

## A Scoping Review of Genre-based Approach

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### Abstract

**Genre-based approach is the pedagogy based on genre theory. It is the empirical application of the study of genre, which is popular in North America and Australia. Using scoping review methodology, this paper aims to elaborate the pedagogy by providing an overview of the contexts, theoretical basis, several teaching models of genre-based approach, and evaluation of genre-based approach. The findings highlight that learners can gain a range of benefits in genre teaching classroom like cognitive development, improvement of genre awareness, specific knowledge and skills of writing, while genre-based approach poses challenges to teachers, learners, and teaching materials. Therefore, teachers should enhance their knowledge and skills to choose and decide suitable teaching materials and to help learners gain language and content knowledge while using genre-based approach.**

### Keywords

**Genre-based Approach; Theoretical Basis; Teaching Models; Evaluation.**

### 1. Introduction

The last decade or so has seen increasing attention given to the notion of genre and its application in language teaching and learning. This is largely a response to changing views of discourse and of learning to write which incorporate better understandings of how language is structured to achieve social purposes in particular contexts of use. For teacher educators, genre-based approach offers principled ways of assisting both pre- and in-service writing teachers to provide their students with targeted, relevant, and supportive instruction. By enabling teachers to ground their courses in the texts that students will need to write in occupational, academic, or social contexts, they help guide learners to participate effectively in the world outside the ESL classroom. These theoretical advances have been particularly welcomed by teachers as they have emerged in a period of considerable social and demographic change in education in many countries. Not only have people seen the growth of modular and interdisciplinary programs increase the complexity of writing in the academy, but with expanding numbers of students from different groups, classrooms are now more culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse places than ever before. These students bring different identities, understandings, and habits of meaning-making to their learning, and teachers cannot assume that students' previous learning experiences will provide them with appropriate writing schema for their studies. The old certainties of cognitive homogeneity which supported process writing models for so long are no longer sustainable, and there is an urgent need for more theoretically robust, linguistically informed, and research-grounded text descriptions to bridge the gap between home and school writing and prepare learners for their futures.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definition of Key Terms

#### 2.1.1. Genre

'Genre', also known as types of texts, is a term widely accepted in literature and rhetoric and was gradually used in the field of linguistics in the 1970s [1]. Definition of genre seems to vary among researchers. In Fowler's view, genres in the language application refer to the different types of communicative activities [2]. Such communicative activities can be divided into a variety of categories, including television, advertisements, various product manuals, relevant teaching materials, full-length novels, etc. Martin [3] considers genre as "the regularities of staged, goal-oriented social processes".

All of the above statements show that: Firstly, determinants of the type of genre are the communicative purpose. Secondly, the genre is conventional and used within the defined structure; it has habitual and relatively fixed characteristics. Thirdly, genres might not be conventional, but that does not mean they cannot be altered. Because of varied cultural elements and linguistic characteristics, the same genre might be modified, resulting in the different expression forms of the same genre. The basic structural principle may be obeyed by some skilled users of the genre not so rigidly and the users can exert their creativity according to their demands. [4].

#### 2.1.2. Genre-based Approach

Genre-based approach (GBA) emerged as early as the mid-1980s. It is the instruction which is gradually formed by utilizing genre and genre analysis theory to the field of language education. Genre-based approach can be used not only in reading teaching, but also in writing, listening and speaking teaching [5]. In China, Qin Xiubai is the pioneer of genre teaching. He points to it that genre-based approach is to consciously use professional academic text analysis skills while giving lessons by applying class discussion or doing drills concerning the schema structure of discourse. This coincides with the viewpoint of Kay [6]. Kay et al. believe that its purpose is: (1) to let learners understand the communicative purposes and discourse structures of specific texts; (2) to enable learners to construct the meaning of texts both linguistically and socially; (3) to help learners grasp the schema structure of articles, and help them create texts of a certain genre on their own. Richards and Reppen [7] explored grammar teaching under the guidance of this method. In their discussions, genre-based instruction is another name of this method. Being the hot issue in L1 and L2 language teaching, the genre-based approach has the following aims: 1) grasping the different communicative purposes and structures of different genres of discourse; 2) Seeing discourse as both a linguistic and social construct. 3) understanding the social meaningful constructs and the schematic structure of the discourse, so as to help students understand and compose discourse belonging to the same genre [8]. According to Qin [9], a genre-based approach is a teaching method based on text genre analysis. In other words, teachers intentionally apply genre analysis theory to classroom instruction and initiate activities taking into account the schematic structure of discourse.

