Understanding learners and learning in ESP genre-based writing instruction

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Abstract

ESP genre research has generated numerous descriptions and explanations of discipline-specific genre exemplars and has produced various pedagogical proposals. However, what learners learn from these genre descriptions and the resulting pedagogical proposals and how they develop as learners and writers of genres in ESP genre-based writing pedagogy is still a less-developed area of research. In this paper, I first examine previous studies and theoretical debates to argue for the importance of closely examining learners and learning in the ESP genre-based writing classroom. I then uncover two deeper issues that may be holding back this area of research: the need for more attention to the full intricacies of being a learner in ESP genre-oriented classroom and the lack of theories of learning that are sensitive to the unique conceptual framework and pedagogical realities of ESP genre-based writing classroom. I explore, with examples, how these two deeper issues can potentially transmit changes to the current ESP genre-based research agenda.

Keywords: Written language instruction; Learner characteristics; ESP; Learning theories; Genre theories

1. Learners and learning as underdeveloped areas of research in ESP genre-based writing instruction

As both a cognitive and a cultural concept, genre is often defined as the abstract, goal-oriented, staged, and socially recognized ways of using language delimited by communicative purposes, performed social (inter)actions within rhetorical contexts, and formal properties (structure, style, and content) (Bahktin, 1986; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Bhatia, 1993; Halliday, 1994; Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990, 2004). Many writing teachers, especially those working in the domains of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and/or English for Academic Purposes (EAP), believe that explicit attention to genre in teaching provides learners a concrete opportunity to acquire conceptual and cultural frameworks to undertake writing tasks beyond the courses in which such teaching occurs (e.g., Johns, 2003).

Among the various schools of interrelated but distinct genre theories and their pedagogical proposals (for detailed analyses of these schools, see Belcher, 2004; Hyland, 2004; Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2002, 2003; Paltridge, 2001), the ESP School, which is the focus of this paper, is arguably the most influential in the teaching of the specialist varieties of English to L2 users and the most familiar one to ESP researchers and practitioners (Bhatia, 1993, 1999; Flowerdew, 1993, 2002; Hyland, 2003a; Johns, 2003; Swales, 1990, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2000, 2004). Indeed, to many English language teachers and researchers, ESP genre studies are often identified with ESP itself (Belcher, 2004; Hyland, 2003b).

In the ESP tradition, genre is often defined as “structured communicative events engaged in by specific discourse communities whose members share broad communicative purposes” (Swales, 1990, pp. 45–47; 2004). The most famous ESP genre analytic framework has been established by Swales (1990, 2004). Swales’s original framework is characterized by the analysis of “moves”, or the “defined and bounded communicative act that is designed to achieve one main communicative objective” (Swales & Feak, 2000, p. 35). The framework is later enriched by socially informed theories of language and has generated numerous descriptions of the “regularities of purposes, forms, and situated social actions” (Hyland, 2003a, p. 27) of various discipline-specific genres, part genres, and the rich features (Barton, 2002) in them (see, for example, the numerous genre-analysis articles in this journal, English for Specific Purposes). ESP genre-based researchers and teachers have also been consistently attempting to translate the analyses of discipline-based genre exemplars into various pedagogical proposals as well as tasks for generating genre-based teaching materials (e.g., Bhatia, 1993; Flowerdew, 1993, 2002; Jacoby, Leech, & Holten, 1995; Johns, 1997, 1999, 2002; Parkinson, 2000; Swales, 1981, 1990, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2004; Swales, Barks, Ostermann, & Simpson, 2001; Weissberg & Bunker, 1990; among others).

Surprisingly, however, few of the detailed and, often corpus-based, descriptions of genre exemplars or the resulting pedagogical proposals cited above contain substantial discussions of how these genre descriptions and pedagogical proposals have actually interacted with learners in classroom settings. Studies that reported on, for example, the effects these genre descriptions or pedagogical proposals have on learners’ development of generic awareness are few and far between and are often constrained by various limitations which will be discussed in detail below. It seems that the ESP genre-based approach to writing instruction, as some genre-based theorists have noted (e.g., Johns, 2002), still remains an approach which privileges the analysis of learner’s target genre needs and the preparation of teaching materials but has relatively little to say about the actual learning by the learners who are consigned to learn in such an approach.

