organisation, and evaluated writing with numeric scores, marking every error. The teaching of writing consisted mainly of teachers' general reminders of grammar structures and vocabulary specific to the writing task, and provision of ideas for the content of the writing. Such teaching usually took 10 to 15 minutes and was thus rather minimal. As for assessment, it was primarily summative in orientation, with a great deal of focus on scores.

Research questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How did teachers go about implementing genre-based teaching and assessment in the traditional writing classroom?
2. How did students and teachers evaluate the genre approach?
3. What factors might facilitate or restrain the genre innovation in the school context?

Participants, data collection and data analysis

Data collection was carried out in the two S1 classes taught by Teachers A and B. Both of them had a BA degree in English. Teacher A was a Cantonese-speaker with over ten years' teaching experience, whereas Teacher B was a native English speaker with twenty years' teaching experience, mainly in Australia. Six students each from the classes taught by Teachers A and B (selected by the teachers based on their writing scores to represent three different proficiency levels – high, mid and low) took part in the study. The 12 participating students were all Cantonese-speakers, aged from 12 to 13.

The study lasted one academic year. Methods of data collection included the following:

1. Four writing lessons (each lesson lasting 40 minutes) were observed in the classes taught by Teachers A and B, respectively, at different points of time in the academic year – two in the first term and two in the second (with about a gap of two months between observations), yielding a total of eight lesson observations. The lessons covered different phases of writing, including two lessons on pre-writing instructional activities, one lesson on peer evaluation, and one on teachers' post-writing feedback. The lessons were video-taped and field notes were taken during the observation.
2. Pre- and post-study individual interviews were conducted with Teachers A and B. The interviews were conducted in English and audio-taped. All together, four teacher interviews were conducted, two with Teachers A and B separately at the beginning of the study, and two at the end of the study.
3. Post-study focus group interviews (six in each group) with conducted with the selected students taught by Teacher A and Teacher B respectively. To put the students at ease, the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the students' mother tongue, and were audio-taped. In total, four student focus group interviews were conducted, two before the study, and two after the study, with the students taught by Teachers A and B respectively.
4. Documents used in the observed lessons and for providing feedback were collected. These include teachers' self-designed instructional materials and feedback forms.

The qualitative teacher interview data were transcribed and sent to the participating teachers for verification. The Cantonese student interview data were translated and transcribed. A paradigmatic approach (Goodfellow, 1998) was adopted in data analysis, where themes pertaining to the research questions were generated and the data coded according to the themes. The field notes were read and re-read, with salient points extracted to shed light on the genre pedagogy observed in the classrooms. The documents collected were reviewed to illuminate the genre focus as well as the link between instruction and assessment, if any, in the genre approach.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

How teachers implemented genre-based teaching and assessment – RQ1

To answer the first research question about how teachers implemented genre-based teaching and assessment, I draw upon data gathered from teacher interviews, lesson observations and related documents gathered from the teachers. The implementation of genre-based teaching and assessment in the study can be described in terms of three phases: planning (using interview data), genre-based instruction (using mainly observational data, corroborated by interview data), and genre-based assessment (using interview data and relevant documents).

First, the interview data showed the importance of planning in the teachers' genre innovation. To begin with, before the school year began, the S1 teachers got together and exchanged views on the benefits of a genre approach in the writing classroom.

The impetus came from the school's new curriculum initiative that focused on "assessment for learning" in the academic year in which the study was conducted. The teachers reached a consensus about the potential of genre as a pedagogical and assessment tool to help improve the teaching, learning and assessment of writing. Then they made an overall plan for the whole academic year (with a specific focus on the recount genre), divided up the work, developed teaching resources and genre-based feedback forms, and shared them among colleagues teaching the same form level. Teacher B described the collaboration as follows:

There was a general consensus first in terms of the genre, text types and so on. And then as each task rolled around on the teaching calendar, there was also a general agreement about the marking criteria. And I also appreciate a lot the resources that we share among colleagues in terms of pre-task, sometimes post-task.

In the second phase, teachers implemented genre-based instruction in the classroom. As shown in the lesson observation data, in their instructional approach both Teachers A and B followed a similar procedure based on the teaching-learning cycle proposed by Feez (1998) – that is, setting the context, modelling and deconstruction of texts, joint construction, and independent construction. Pre-writing activities consisted of the use of mini-text analysis tasks based on sample texts. For instance, in a lesson taught by Teacher B, students were shown how to write a biography using model texts about US President George Bush and film star Jackie Chan, which helped them understand the structural elements of a biography.