In this study, genre-based approach is defined as a teaching method in which teachers and students have sufficient interaction to explore text structure and language features together, relying on specific genres which aims at improving students' discourse awareness and discourse ability, and their reading speed and reading interest. In this way, the background information including social context or cultural customs and so on are explored, as well as the significance of the status of language use. Students can make clear the communicative purpose and steps of specific genre, and pay attention to the role of context.

## 2.2. Theoretical Basis

### 2.2.1. Genre Analysis Theory

Genre analysis is the study of how language is used within a particular setting. Thus, it tries to focus on the study of styles and discourse types, whether they are lectures, conversations, speeches, notices, advertisements, novels, poems, short stories, menus, etc. [10]. The purpose of genre analysis is to answer this question - Why are specific discourse-genres written and used by specialist communities the way they are? From the point of view of genre analysis, "our primary concern is twofold – characterizing typical or conventional textual features of any genre specific text in an attempt to identify pedagogically utilizable form-function correlations, and explaining such a characterization in the context of the socio – cultural as well as the cognitive constraints operating in the relevant area of specialization, whether professional or academic, [11]. Qin proposed that genre analysis involves both text analysis and discourse analysis. Its fundamental purpose is to study the communicative purposes and language use strategies of discourse. According to him, discourse analysis mainly probes into the demands such as the aims, strategies, skill of communication and so on of texts by blending linguistic theory with sociological and psychological research. The different genres and communicative functions of texts contributes to different language styles, as well as the sentential forms [12]. He believes that the organizational structure with specific communicative purposes constitutes the genre structure of this particular discourse. The mode of text organization has the regularity of helping people use language to do things which is just like a program. He also figures out that people can cognitively understand a certain kind of text structure with this regularity as the basis. Genre analysis can help people to analyze the organization pattern of a text, so as to explore the specific macro cognitive structure of a specific text. Cai and Luo [13] believe that genre analysis is an important branch of discourse analysis. It goes beyond the simple description of the language features of a text, tries to explain the rationale of the text, explores the socio-cultural factors and psychological cognitive factors behind the text, and reveals the special ways to realize the communicative background and the conventionality of the text structure. Genre analysis combines linguistic analysis with sociological and psychological analysis. They believe that genre analysis can help students master the communicative purpose and discourse structure of different genres.

Genre analysis is the product of interdisciplinary activities which integrates linguistic analysis, psychological analysis and sociology. Therefore, it can analyze linguistic features, social phenomena and cognitive structures simultaneously. In addition, the fundamental purpose of this model is to figure out the aims and methods when communicating with languages. It combines sociocultural and psycho-linguistic factors, which enables readers to analyze not only the communicative purpose of the text, but also the strategies used by the author in composing the text. In short, genre analysis involves both text analysis and discourse analysis, and its fundamental purpose is to study the communicative purposes of discourse and the strategies of language use.

### 2.2.2. Schema Theory

Schema is a term in cognitive psychology, which was first proposed by Kant in 1781. Later, Piaget, a famous Swiss child psychologist, studied the role of schema in children's growth. The results prove that schema has essential impacts on children's cognitive development. British psychologist Bartlett first proposed the schema theory in 1932. According to Bartlett [14], schema refers to how people store their acquired knowledge in mind; schema indicates how the brain reacts or organizes the past experience; schema demonstrates how old information connects new information to reconstruct learners' knowledge system [15]. The main proposition of schema theory is that people should connect those new things with their existing knowledge when people need to understand some new things, and their existing knowledge

includes the known concepts and past experience. The schema in their mind plays a decisive role in the understanding and interpretation of new things. That is to say, schema is the basis of cognition and understanding. People need to analyze, interpret and absorb the external information with the existing schema in their brain. In addition, the more abundant the schema stored in mind is, the much stronger people's ability to understand external information will be.

According to the different characteristics of schema, schema can be divided into three categories: linguistic schema, content schema and formal schema [16]. More specifically, linguistic schema refers to language knowledge and the ability to use language. For instance, students can choose appropriate words and write correct sentences in their writing. Content schema refers to the cultural background knowledge carried by language. The understanding of language materials is achieved through the interaction between learners' schema and the language material information. If the interactive process is successful, learners will get the information conveyed by language materials. Formal schema refers to the knowledge of structural features and content organization, including paragraph, textual cohesion, etc. In fact, writing is a process in which learners apply their existing schema to construct the new schema to meet the requirements of those three kinds of schemas of the target essay to achieve the writing purpose successfully.