This paper, therefore, calls for more learner-focused research that examines learners’ learning of genre and their development of generic/rhetorical consciousness. It calls for
more principled investigations into not only the process of learning in which learners develop strategies and cultural tools that enable them to develop generic awareness and discipline-specific writing, but also the contexts of learning in ESP genre-oriented writing pedagogy. The overall argument is that learner-focused, context-sensitive research needs to be pursued with equal, if not more, intensity as target-genre-focused analyses are currently being pursued so that the ESP genre approach to writing can better measure up to its appeal as one of the effective approaches to the teaching of the specialist varieties of English to L2 users.

In the next section, I examine previous studies and theoretical debates to argue for the importance of more learner-focused, context-sensitive ESP genre-oriented research.

2. The urgency of examining learners and learning in the genre-based literacy classroom

The importance of documenting learning in any language and/or writing pedagogical approach, including the ESP genre approach, is almost axiomatically evident because everything that transpires in a pedagogical context has to be filtered through the learners who ultimately define the end goals of the instruction (Allwright, 2005; Richards & Rogers, 2001; Roebuck, 1998).

In the context of ESP genre-based writing instruction, examining learners and learning becomes especially consequential given the many direct and indirect criticisms against such an approach from writing researchers from various theoretical and pedagogical backgrounds. For example, as many ESP genre-based researchers have noted (Swales et al., 2001; Swales & Luebs, 2002; Swales & Lindemann, 2002), there have been criticisms against explicit discoursal explorations – the hallmark of ESP genre-based writing instruction – in writing classrooms. Sociologists of writing such as Beaufort (1999), Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), Casanave (2002), Casanave and Hubbard (1992), and Prior (1995, 1998) have questioned the theoretical defensibility of viewing disciplinary acculturation as the acquisition of increasingly complex genres. Such a view, according to these critics, is overly hierarchical, too static, and too much of a strong text approach. These criticisms have been supported by researchers who, unlike the critics above who are interested in the sociology of writing in general, are more concerned with (L2) writing pedagogical issues in particular (Freedman, 1994; Leki, 1995; Spack, 1988). These researchers, though often working from outside the ESP genre-based approach, have alerted practitioners to the restricted values and even the possible detrimental effects of teaching genre explicitly (Freedman, 1994) and the questionable feasibility of the explicit teaching of discipline-specific writing by L2 writing teachers (Leki, 1995; Spack, 1988).

The above-cited criticisms, I believe, should be read with their limitations in mind. For example, Freedman (1994) anchors most of her arguments on Krashen’s dichotomy of acquisition and learning and the resulting resistance to explicit language teaching (Krashen, 1982, 1993). Since Krashen’s conceptualizations of SLA have been seriously challenged in the applied linguistics literature (e.g., Dunn & Lantolf, 1998; Gregg, 1984; Lightbown & Pienemann, 1993; McLaughlin, 1987), the validity of Freedman’s arguments, which are predicated heavily on Krashen’s arguments, is obviously debatable. Spack’s influential and often-cited paper (1988) calls for L2 writing teachers to focus on the “general principles of inquiry and rhetoric, with emphasis on writing from sources” (p. 29). Such a proposal, as one genre-based theorist (Hyland, 2002b) aptly points out, shows obvious insensitivity to L2 learners’ urgent, real-life needs to learn to produce
discipline-specific discourses. In fact, in a later article, Spack challenges her own previous assumptions about the importance of teaching “general inquiry strategies, rhetorical principles, and tasks that can transfer to other course work” (Spack, 1997, pp. 40–41) and acknowledges academic work as socially situated. Such a move, as noted by one of the anonymous reviewers of this article, might have brought her closer to the genre-based view of writing than she would like to admit. Other works that focus on the sociology of writing, such as those by Beaufort (1999), Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), Casanave (2002), and Prior (1995, 1998), provide invaluable naturalistic accounts of how writers, including L2 writers, write or learn to write. However, their limited attention to writing instruction (again, including L2 instruction) in classroom settings, which are the primary pedagogical and research sites of the ESP genre-based approach to writing instruction, should be duly noted. Despite their various limitations, the direct or indirect challenges by the above-cited researchers add a degree of urgency to examining learners and learning in the ESP genre-based literacy classroom. Apart from current theoretical engagement with these critics by genre-oriented researchers (e.g., Hyland, 2002b; Johns, 1995a, 1995b), other productive ways to clarify these controversies and to advance our understanding of L2 writing pedagogies in general and ESP genre-based writing pedagogies in particular would entail documenting what learners learn and how they learn it in the ESP genre-based framework of teaching and learning academic literacy.