A range of activities were used to engage students in textual analysis. Teacher A adopted a similar explicit instructional approach. In one observed lesson, Teacher A focused on "diary", deconstructed model texts together with students, and highlighted typical structural and language features of the diary genre. Aside from genre-based instruction, efforts were also made to share the genre-specific assessment criteria explicitly with students at the instructional stage. The criteria used for assessing the diary genre, for instance, were established through the pre-writing activities, helping students understand the structural elements of a diary (namely, orientation, events and re-orientation), as well as typical lexico-grammatical features, such as the past tense and appropriate adjectives to describe the events. Using a genre approach, thus, the teachers established the success criteria early on at the pre-writing stage, helping students understand their learning goals for the target genre. This, according to Chappuis (2009), is a useful assessment for learning strategy that enables students to see the close connection between assessment and learning. In the teacher interview data, the teachers affirmed their instructional approach by depicting the link between instruction and assessment. Teacher A said: "I try to make sure that the students understood the hallmarks, the features of the genre, so we'll look at the model texts and we would deconstruct the text." Teacher B elaborated as follows:

Often ten to fifteen minutes of a particular lesson would be spent going through the criteria in detail, trying to make the connection between the pre-tasks and any other homework tasks with the specific criteria that we've been talking about. Yes, because inside the feedback form, all the criteria have been stated, so that also set the goals of writing the genre.

Aside from pre-writing input that integrated instruction with assessment, in a peer evaluation (as part of instructional activities) lesson conducted by Teachers A and B respectively, there was clear evidence to show the integration of assessment and teaching. In the lesson, students evaluated their peers' writing using the genre-specific assessment criteria established by the teachers in the pre-writing stage. In both lessons, the teachers included selected foci for peer evaluation – namely, peer editing with reference to specific language items (such as verb tenses and adjectives) – and students reviewed their peers' texts paying specific attention to these selected focuses. Overall, the genre approach helped students become familiarised with the assessment criteria through peer evaluation and come to a better understanding of the teachers' expectations of the writing task. Reflecting on peer evaluation, Teacher A remarked that it had made students become “more active in the writing classroom” and “more aware of the assessment criteria”.

The third phase of the implementation was genre-based assessment, which was strongly linked to instruction. The genre-specific criteria, which were explicitly shared with students at the instructional stage, were clearly represented in a feedback form that guided teachers' assessment (see sample in Appendix 1). Teacher A said, “It seems all in a melting pot...because assessment takes the key role in the learning-teaching cycle.” In the genre approach adopted by the teachers in the study, assessment had a pivotal role to play in the instructional cycle, instead of being viewed as an “additional” component of writing as in their previous approach. Teacher B further added:

I assessed always in line of what I had taught them, and it was reflected in the evaluation forms. I would go about a wide range of the pre-tasks before finalising the form of criteria so that I knew they better reflected what we covered in the pre-tasks.

As mentioned above, the teachers deliberated on the assessment criteria at the lesson planning stage and shared them with students during the instructional stage, making sure that what was covered in the teaching was reflected in the feedback form. Review of the teacher feedback forms showed a close match between instructional foci and the assessment criteria. In the teachers' post-feedback lessons, specific foci of the genre-based lessons were highlighted to reinforce students' learning. For instance, in Teacher A's post-feedback lesson on diary writing, she returned students' compositions and asked them to evaluate their own and their peers' writing in terms of the adjectives they had used to describe the events in the diary as well as their feelings. Such a post-feedback activity enabled the teachers to foster a close connection between assessment and instruction, using the assessment criteria to remind students of what they had learnt in the instructional stage.

It is important to note that in spite of the innovation delineated above, genre-based teaching and assessment were carried out against the backdrop of an assessment culture that required teachers to adopt conventional practices in traditional writing classrooms, such as marking all written errors meticulously, treating writing primarily as a product, and evaluating writing summatively with numeric scores (according to content, organisation, accuracy, as well as “genre”, a newly added component to reflect the focus of the innovation). Such conventional practices were, to some extent, at odds with the principles of genre-based teaching and assessment adopted by the

participating teachers. For instance, while the teachers preferred giving focused feedback with reference to the genre-specific assessment criteria in the feedback form and putting less emphasis on error feedback, they found it difficult to do away with the entrenched practice required by their school. Teacher B explained:

Personally I prefer targeted marking...it must be discouraging and sometimes I think students must think, well, would I ever master this language (if they received essays back full of red ink). It must be defeating and frustrating.

