Genre learning and development: A Bakhtinian perspective

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Abstract

There has been a growing interest in genre as a powerful means of analysing and understanding texts in cross-disciplinary areas. Genres tend to be conceived as generic structures that constrain individuals and communicative events. In second language writing pedagogy, much attention has been given to raising ESL (English as a Second Language) students’ structural awareness of genres as the route to genre development. Following from this pedagogical assumption, learning to write in a particular genre (e.g. academic genres) means learning the formal conventions associated with the genre. Drawing on Bakhtin’s conception of dialogic unity between inner genre and genre forms, this paper argues that while structural scaffolding may lead to greater schematic awareness of texts, genre development is a developmental process contingent upon students’ epistemological beliefs (inner genre). This conception offers a new perspective on genre development and learning in a second language.

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in genre as a powerful means of analysing and understanding texts in cross-disciplinary areas. The concept of genre evolves with a new perspective on the nature of language, which views language as a functional tool for achieving particular purposes. As a result a genre-based approach to language learning has gained an important place in language learning and teaching. However, this approach tends to focus on the schematic structure of the genre form with an aim to raising students’ structural awareness. While the research shows that this approach does help raise students’ textual awareness, little is known about what drives the genre development. This paper argues for a place for students’ inner genre in genre learning and development. It draws on Bakhtin’s conception of inner genre and argues that genre development is intricately interrelated with students’ epistemological beliefs and how this has an impact on the way genre features such as citations are appropriated. The following section discusses different perspectives on genre and genre learning and foregrounds the theoretical background that leads to the perspective under discussion.

Approaches to genre and genre learning

The concept of genre has been the focus of studies in cross-disciplinary areas (see Paltridge, 1997 for a detailed review) and has emerged as a prominent way of describing how experts
generate texts for a genre and what the organization of the text means for genre development. Originating as a literary construct, genre has been used as a means for studying language use in context (Dudley-Evans, 1994; Swales, 1990) and has been successfully applied to language pedagogy in primary and secondary schools (Burns, 1990; Derewianka, 1990), at tertiary settings, and in the workplace and other professional contexts. As a concept that has such wide applications, genre has been conceptualised differently according to different theoretical camps. Theorists argue as to how genres should be described and what the term means for genre learning and development.

Three traditions have been taken as primary approaches to genre in the area of applied linguistics (see Hyon, 1996). They are the North American Rhetoric studies represented by Miller (1984) and Freedman and Medway (1994), the Australian “Sydney” school of genre theory represented by Martin (1987; 1992) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) represented by Swales (1990). The major difference among these three approaches resides in whether the focus of description is on textual forms or social practices. The “Sydney” school represents the first approach and has its focus on schematic structures of different genre types. Developed from Halliday’s (1994) systemic functional linguistics, genre is regarded as one of the two contextual variables (the other being register) that constrain language choices. Genre is seen as being related to social purposes in using language and is thus instrumental in capturing the schematic structure of text manifested in the form of stages. This view has been successfully applied to both mainstream and ESL literacy instructions in primary and secondary schools and in the adult migrant program in Australia. Focusing on the schematic resources that can be used to embody different generic purposes, this approach aims at developing students’ metalinguistics awareness about the schematic and language features of genre forms. Textual scaffolding is seen as fundamental in genre development and can be provided through a three-stage teaching-learning cycle, comprising modelling, joint construction of text and independent construction of text (see Burns, 1990; Derewianka, 1990).

In the field of English for Specific Purposes, genre is discussed within the context of discourse communities and is conceptualised as a type of communicative event and regulated by members’ shared communicative purposes in a discourse community (Swales, 1990). Parallel to the Sydney school, ESP approach to genre focuses on explicating the generic structures for the realisation of certain communicative purposes in an academic discourse. Researchers in the ESP field share similar text-based assumptions with systemic functional linguists, and hold that the provision of exemplar models would enable students to master the generic structures deployed by expert writers (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998; Swales, 1990). Genre learning, in this sense, means gaining control over academic genres students are expected to use effectively at the tertiary or graduate level. This perspective has had a great impact on the teaching of both first and second language academic writing at tertiary settings. While text-based instruction could lead to a certain degree of textual awareness, there can be no guarantees that students will learn what they are taught (Nunan, 2000).