Apart from the theoretical debates originated by researchers working from outside of the ESP genre-based approach to writing instruction, existing studies that specifically address ESP genre-based literacy instruction, though few and far between, have also highlighted various limitations of the approach. These limitations, all uncovered and described by the researchers cited below in their articles, include, among others, learners’ inadequate improvement in move accuracy (Henry & Roseberry, 1998); learners’ limited attention to unpacking many of the concepts or vocabulary items in genre exemplars (Hyon, 2002); learners’ persistent problems with organization, headings, quotations, and plagiarism as well as their failure to follow the basic conventions and macrostructures of the genre exemplars they studied (Mustafa, 1995); learners’ overgeneralization and misapplication of prototypical genre qualities (Hyon, 2001); teachers’ concerns with potential prescriptiveness and the possible disempowering effects of genre teaching (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998); and the need for cultural adaptability in ESP genre-based material development (Yakhontova, 2001).

It is also noteworthy that the above-mentioned genre-oriented studies have often been constrained, at least as far as I can see, by various limitations in research design and/or data reporting. For example, apart from a short paragraph that discusses “students’ opinions” about how they enjoyed the genre-based approach, Henry and Roseberry relied almost exclusively on a pre- and post-test design and on written products (1998, p. 152). Hyon’s studies (2002, 2002) mainly use post-instructional naming tasks and interviews where the students named genre features and self reported on their perceptions of the course and its applications for L2 reading. As a result, there is inadequate documentation of the processes or the contexts of learning in these studies. Other studies (Johns, 1999; Swales et al., 2001; Swales & Lindemann, 2002; Swales & Luebs, 2002; Yakhontova, 2001) focus more on genre-based curriculum design and materials development, and the reporting of learning in these studies is often in the form of “a selection of some of the most insightful student reflections” (Johns & Swales, 2002, p. 21; also see Swales et al., 2001, pp. 454–455).
Both the limitations of the ESP genre-based teaching of literacy uncovered by the studies cited above and the limitations in the design and data-reporting processes in these studies themselves have pointed to the necessity for more intensive efforts to study learners and learning in the ESP genre-based approach to writing. They have also pointed to some of the deeper issues that may be holding back learner- and learning-focused research in ESP genre-based writing instruction. In the next section, I highlight two of these issues: the need for more attention to the full intricacies of being a learner in an ESP genre-based writing classroom and the lack of theories of learning that are sensitive to the unique conceptual frameworks and the pedagogical realities of the ESP genre-based writing classroom. I argue, with concrete research scenarios, that these two issues can potentially transmit changes to the current ESP genre-based research agenda in forms which may prove persuasive to genre-oriented L2 writing theorists and practitioners.