### **2.2.3. Constructivism**

Constructivism was first proposed as an important branch of cognitive psychology. With the exploration of constructivism, scholars have endowed constructivism with rich connotations. Constructivism plays an important role in education and teaching. Scholars put forward many teaching modes based on this theory. According to constructivism, knowledge and meaning do not exist independently. The understanding of things is not simply determined by things themselves but the interpretation of the objective world constructed by the individuals based on their original knowledge and experience. That means that people may have different understandings of the same thing due to their different experience. Besides, constructivism consists of individual constructivism and social constructivism. The former holds that learning is a process of meaning construction, during which learners combine new and old experience to construct a new cognitive structure; the latter proposes that learning is a process of cultural participation, during which learners develop the relevant knowledge through participating in practical community activities. Therefore, constructivism learning theory proposes that learning guides students to construct new experience from their original experience [17].

## **2.3. Three Schools of Genre-based Approach**

### **2.3.1. The Australian School**

Based on Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics, the Australian school emphasizes the relationship among the context, the discourse structure and the social function and attaches enough importance to the content and the structure of discourses. Apart from emphasizing the language features of the target essays, this school also focuses on the construction of the meaning rather than the form. That is to say, when teaching writing for different communicative purposes in different contexts, teachers can explicitly tell the students the structure and the language features of the target essays, enabling students to master how the essays are organized and structured to achieve the communicative purposes in different contexts better. Concerning the context, the Australian School divides the context into two aspects: category and register [18]. Therefore, teachers can instruct students to analyze the context from the two aspects. Moreover, the teaching objects of the genre-based approach represented by the Australian School are different from the other two representative schools. In addition to primary and secondary school education, the genre-based approach represented by this school also concentrates more on adult immigrants' education in Australia. The genre-based approach

represented by the Australian School is the most widely used teaching method among the three schools, and it is also one of the most popular and recommendable teaching methods in China. This teaching method, mainly used in English teaching, puts more emphasis on the discourse structure, social functions, language features, and cohesive devices of various genres set by the syllabus [19].

Concerning the issue about how to implement language teaching, scholars of the Australia school created the teaching and learning cycle to serve the genre-based writing instruction. Firstly, the teacher introduces a genre through a model text, focusing on analyzing its schematic structure and clarifying the social purpose of the discourse by using schematic structure analysis method. Then, based on the results of the genre analysis, the teacher works with the pupils to write an essay belonging to the genre, which involves different stages of reading, research, gathering and organizing information, and writing. Finally, students choose a topic to research and then write an essay in this genre. Many educators have highly praised this teaching model, and some educational researchers have also slightly modified this model to better adapt to the actual teaching situations and be more in line with students' cognitive levels. The most obvious advantage of this approach is that teachers can make full use of the genre analysis mode to analyze the text effectively so that students can create a new text based on the understanding of the target genre, which can promote the effective output of the target language and strengthen students' genre awareness. It is admittedly recognized that the true knowledge can be tested through practice. Similarly, the teaching and learning cycle has been tested to be effective and beneficial through the teaching practice.

### 2.3.2. The ESP School

Based on the framework of genre analysis, the ESP School insists that genre should be the structured communication events within the discourse groups that have the same communicative purposes, the similar discourse structure and the common readers. This genre concept is strongly supported by some representatives of the ESP School. At first, it was Swales who introduced the concept of genre into the research field of this school in 1990. According to Swales [20], genre was a group of communicative events with similar social functions. Later, Bhatia made further elaboration on the genre. Based on Swales' proposition, the researcher held that internal structure of communicative events was conventional. However, it does not mean that the genre structure and language features cannot be changed. On the premise of obeying the conventions of the genre, the writers can still express their personal ideas and communication purposes within the framework of genre, which means that the writers can modify the structural framework of genre and can also write freely in the content to some extent. According to Sun and Wang, the genre is not immutable and it can be changed with different social activities. Based on different communicative purposes, similar discourses may have different genres. In addition, different language features may signal similar genres.