The third approach referred to as the New Rhetoric (Hyon, 1996) moves away from a solely text-based agenda to one that explores the complex relations between textual features and rhetorical situations. Genre, in Miller’s (1984) original proposal, embodies a writer’s response to repeated rhetorical situations. While stressing the importance of the writer’s ability to recognise the exigency and deploy genre forms to respond to the situation, this approach expands the conception as grammatical and schematic resources to include cognitive resources such as repertoire of experiential and ideological knowledge (Bekkenkotter & Huckin, 1993).
The role of cognitive resources in facilitating both text recognition and production is reflected in Freedman and Medway’s (1994, p. 10) work:

Producing an example of a genre is a matter not just of generating a text with certain formal characteristics but of using generic resources to act effectively in a situation through a text. While a learned structure provides a crude framework as well as a set of constraints, achieving an effective text involves innumerable local decisions for which the decontextualised formal rules learned in advance will provide no guidance.

Implicit in this extract is a perspective that genre development does not reside in the mere reproduction of identical structures but in the creative generation of genre forms in recurrent rhetorical situations. By including cognitive resources as the mediational tool for genre development, the New Rhetoric approach contributes significantly to the understanding of what is involved in genre development beyond mere reproduction of schematic structures. It is yet known what cognitive resources are and how they relate to genre learning and development. Taking a Bakhtinian perspective, the ensuing section explores how the construct of inner genre holds a central place in genre learning and development.

**Genre learning and development: A Bakhtinian perspective**

Genre as cognitive resources is the core of Bakhtin’s (1973; 1981; 1986; Voloshinov, 1973)\(^1\) dialogic principle. For Bakhtin, genres are not “the devices of stringing together” formalistic features (Medvedev/Bakhtin, 1978, p. 136), but ways of conceptualising the world. Defining genre in this way, he takes a top-down approach and stressing the importance of meaning in giving life to genre forms. The cognitive resource that the writer deploys to conceptualise the reality is referred to as inner genre (Medvedev/Bakhtin, 1978, p. 134). He suggests that “human consciousness possesses a series of inner genres for seeing and conceptualising reality” (ibid). He further argues that the ability to see the world through “the eyes of genre” is fundamental in representing a genre in a particular form (Medvedev/Bakhtin, 1978, p. 134).

Although genre is a product of Bakhtin’s later work (Morson & Emerson, 1990), the conception of inner genre as the driving force for the generation of genre forms resembles his early discussion of the role of inner speech in the production of outer speech (Voloshinov, 1976). He argues that “the outwardly actualised utterance is an island rising from the boundless sea of inner speech” (Voloshinov, 1976, p. 96). This analogy foregrounds prominently the role of inner genre (speech) as the shaper of genre forms. The potential of the formative role of inner genre is implicated in his early discussion on the distinctions of different discourse types and different perceptions of truth that lead to different discourse types. The major discourse types discussed include *single-voiced words* and *double-voiced words* (Bakhtin, 1973). These two discourses vary according to a writer’s perception of truth moving from unquestionable truth with one unqualified meaning to dialogic truth with diverse meanings. Within each discourse type, variational forms are found according to the writer’s orientation towards self and others.

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\(^1\) There is much dispute over the ownership of Voloshinov’s *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* (Clark & Holquist, 1984; Morris, 1994; Morson & Emerson, 1990; Wertsch, 1991). Bakhtin has been argued strongly to be the author of the book. The paper follows the common citation practices of attributing the text to Voloshinov, but the ideas taken from *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* will be attributed to Bakhtin.
Bakhtin’s account of discourse types provides a penetrating view into the role of inner genre in genre learning and development. The descriptions of different layers of dialogue bring together the social, intertextual, psychological and textual aspects of discourse production and interpretation and provide a holistic view of contextual use of language varying according to what Clark and Holquist (1984, p. 227) refer to as “different epistemological layers of their culture system”. What this suggests is that using the formal features of a genre usually means adopting a subject position implicit in the genre and invoked by both the community’s epistemic values. Coe (2002) rightly pointed out that one cannot write an academic paper without adopting epistemic values such as objectivity invoked by the genre.