3. Two deeper issues and the research opportunities they generate

3.1. Exploring learner dynamics in ESP genre-based writing classroom

As evidenced by ESP genre-based practitioners’ justifiably meticulous analysis of learners’ target genre needs, learners are admittedly an important component in the ESP genre-based literacy approach. In fact, ESP has always prided itself on its learner-centered approaches to curriculum design and materials development (see Belcher (2004) for a recent discussion of ESP and learner-centeredness). Ironically, when it comes to understanding learners in their actual appropriation of the results of ESP genre researchers’ target need and genre analysis, learners in the ESP genre frameworks often tend to be construed as the “generic” learners (pun intended). A review of studies that specifically report on ESP genre-based classroom instructions, for example, reveals that learners in these studies are often described as “advanced Asian doctoral students”, “nonnative-speaking junior scholars”, “a Mexican student in Latin American literature”, or “an Angolan undergraduate student” in both the research-design and the data-reporting processes (Chang & Swales, 1999; Dudley-Evans, 2002; Henry & Roseberry, 1998; Hyon, 2001, 2002; Pang, 2002; Samraj, 2002; Swales & Lindemann, 2002; Swales & Luebs, 2002; Swales et al., 2001; among others). Admittedly, defining learners as “advanced Asian doctoral students in mechanical engineering” can describe how different groups of learners react to ESP genre-based writing instruction. However, taking these labels at face value and failing to explore their full pedagogical and theoretical significance, as is often the case with many of the above-cited studies, have caused ESP genre-oriented researchers to miss the opportunities to observe the full intricacies of learning in the ESP genre-based classroom.

Given the prevalence of these labels and the fact that they often go unexamined in current ESP genre literature, a potentially productive research direction is to turn these labels on their head and use them as heuristics to explore the complexities of genre-based learning. In the next subsection, I briefly describe a concrete research scenario in which I re(de)fine the construct of advanced learner to see how it can serve as a lens to reexamine data and to uncover learner dynamics. I hope that this concrete scenario can illustrate one of the many possible approaches which can address the somewhat limited attention to the processes and the contexts of learning in current ESP genre-based pedagogy.
3.2. Research scenario 1: re(de)fining “advanced learner” for a better understanding of learner dynamics in the ESP genre-based literacy framework

In current ESP genre-based literature, there is often an assumption that ESP genre-based writing instruction is suitable and even necessary for advanced learners of the specialist varieties of English. Such an assumption is evidenced in Ann Johns’ observation that the “artful and practical” ESP genre-based approach as proposed in Swales (1981, 1990) and Swales and Feak (2004) can adequately address the needs of the “advanced (often graduate) ESL students”, but not so much the “less-advanced” novice undergraduate students in her class, whose needs may be more appropriately addressed by a socioliterate approach which she details in her 1997 book (Johns, 1995a, p. 186; see also Johns, 1995b, 1997, 2003). Indeed, many studies in the ESP genre-based tradition often describe their learners as advanced learners (see, for example, Chang & Swales, 1999; Dudley-Evans, 2002; Henry & Roseberry, 1998; Hyon, 2001, 2002; Pang, 2002; Samraj, 2002; Swales & Lindemann, 2002; Swales & Luebs, 2002; Swales et al., 2001; among others). However, what the term “advanced learners” entails often goes unexamined in current ESP genre-based literature, except that “advanced learners” are often described as graduate students “whose majors are determined and whose disciplinary communities (and their genres) may be identifiable (Johns, 1995a, p. 185). Moreover, in a heterogeneous, multidisciplinary graduate-level writing class, which is a typical instructional and research site of ESP genre-based writing pedagogy (e.g., Hyland, 2002b; Swales & Luebs, 2002), learners who seem to fit the conventional understanding of “advanced” learners may develop generic awareness and discipline-specific writing to drastically different degrees. Such a common but perplexing phenomenon prompts at least these research questions: do these learners all qualify as “advanced” learners? If these are all “advanced learners”, why do some of these “advanced” learners interact better with the ESP genre-based approach than others?

One approach, among others, to answering these questions is to reevaluate the notion of advancedness by juxtaposing it with learners’ concrete learning processes and outcomes. Such an approach can be carried out at three interrelated levels:

**Level 1:** explore the full meanings of the term in light of learners’ learning outcomes. This level of inquiry aims at re(de)fining what “advanced” means when theorists believe that ESP genre-based writing instruction is suitable for advanced learners of the specialist varieties of English. It can clarify, for example, the relationships between “advancedness” and language proficiency, degree progress, or familiarity with generic and disciplinary practices. Ultimately, it can foreground characteristics that “advanced” learners in ESP genre-based writing classrooms usually possess.