While detailed error feedback could discourage and confuse students, and hence impinge negatively on the uptake of the genre innovation, it was a policy that was hard to change, as evident in Teacher B's remark: "I'm not going to be a salmon that swims upstream. I'm not going to fight against the school policy."

Another example of the tension between the genre innovation and conventional practices was the teachers' wish to promote formative genre-specific feedback through multiple drafting and peer evaluation on the one hand, and the need to ask students to write within a time limit and produce single drafts on the other. Although the teachers wanted to combine a genre with a process approach, in reality they were constrained by the lack of time, which was a feature of the exam-driven culture in Hong Kong. As a result, for most of the writing tasks, students performed one-shot writing, and they engaged in multiple drafting and peer feedback only occasionally. In the study, while genre-based assessment enabled teachers to foster a closer link between teaching and assessment, they were faced with contextual constraints that did not allow them to fully promote formative feedback through multiple drafting, active student involvement (for example, through peer feedback), and focused revision on a regular basis.

Moreover, they had to adhere to the conventional practice that required them to give summative scores to student writing. Although the genre-specific feedback form was intended to draw students' attention to the competency levels (see Appendix 1) for the various assessment criteria detailed in the form, thus facilitating diagnostic feedback, the emphasis on summative scores, which served mainly to judge students' overall writing performance, had the potential to draw students' attention away from the focused feedback in the feedback form (as students tend to ignore teacher feedback when presented with both scores and feedback – see Butler, 1987). Overall, the tensions between the genre innovation and the conventional practices made it difficult for teachers to fully utilise the potential of genre-based assessment as a tool for assessment for learning. The factors that facilitated and restrained the implementation of the genre innovation will be further explored in the analysis of the factors in the third research question below.

Students' and teachers' evaluation of genre-based teaching and assessment – RQ2

This section draws upon the teacher interview and student focus group interview data to answer the second research question about the students' and teachers' evaluation of the genre approach.

At the post-study interview, nine out of 12 students (75%) thought that they had made progress in their writing (for example in terms of overall structure, grammar and verb

tenses, vocabulary and spelling, and content), which they ascribed to the teachers' pedagogy. One student said:

I was not familiar with some genres, but after the teacher had taught us the genre-specific items, I had a better understanding of genres and I found it easier to do the writing.

While this student thought that explicit instruction had rendered writing easier, another student referred to the samples the teacher showed and the language features linked to target genres: "She showed us samples and taught us what tenses we ought to use."

Genre-based assessment was found to be useful too, as it made writing a more goal-directed activity than before. A student remarked, "A direction was provided. When we followed the direction, we could come up with a good piece of writing." With the use of genre-based feedback forms, students appreciated the level of detail in the feedback teachers provided, and felt that the information was useful for their subsequent writing. One student said, "When I tackle the writing of the same genre for the second time, I can do better." Overall, the findings show that genre-based instruction was perceived as useful by the students.

While the findings suggest that students were generally appreciative of the genre approach adopted by their teachers, its potential problems were pointed out by some students. The focus on models and analysis of text structures, for example, had rendered the act of writing more intricate than some students originally thought: "Things have become more and more complicated. So it [text analysis] brought confusion to my mind." Apart from confusion, boredom was found to be another problem. One student felt that a focus on genre-specific vocabulary had made learning rather tedious: "Yes. I learnt some vocabulary items, but sometimes it's boring." Another student was bored by the teacher's explicit instructional approach: "If you don't understand, he (Teacher B) will go on talking to make you understand. But sometimes he's too long-winded." It is possible that the teacher's teaching style influenced students' perception of the genre-based approach. A teacher's being long-winded, however, is not a problem inherent in genre pedagogy, but the need for a focus on explicit instruction might have made the teacher spend more time explaining certain items, leading to boredom for some students.

From the teachers' perspective, genre-based instruction and assessment reaped benefits for both student learning and their own professional development. To them, genre pedagogy generally succeeded in improving student motivation in learning writing. Teacher A remarked that the learning of different forms of the recount genre had increased students' interest in writing in English:

They would like to write more dairies in English on their own. And they just request to learn more about writing so that they can keep correspondence with their peers in English.