The same as the Australian School, the ESP School supports the explicit teaching and thinks that students can acquire genres through the effective genre-based teaching. As for the teaching objects of the ESP School, they are mainly overseas students in English-speaking countries. Besides, the ESP School focuses on the academic discourse writing and professional discourse writing of college students or postgraduate students. Through the effective genre-based teaching, students not only can master the target professional knowledge of their subject but also can clearly understand the genre characteristics of professional discourse, including the genre structure and the language features. Moreover, the most remarkable advantage of the ESP School is that genre teaching activities are based on communicative tasks. Students can directly participate in the teaching process and intuitively understand the genre characteristics of different academic and professional discourses to acquire the target genre knowledge. According to the actual needs of students, educational researchers ought to design the teaching objectives, compile the textbooks and explain language knowledge and structural features

based on real discourses familiar to students [21]. However, there are also some problems in the genre-based approach of the ESP School. Liang and Kang pointed out that the academic culture taught by the EAP courses was not in harmony with the background culture of learners, which was not beneficial to the development of intercultural communication and might lead to conflicts among different cultures. Therefore, the ESP School should pay enough attention to these aspects in future teaching research.

### 2.3.3. The Rhetoric School

The New Rhetoric School is mainly influenced by the new rhetoric movement in North America, and it also absorbs Ba Jin's dialogue theory. Researchers of the New Rhetoric School are mainly some university scholars engaging in the research of rhetoric, university students' compositions and professional writing teaching. Correspondingly, their research participants are mainly university students and professional novices in some countries in North America. Besides, the final aim is to make those participants understand the social functions and the social contexts of specific genres. However, this school distinguishes itself from the other two representative schools of the genre-based approach. Compared to the other two schools, the New Rhetoric School, fully realizing the social and cultural characteristics of the genre, mainly studies the acquisition and development of English as the mother tongue or the first language and focuses on the native language discourse and writing. Moreover, different from the other two schools' understandings of the genre, the New Rhetoric School believes that the genre not only can be understood as an object composed of similar discourses but also can be seen as an event of coding and decoding in the process of social communication[22].

As for genre teaching, especially explicit teaching, the New Rhetoric School holds the opinion that the genre cannot be taught by teaching activities. Hyon [23] conducted a genre-based approach experiment with good results. The main pedagogical steps were as follows: Firstly, the teacher and students analyze the scheme structure of a genre through examples. Then, students use genre analysis to analyze different discourses belonging to the same genre. Next, according to the schematic structure of a certain genre that has been learned, the teacher disrupts the structure of different discourses and asks the students to put them together and restore them to a discourse that conforms to the conventions of the genre. After that, students work individually to find a number of discourses belonging to the same genre to analyze and comment on, and then students analyze the language and style of the genre in depth. Finally, students write to gain a deeper appreciation of the structural features and language styles of a particular genre. The New Rhetoric School believes that the genre is dynamic, changing with time and it cannot be taught by teachers. Therefore, this school is against explicit teaching. In addition, the New Rhetoric School also thinks that the genre is the product of certain contexts, originating from people's daily communication activities. In different social activities, people continuously establish or reconstruct the social structure to achieve specific communication purposes, during which the social structure can be viewed as the genre structure used to meet the communicative purposes. With daily communication activities changing, people will have different communication purposes. Therefore, this school disapproves of explicit teaching about the genre. Consequently, the New Rhetoric School holds that the genre can be acquired naturally instead of being taught by the teachers. There are some studies supporting this proposition. Berkenkotter and Huckin pointed out that the explicit genre teaching would only inhibit students' understanding of context. They held that the explicit teaching was not conducive to the development of students' writing creativity because both genre and context would change when people participated in different social and professional activities. Moreover, Freedman [24] proposed that genre was a kind of tacit knowledge, and students should be exposed to a large number of genre texts regularly, through which students could naturally acquire the target genre knowledge. As a result, when compared to the other two schools, the New Rhetoric School seldom applies the genre-based approach to the teaching practice widely

because this school does not treat the genre in a static way. Furthermore, the New Rhetoric School focuses on the teaching of native language writing, and it might not be suitable to apply the genre-based approach represented by this school to China, where English is seen as a foreign language. According to Liang and Kang, they point out that the most prominent advantage of the New Rhetoric School is the emphasis on the dynamic, historical, social and cultural features of the genre. Therefore, the genre cannot be regarded as something unchangeable to some degree.