**Level 2:** to fully understand the attributes of advanced learners in an ESP genre-based writing classroom, researchers can also situate the term in the concrete pedagogical realities of genre-based teaching to see what the term reveals about the contexts of learning. When reexamining the term “advanced” at this second level, one may find, for example, international graduate students with good professional standing and extensive professional work experience enroll in genre-based EAP classes because of their “verbal difficulties and dysfluencies” when they use discipline-specific English (e.g., Swales et al., 2001, p. 442). One may also find, as reported by Swales and Luebs (2002), advanced Asian doctoral students in social psychology, who are considered to be “bright students”, “an impressive and successful cohort” with “multipage vitae” and “enough English to
get a degree” (p. 138, 149), still recommended by their academic advisors to enroll in EAP writing course to acquire literacy skills for long-term career development. Discipline heterogeneity, which is not unusual in advanced genre-based writing classes (e.g., Chang & Swales, 1999; Hyland, 2002b; Swales & Lindemann, 2002; Swales & Luebs, 2002) can add further complexities to the pedagogical realities. For example, in their ESP genre-based writing course for advanced Asian doctoral students in social psychology, Swales and Luebs (2002) had originally anticipated that they would be getting a tightly homogeneous group of social psychologists. In reality, they ended up with four hard-core social psychologists, two more from the joint doctoral program in social science and social work, plus an organizational psychologist, a developmental psychologist, and a psychologist-inclined student in Information Sciences. The advanced nonnative-speaking “junior scholars” in Swales and Lindemann (2002, p. 118), who learn to write literature reviews using a genre-based approach, come from areas as diverse as Public Health, Social Psychology, Southeast Asian Studies, Philosophy, Latin American literature, among others. Their discussion of the literature review section, however, is based on materials from engineering education. The complexities of advancedness as it is played out in these learners in concrete pedagogical realities can generate meaningful observational perspectives into the processes and the contexts of ESP genre-based learning. For example, one can observe how these “advanced” learners position themselves as (academic) readers, (academic) writers, and language learners before they are initiated into a genre-based way of learning in academic literacy classes. One can also examine how these different ways of positioning themselves interact with the ESP genre-based learning processes and whether these different ways of positioning themselves have been changed by the genre-based ways of learning. A potential third observational perspective is to examine how disciplinary heterogeneity impacts classroom discussion and, in turn, the advanced learners’ deciphering and appropriation of discipline-specific generic features in their respective fields. Situating “advancedness” in such concrete pedagogical realities can lead to more grounded pictures of learners and learning in the ESP genre-based writing pedagogical framework.

Level 3: since any contextualized study of learners has to ultimately inform our theoretical understanding of the ESP genre-based literacy approach in general, the third level of reexamining the term would be to restate the term in the ESP genre-oriented theoretical framework to examine its theoretical significance. Exploring the construct “advanced” at this third level will raise, for example, questions that speak to the relationships among genre, language, and writing: does being an “advanced” learner mean that one is less a learner of language and writing and more a learner of genre (e.g., Hyland, 2003b)? Can these three constructs be separated at all? Another set of questions at the theoretical level would be the relationship between reading and writing in the ESP genre-based framework (Hirvela, 2004). How can a more coherent reading/writing connection be established in the ESP genre-based literacy framework and how does such a connection on the learners’ part influence their learning of genre and academic literacy?