While the construct inner genre contributes significantly to understanding what genre is and what it entails for creative deployment, Bakhtin’s theory further suggests how inner genre can be shaped and formed. Though not directly theorising the development of a writer’s inner genre, Bakhtin, in his Discourse in the novel discusses what leads to the “ideological becoming” of a writer (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 341). For him, to appropriate genres requires individuals’ efforts to assimilate ideological points of views through an active and engaged process (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 345-346). This process is referred to as responsive understanding and viewed as essential in genre development. Its opposite, passive understanding, marked by passive reception of the linguistic significance of utterances, is regarded as a hindrance to ideological becoming of a writer (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 281). This suggests that while text-based instruction could yield positive learning outcomes, what we intend to teach may only indirectly by related to what is learned. What ultimately matters is how individual learners decide to engage with genre forms.

While the writer’s engaged agency is seen as fundamental to genre development, Bakhtin further suggests that what is entailed for the formation of inner genre. He located this formation in a dialogic interaction between the writer’s past inner system and new normative structures (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 27), emphasising the importance of forming a new inner unity appropriate for the creative deployment of genre forms as is shown in the following quote:

In point of fact, any cognitive thought whatever, even one in my consciousness, in my psyche, comes into existence, as we have said, with an orientation toward an ideological system of knowledge where that thought will find its place. My thought, in this sense, from the very start belongs to an ideological system and is governed by its set of laws. But, at the same time, it belongs to another system that is just as much a unity and just as much in possession of its own set of laws – the system of my psyche. The unity of this second system is determined not only by the unity of my biological organism but also by the whole aggregate of conditions of life and society in which that organism has been set … (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 35).

The account of dialogic interaction brings together the situated moment of how normative structures are conceptualised and how writers go about redefining their past systems, that is their previous ways of knowing shaped through their engagement with other genre-mediated activities. This suggests that the appropriation of genre requires the reformulation of writers’ past cognitive resources appropriate for new language mediated activities. The need to reformulate the writer’s cognitive resources is reflected in the study of second language acquisition carried out by Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000). Their study suggests that second language learners’ abilities to adapt to a changed language-mediated world reside in their efforts to reinterpret their ongoing narrative history.
As has been argued above, Bakhtin’s genre theory provides a new perspective on genre development. This perspective views the use of genre as the mediational tool for the development of inner genre and inner genre as the indication of the mastery of academic genre. From this perspective, the process of appropriating and deploying English academic genres can be understood as involving a process of self-redefinition and shaping a new way of knowing, appropriate for English academic writing. In this process, the writer’s engaged agency is an important resource through which L2 students could gain a responsive understanding of the English academic genre. The next section describes how this theoretical perspective has been applied to the study of a group of Chinese EFL students’ citation behaviour (Chen, 2000, 2001a, 2001b).

Case studies

The study

The development of inner genre appropriate for a particular genre has been identified as a fundamental index of Chinese EFL students’ appropriation of academic genre in Chen’s (2000, 2001a, 2001b) studies. Using the learning of English citation practices as an example, Chen explored how Chinese ESL students came to know and learn to use English academic genre as they prepared the literature review chapters for their theses. The research is a case study of four Chinese masters level students who were enrolled in an offshore program of an Australian university. It draws on interviews with these students, examinations of the literature reviews written for their thesis proposals and the finished theses presented for examination. The analysis focuses on the kinds of understanding these students brought to their studies and how these understandings were redefined and developed during their engagement with literature review writing.

To capture the students’ formation of inner genre, the study draws on the notion of “ways of knowing” from developmental psychology that examines learners’ epistemological beliefs (Perry, 1970) and self orientation (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Perry’s (1970) study provides an account of the cognitive development of male students at Harvard University as they went through their college years. His description of college students’ cognitive development offers a heuristic with which to examine the nature of word meaning that resides in students’ mind, and contextualises Bakhtin’s (1973) conception of senses of truth leading to the variations of discourse types within an Anglophone academic context. In a similar vein, Belenky et al. (1986) examined how women from diverse backgrounds make sense of knowledge and themselves as knowers. Their study shows how women’s voices change with their ways of making sense of knowledge and themselves as knowers.

The findings from Chen’s (2001b) study suggest that learning to write resides in the writer’s dialogic interactions between his or her past resources and the cultural and contextual features of English academic genre. The study finds a dialectic unity between students’ ways of knowing and the ways through which they deployed the genre. A full description of this dialectic unity is beyond the scope of this paper. The following sections provide a description of the inner genres that students developed and of the forces that drove the development. The description aims to illuminate the theoretical perspective discussed in the above section.
Inner genre and genre development

Chen’s (2001b) study demonstrates that cognitive resources are an important mediational tool in genre development. It seems that the formation of a new way of knowing seems to be a fundamental part of the development of a full understanding of genre forms. All four participants, John, Sophie, Joy and Elizabeth, brought with them their own past resources. However, particular understandings of the English academic genre are associated with how the students evaluate their past resources and reshape a new way of knowing.