Teacher B learnt from the students' final composition (which was a post-study writing task for the larger study not reported in this paper, and it was not scored and assessed by Teacher B), in which they wrote a letter to him, that the majority of students "had

enjoyed writing in English” and showed a stronger understanding of what constituted “good” writing:

I was quite touched, actually, by a lot of comments which were directed to me personally....a lot of thanks from the students...and a lot of them hope that maybe I could continue to be their English teacher in Form two... And the comments were directed at the writing tasks that I have given them. They said that they had gained some insight, and some appreciation of what was required in making them good writers or better writers.

The above quotation suggests that Teacher B’s students thought that he taught writing better through a focus on genre. Although there was a possibility of students including favourable remarks in the letters to please the teacher, the fact that the letter was not part of the classroom writing assessment, and hence not scored, might make the data more objective than if it were an intrinsic part of writing assessment for the S1 class.

More importantly, through the innovation the teachers felt that they were able to design a more focused, organised, systematic and coherent writing syllabus, which was crucial to their own professional development. Teacher A said that she had gained confidence in her own teaching through using a genre approach:

I feel more confident when marking students’ composition as well because I have a clear focus. And also when students come to me, ah... how can I improve my writing? I have a specific focus for them, for example, you may include more adjectives or description....In the past, when students came to ask me, sometimes I just talked about something very general. But this time, I’ve really got some constructive comments for them.

Teacher B felt that through genre-based assessment, he was able to steer away from “giving general, vague comments on student writing”. Instead he pinpointed students’ strengths and weaknesses by referring to the genre features that had been explicitly taught.

Despite the benefits noted, Teacher A felt that one potential problem of a genre approach is that it may “pose danger in hindering children’s creativity, leading to their conventional style of writing”. Indeed, it is rather natural that when model texts are used, students may rigidly mimic the style of writing in the texts (Johns, 2011). The teachers were aware that though the provision of sample texts and an emphasis on genre features might help students produce texts that were considered genre appropriate, such an approach could also lead to boredom, as expressed by some students in the above, and they might feel that they had to adhere to the “template” provided so as to meet the teachers’ expectations of good writing.

Factors that facilitated or restrained the genre innovation – RQ3

This section draws upon the insights gained from the first two research questions to illuminate the factors that might facilitate or restrain the genre innovation. Three factors were found to facilitate the innovation in the study. First, genre-based instruction and assessment were possible, because the teachers shared a common goal and were willing to work collaboratively. Teacher B reiterated:

It has to be a team vision. The teachers involved must have a shared vision, what is to be achieved, goals and we have to agree on the tasks that we assign to the students.

The S1 teachers all had the same direction, all motivated to bring improvements to the traditional writing classroom through a focus on genre. This was considered one of the most important reasons why the innovation was possible. The study demonstrated that for innovations to work, teachers need to work collaboratively, share a common vision, and participate in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

The second facilitative factor was the participating teachers' professional knowledge and skills with regard to the genre approach. Teacher B was an experienced Australian teacher well versed in genre pedagogy. He had rich experience using the approach with schoolchildren in Australia. Teacher A received training in genre approaches during her MA studies. In the post-study individual interview, she illustrated her pedagogical approach with reference to "Halliday's functional grammar". Although one cannot conclude from the brief words of Teacher A that she possessed strong knowledge of genre pedagogy, she was able to articulate her pedagogical principles in concrete terms. From the lessons observed, too, both Teachers A and B provided instructional scaffolding of the recount genre with clarity and confidence.

The third factor was related to the students' language abilities and learning motivation. As genre approaches require teachers to use metalinguistic terms and engage students in the explicit learning of grammar, vocabulary and text structure, it cannot be easily implemented in classrooms where students have a very low level of proficiency and/or motivation. The study was conducted in a band-one school with students with relatively strong English abilities, which might be a facilitative factor. In the lessons observed, students were well behaved and highly co-operative. They were generally on task and followed instructions without difficulty. Thus, the fact that the students were relatively motivated and proficient might have facilitated the innovation.

Notwithstanding the benefits of a genre approach, the study showed that genre-based instruction and assessment did not help teachers solve all their problems. Two impediments to the development of the genre innovation were noted. First, in this study, the implementation of genre-based assessment requiring teachers to deliver focused feedback with reference to genre-specific features of target genres, as manifested in the use of genre-specific feedback forms, appeared to come into direct conflict with the conventional feedback approach that required teachers to give unfocused feedback on errors. As students received detailed error feedback (which was unfocused) as well as genre-specific feedback (which was intended to be focused), they may have felt overwhelmed and confused by these conflicting approaches. The tension between the genre approach and the conventional error-focused approach, therefore, perhaps reduced the impact of the genre innovation and pose an obstacle to its further development.