Using “advanced” as an example, I hope to illustrate how a closer examination of this term at the three interrelated levels (definition, pedagogy, and theory) can transform the term into a powerful heuristic which can direct us to a more learner- and context-sensitive research agenda and can afford us a more nuanced picture of learning in concrete ESP genre-oriented pedagogical contexts. Such an approach can provide us with some clarifying observational perspectives into sometimes very messy learner data.
As to methodology, a learner-focused, context sensitive research project in the ESP genre-based frameworks, as briefly described above, may necessitate the use of case studies as exemplified in Belcher (1994, 1997) and Spack (1997). Such case studies need to be situated in typical ESP genre-based pedagogical applications (Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 2000, 2004) to ensure that the contexts of learning emerging from the data are those most relevant to the ESP genre-based framework (see Belcher, 2004 for her caution against making claims about the effectiveness of ESP genre-based applications). Multiple data sources originated from concrete research sites, such as learners’ genre-analysis tasks, writing tasks, classroom interaction data, curriculum materials, learners’ literacy autobiographies, and ethnographic interviews, among others, can be orchestrated to generate grounded pictures of the contexts of learning in ESP genre-based pedagogy.

The concrete research scenario described here is applicable to a host of other learner-related terms, such as “nonnative-speaking” or “international”, which are customarily used, but rarely examined, in ESP genre-based literature. Indeed, the purpose of carefully problematizing labels such as “advanced nonnative-speaking international doctoral students in mechanical engineering” and using them as heuristics is to generate more thick descriptions of the fully instantiated human agents/learners developing the abilities to approach genre in realistic pedagogical contexts. As one of the many possible approaches, the one described here can lead us to layers of contexts of genre learning, until a nuanced picture of learners actually operating in concrete pedagogical contexts can finally emerge. As a result, it should prove to be one of the productive ways of expanding current research horizons from genre/text-focused research into learner-focused research. By extension, it should also better inform us of the effects of ESP genre-based literacy teaching.

3.3. Developing theories of learning applicable to ESP genre-based writing instruction

ESP has long been noted as paying “scant attention to how people learn, focusing instead on the question of what people learn” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 2; emphasis original). Unfortunately, such an assessment of the ESP research agenda in general can also be applied to ESP genre-based writing pedagogy in particular. Currently, when conceptualizing classroom teaching and learning, the ESP genre-based approach rarely moves beyond premises such as “exposing students to a variety of texts within the relevant target genre and providing them with an understanding of how the contexts and purposes of these texts are related to their structure and lexicogrammar” (e.g., Hyland, 2003a, p. 21; see, however, Johns (1997) for a notable exception). Such premises only sketchily explain how genre is taught, and tell us even less about how it is learned. In earlier genre studies, task, or the “differentiated, sequenceable goal-directed activities relatable to the acquisition of pre-genre and genre skills appropriate to a foreseen or emerging sociorhetorical situation”, has been proposed as a guiding pedagogical principle in genre teaching (Swales, 1990, p. 76). However, in that proposal, task is more a guiding principle for curriculum and materials development than a principle for observing learning. It seems, therefore, that ESP genre-based pedagogy is still in need of conceptualizations of learning which are sensitive to the ESP conceptualization of language and genre, applicable to the ESP genre pedagogical realities, and capable of explaining how its targeted learners intersect with the results of genre analyses.

Currently, many ESP genre-oriented researchers often turn to the theoretical and/or pedagogical siblings of ESP genre-based genre studies – Systemic Functional Linguistics
genre studies and the New Rhetoric genre studies (NR) – and invoke conceptualizations of learning in these schools as the master theories that can also explain teaching and learning in the ESP genre-based pedagogical contexts (e.g., Hyland, 2003a; Johns, 2002). Such a theoretical move is understandable, given the many influences SFL and NR genre studies have on ESP genre-oriented research (for a recent extensive discussion of how NR and SFL enrich ESP genre studies, see Belcher, 2004). However, it is worth noting that, despite the influences these two other schools have on ESP genre studies, the significant differences between ESP and the other two schools of genre studies make the transfer of theories of learning from these two schools to ESP problematic at best. Johns (2003), for example, highlights the differences between SFL and ESP in the conceptualization of genre and the target genre exemplars that the students need to learn: ESP deals with discipline-specific genres, while SFL is concerned with what ESP theorists would call “pre-genres” (Swales, 1990, p. 58). On another front, Belcher (2004) emphasizes the differences between ESP and NR regarding the use of immersion or community of practice as the metaphors of learning. According to Belcher, most ESP theorists would not disagree with NR theorists’ strong emphasis on the necessity of immersion in the target situation as “the enabler of expertise in academic and workplace genres”, but they would also insist that mere immersion is not enough, and much more explicit, guided “immersion” is called for than normally available in situ (Belcher, 2004, p. 171). Overall, suffice it to say that the different envisioning of genre, target student populations, instructional contexts, and the expected teacher/student roles makes the applicability of theories of learning from the other two schools to ESP genre-based teaching an open empirical question, rather than a given.