Although the three representative schools are different in theoretical bases, research focuses and teaching practice, they all focus on the interaction among the writer, the text and the context from the perspective of social culture and their ultimate aim is to cultivate students' genre awareness and improve their ability to apply the genre knowledge to their writing. Also, there is no denying that they also have the same propositions in some aspects. Therefore, the three main schools are different and complementary to each other.

### **3. Reflections on Genre-based Approach**

#### **3.1. Benefits of Genre-based Approach**

Genre-based approach, as a teaching approach, is worth implementing into the school curricula for it has many advantages of practicing genre-based approach. Firstly, taking genre-based approach to teaching writing enables students to understand that writing is a regular social interaction and a means of understanding the world and participating in social activities. Secondly, using genre-based approach in reading classes enables students, especially for second language learners at the beginning level and intermediate level, to acquire relatively stable patterns of discourse that can be learnt and relied upon. Then they can enhance their confidence when comprehending and creating discourse. Furthermore, in the long term, the genre-based approach can develop students' creative thinking competence. Once students have mastered the structure and rationale of genres, they will be able to use them freely and write different discourses.

#### **3.2. Constraints of Genre-based Approach**

Undoubtedly, there are certain difficulties which prevent teachers from achieving this ideal strategy. Firstly, the genre that is limited to certain structure may lead to a prescriptive and fixed approach to teaching and learning. If the teacher lacks imagination and creativity when using genre-based approach, students may find the approach dull and boring, which will result a "one-size-fits-all" approach to student writing practice. Secondly, teachers may put their focus on just discourse and genre in classroom teaching when using genre-based approach. And teachers tend to pay more attention on description and reproduction of the discourse while omit the practice and drills of creative language output. Thirdly, it is difficult for classroom teaching to exhaust all the genres that students may encounter in their future lives due to the variety of genres, so there are certain limitations to the genre-based approach in both writing and reading classes.

#### **3.3. Implications of Genre-based Approach**

Scholars and teachers have put forward some countermeasures aimed at improving this teaching method considering problems mentioned above, and their attempts can give people some implications. Firstly, teachers should guide students to examine, describe, analyze and use genres in their socio-cultural contexts. This will help students to understand the socio-cultural context in which the discourse is produced and the deeper rationale that underlies a particular discourse. Secondly, on the basis of grasping the prototype of the discourse, teachers should guide students to grasp the various variables that can affect the formation and understanding of the discourse, such as discourse type, discourse mode, discourse tone, etc.

These variables can affect the structure of the genre and language style of the discourse, so that the discourse of the same genre has a certain degree of flexibility in the discourse layout. Thirdly, teachers should introduce students to as many authentic texts belonging to the same genre as possible, rather than using only one or two texts to represent a particular genre. Fourthly, when designing syllabuses and teaching materials, teachers should take into account the genre factor and the language programs exclusively, so as to meet the actual needs of learners in social interaction and to enable them to have as much exposure to and various genres, in both written and spoken, that they will encounter in their future work and life. Fifthly, in classroom teaching, teachers should also consciously use the method of genre analysis to enable students to understand the social functions and communicative purposes of specific genres, genre structures and cognitive patterns, so as to help them better understand and create discourse that conforms to the conventions of specific genres, and to acquire the ability to use English to do things in the society. Finally, English writing teaching in China tends to focus on rhetoric and grammar training, while ignoring genre and genre analysis. The results of many language teaching experiments show that the genre-based approach is effective in teaching writing. Teachers should pay attention to the approach in the future.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research reviewed the background, relevant theories, three representative schools, and evaluation of genre-based approach. As writing and reading highlights the need for greater attention to foreign and second language learning, it gives rise to genre-based approach development. Genre-based approach is firmly supported by genre analysis theory, schema theory, and constructivism theory. The review sought to provide an overview of three main relevant research schools in genre-based approach research that had been conducted. Although the three representative schools – the Australia school, the ESP school, and the rhetorical school, are different in theoretical bases, research focuses and teaching practice, they all focus on the interaction among the writer, the text and the context from the perspective of social culture and are complementary to each other. According to the review, it revealed that students could gain a range of benefits in genre-based approach classroom like cognitive development, improvement of genre awareness, specific knowledge and skills of writing. Although there are many difficulties in the process of carrying genre-based approach, it is also necessary to try and conduct it.

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