Second, the summative nature of writing assessment requiring teachers to evaluate writing with scores was at variance with the goals of the genre innovation, which was partly intended to provide students with genre-specific feedback to help them improve their writing. The problem is that when both scores and written feedback are given to

students, their attention is likely to be drawn to the summative scores rather than the feedback information detailed in the feedback forms (Butler, 1987). In this study, because of the teachers' need to evaluate writing with summative scores linked to broad criteria (that is content, language, organisation and genre), it is likely that students' attention was primarily drawn to the summative scores instead of the competency levels in relation to the assessment criteria suggested in the feedback form. Thus, the potential of genre-based assessment to provide diagnostic information about students' strengths and weaknesses in writing (via the competency levels in relation to the genre-specific criteria in feedback forms) and to serve the purpose of assessment for learning might not have been fully realised.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

It is not my purpose to make generalisations based on a single study, which has its own limitations, such as its narrow focus on the recount genre, as well as the relatively small sample size. Nonetheless, the findings shed important light on the implementation of innovation through a focus on genre-based instruction and assessment in the L2 school context, and its implications will have relevance for teachers teaching writing in similar contexts. First, the findings suggest that genre can be used as an organisational principle to integrate instruction and assessment, making writing easier to learn for students and more systematic to teach for teachers. Genre-based assessment rubrics can help students better understand the requirements of writing and assist teachers in diagnostic assessment, thus facilitating the implementation of assessment for learning in the writing classroom.

Second, the study shows that effective implementation of genre-based instruction and assessment in school contexts requires professional knowledge and skills on the part of the teachers, as well as their collaborative efforts. Writing teacher education is, therefore, necessary to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills about genre instruction and assessment. More importantly, the findings of the study show that genre-based instruction and assessment cannot simply be implemented without consideration for the wider institutional context that influences teachers' instructional and assessment practices. For instance, a focused feedback approach using genre-specific assessment rubrics is incompatible with the conventional, unfocused corrective feedback practice (that is, marking errors comprehensively). Having to both respond to every single error and evaluate writing using genre-specific feedback forms not only doubles teachers' workload, but it can also overwhelm students, destroy their confidence, and hence undermine the positive impact of genre-based assessment. To implement genre-based assessment effectively, therefore, teachers need understanding and support from school leaders so that ways can be found to accommodate genre-based assessment within the conventional feedback and summative approach. In similar L2 contexts, it would probably mean changing the rigid policy of giving comprehensive error feedback, so that students' attention could be drawn to teacher feedback in the genre-specific forms, rather than detailed error feedback. In order that students can act upon teachers' genre-specific feedback, a process approach can be combined with a genre approach so that students can use genre-specific feedback to improve their texts through multiple drafting, and through engaging in peer feedback.

To conclude, while the study attempted to answer the research questions posed earlier, it also brought out issues that need to be further explored, such as how genre instruction can be implemented to prevent text-types from being interpreted as rigid formats (and hence to prevent “low road transfer” {Johns, 2011}), and how the benefits of genre-based assessment can be maximised within an institutional context that emphasises error-focused feedback, summative scores, and single drafting. These are thorny issues but definitely warrant further attention. The present study focused on one major genre and lasted one academic year; it did not look into the impact of genre-based teaching and assessment on students’ writing development. Future research can investigate, in greater depth (and involving more genres) and over a longer time span, how genre-based teaching and assessment can be carried out and sustained to discover whether they impact positively on student writing and learning of writing.

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APPENDIX 1: FEEDBACK FORM FOR DIARY

The following features give you a better understanding of your strengths and weaknesses on various aspects of your writing. Please read through it and try to improve your work accordingly.

4: Well done

3: Satisfactory

2: Acceptable

1: Needs improvement

Criteria	4	3	2	1
Content				
Give a suitable title				
Give 4 days of diary entries				
Describe what you did in detail				
Describe how you felt				
Organisation				
Use paragraphs*				
Language and Vocabulary				
Use past tense				
Use a variety of adjectives to describe activities				
Use suitable adjectives to describe your feelings				
Form grammatical sentences				
Spell accurately				
Genre				
Use first person				
Use dates and times				
Recount events and feelings				

*The feedback form was designed by the participating teachers without my input as the researcher. I would have suggested they change “use paragraphs” to “use paragraphs to sequence events chronologically” had I been consulted.