Although ESP researchers will, understandably, continue to explore the applicability of learning theories from SFL and NR to ESP, another possible research direction is to construct theories of learning which are grounded in the current pedagogical practices of ESP. For example, ESP genre-based researchers have always been interested in incorporating more discovery-based genre learning where the goal is to help resituate the disciplinary-specific texts in learners’ eyes (Swales & Luebs, 2002). Correspondingly, since as early as Swales’s monograph on introductions (1981), various pedagogical proposals, such as data-driven learning (Johns, 1994), urging learners to be ethnographers of disciplinary practices in their fields (Johns, 1997), and engaging learners in genre-analysis projects, have been proposed (Currie, 1999; Flowerdew, 1993; Hirvela, 1997; Parkinson, 2000; Swales, 1990, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2000, 2004; among others). Such a renewed understanding of effective genre learning has pointed to the exciting possibilities of cross-sectioning ESP genre-based writing pedagogy with approaches that explicitly address learning such as Language Awareness (Bolitho et al., 2003; James & Garrett, 1992; White, Maylath, Adams, & Couzijn, 2000), Learner Autonomy (Jordan, 1997; Lynch, 2001; Wenden, 2002), and, in general, a constructivist view of learning (Candy, 1991; Prawat, 1996; Steffe & Gale, 1995).

Language Awareness (LA), for example, is an approach that relies on the learners paying conscious attention to instances of language in an attempt to discover and articulate patterns of language use. The basic tenets of LA include three major dimensions – the objectives of learning, the processes of learning, and assessment – which a viable conceptualization of learning usually includes. These basic tenets expound on various parameters of learning such as the role of enhanced consciousness; the importance of shared enquiry and active engagement; the dialectic relations between the experiential and the analytic in
learning and between noticing and performance; the target, format, and timing of assessment; as well as affective investment and critical awareness. Given their relevance to ESP genre-oriented learning, these tenets can potentially serve as lenses to examine the processes of discovery-based genre learning currently practiced in the ESP genre-based literacy framework. In the research scenario described below, I will illustrate how Language Awareness can help generate meaningful research questions as well as provide useful data-analysis categories.

3.4. Research scenario 2: examining learner annotations through the lenses of Language Awareness

Currently, a typical ESP genre-based writing class for international graduate students often involves guiding students from various disciplinary fields to explore the generic features and the disciplinary practices in research articles (RAs) that they themselves have collected. It also often involves learners engaging in discipline-specific writing tasks. Given such focuses, learning to annotate published RAs as well as one’s own texts from a genre-analytic perspective is an enabling cultural tool that the learners need to develop in an ESP genre-based writing class. However, there have been few studies that systematically examine learners’ actual development or their use of this tool. A study that focuses on learners’ genre-related annotations of published RAs, and more important, their self annotations of their academic writing, therefore, can provide a useful glimpse into the emergence of genre awareness and the development of discipline-specific literacy. Such a study, especially in the question-formation and data-analysis phases, can be greatly enhanced by the systematic application of some of the basic LA tenets.

For example, LA defines the objectives of language learning as the enhanced consciousness of the forms and functions of language, the awareness of the limitations of closed categories (for example, learners’ often static views of what certain language categories are), and the importance of shared enquiry about language rather than blind acceptance of existing “expert” linguistic knowledge and analytic frameworks. Using these basic tenets as possible points of entry into the scenes of research and, subsequently, into learner data, ESP genre-based researchers can explore how an enhanced consciousness of genre and language gradually emerges in learners’ annotations and how discipline-specific texts become resituated in their eyes in an instructional sequence. Researchers can also look at whether learners develop an awareness of the limitations of closed linguistic and generic categories and how such awareness leads to more destabilized and enriched theories of genre (Johns, 2002).

Regarding the learning process, LA emphasizes the holistic entries into texts, the bridging of the experiential and the analytic in developing language awareness, and the active engagement between the learner, the language data, and the learning process on the textual, contextual, sociopolitical, and attitudinal levels. Using these as question-formation or data-analysis heuristics, ESP genre-based researchers can examine how learners gain gradual entries into genre as evidenced in their annotations. Researchers can also examine the annotations closely to decipher the roles the experiential and the analytic processes of learning play in learners’ efforts to make visible to themselves the rich features (Barton, 2002) of disciplinary genre exemplars, among others.

As to assessment, LA believes in the importance of observing how learners notice the gap between their own performance in the target language and the performance of proficient
users of language because such noticing gives salience to a feature that can become more noticeable in future input and output. Such insights are valuable in ESP genre-based pedagogy because of their potential in shifting the focus of ESP genre-based assessment from the products to the processes of genre learning. For example, researchers can focus on the correlations (or the lack thereof) between learner’s annotations of other researchers’ published RAs and their annotations of their own discipline-specific writings. Such correlations can index learners’ transition from noticing genre to performing genre; they can reveal, for example, learners’ gradual development of the abilities to rematerialize some of the genre awareness in their own writings.

I have suggested how the basic tenets of LA, when systematically applied to a concrete ESP genre-based research project, can generate some meaningful research questions and provide lenses for the microgenetic analysis of data, analysis that relies on the density of observations to capture both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of learning “in the process of change” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65; see Belz & Kinginger (2003) for a recent example of using microgenetic analysis in L2 research). However, my purpose in juxtaposing LA, with its explicit attention to the process of language learning, and ESP genre-based writing instruction, which presently focuses more on genre description and less on learning, is not to argue for the hasty (and arranged) marriage of the two. Indeed, there are some major theoretical issues (e.g., the extent to which genre resides in language) and disagreements (e.g., on explicit “top-down” teaching) between the two which need to be ironed out. Also, I am not suggesting that the basic tenets of LA be used as predetermined, static categories in project design and/or data analysis. Rather, I hope to use the juxtaposition of the two as heuristics to explore areas of potential changes in the ESP genre-oriented research agenda. Specifically, I am interested in how a clearly articulated conceptualization of learning (here, through the lenses of the basic tenets of LA) can generate a set of systematic and clarifying observational dimensions that can cover various aspects of discovery-based genre learning (cognitive, affective, and critical; text, learner, and teacher; goal, process, and assessment). These observational dimensions can then lead ESP genre-based researchers and practitioners to ask productive questions and to design studies, such as the one described above, that can shed light on the various parameters of learning in ESP genre-oriented pedagogy.

4. Conclusion

Elsewhere, researchers have proposed that the T(eaching) word should be put back into EAP research, given our relatively less developed understanding of teaching in EAP (Watson Todd, 2003). Here, I argue that, equally important, if not more so, the L(earner) word also needs to be put into a more focal position in the ESP genre-based approach, which is an important strand of EAP. Doing so would require revisions of the current research agenda. It would require, for example, that the field of ESP genre studies resist the seduction of what two prominent ESP genre-based researchers called “the straightforward research life” which relies on the descriptions and analyses of “easily accessible and portable” published research articles (Johns & Swales, 2002, p. 13). It is hoped that, with more researchers devoting their research energy to conceptualizing learning and to examining how learners, as complex and instantiated agents, operate in the ESP genre-based pedagogical contexts, the ESP genre approach to academic literacy will be able to better determine its objectives, clarify its approaches to learning and teaching, measure its effects,
and, ultimately, measure up to its promise as one of the uniquely effective approaches to the teaching of the specialist varieties of English to L2 users.

References


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