Both John and Sophie showed attachment to their past resources. John’s way of knowing was marked by a reliance on external experts for meaning. He was preoccupied with the authoritative words of the political leaders, demonstrating passive reception of citation practices based on superficial linguistic features. The deference to external authority is extended into his new system where he accepts expert knowledge as truth without exploring his role as a writer. He thus demonstrates a passive understanding of citation practices. This is evident in the following interview extracts:

John: If I could not accept that idea, I will not cite that in my article. So all the article, all the recitation, is agreed by myself, so I will recite them. If not, I will refuse to pick them. … I think they are not useful to my article. … I do not have such a habit to do that, we just follow some famous statements, and those statement I agree with. So I will pick them, if I read some articles, which are different from my idea, I will refuse to pick them into my thesis.

John: I think that when the examiner read it, they will think that my writing of a literature review is just follow their style, that’s the formal writing. But I cannot say maybe it is not so suitable for their taste, OK, but I tried my best to follow their style (Chen, 2001b, p. 135-145).

Sophie represents a way of knowing which seeks for one’s independent self. Sophie demonstrates a subjective way of knowing which is marked by an orientation towards internal pursuit of knowledge. She conceives knowledge as being derived from her inner imaginative power, and values concrete practical knowledge over theoretical knowledge. For her, knowledge consists of facts and real world events. However, dependence on her own independent self as the agency of knowing prevents her from engaging in dialogic interactions with the meaning of citation practices. In this sense, her voice remains monologic. This is illustrated in the following extracts:

Sophie: Practically, maybe this is concerned with my, ah, literature preference, yeah, something, ah, something very easy to perceive, or to understand from the words, and for imagination, yeah, creativity through the word, and you can imagine something, imagine something. OK, yeah, and you can try to understand or interpret, interpret it from other angle or other way …

Sophie: No, I am afraid, sometimes, I dis-, I, I hated to use the reference. Why, you know, because if I use references, I am controlled by that. Yeah, I am often thinking in that way, because I think my way should have my own purpose, or my, my style, it should be different from the others. But I use the others, sometimes I am really controlled by that, especially in literature, I never like to use the others. Yeah, I only want to invent by my, my own ((laugh)), but, yeah,
but academically, yeah, it is not so, it doesn’t sound so, au, authoritative right?
(Chen, 2001b, pp. 160-167).

Joy presents a deeper dialogic engagement with the meaning of citation practices, in which the symbolic meaning of citations as the carrier of knowledge claims is recognised. However, this way of knowing represents the loss of individual agency since, for her, it embodies a belief in objective characterisation of findings and procedures. This way of knowing resembles the epistemological stance of separate knowers described by Belenky et al. (1986). However, unlike the separate knower who holds a relative attitude towards truth, Joy presents a belief in absolute knowledge and authority. Her way of knowing can thus be characterised by Bakhtin’s (1973) notion of a styliser, who accords status to the discourse of others without evaluative tones. Joy developed a deepened understanding of beliefs and values embodied in the English citation practices. However, as a styliser she masters some features of citations but disengages herself from finding deeper meanings that are invoked by the actual use of citations. The following extracts illustrate this way of knowing:

Joy: I should say that I have very limited writing experience. I mean what I can remember is write for examinations, or I practise writing, the only purpose is to pass the examination, I never enjoy the beauty, or the excited experience, or a kind of deep feeling from writing English, even though I prefer writing in Chinese. I am good at Chinese writing, and personally, but I never have the same experience in writing English.

Joy: Writing Chinese I can recreate myself, I can find myself, I can help myself develop or grow up. So I wrote a lot of diaries, and also that’s a means of improving my Chinese. But it is a part of my purpose. For English, that’s the only purpose, improving English.

Joy: Thesis writing seems only an exercise for improving our writing skill, because the findings we obtain after doing the research is of no importance, for us, or for others, or for the society. It’s not productive. For using citations, there does exist a “bad cycle”, I mean, everybody cites, some responsible, some not; overstressing citation also arises a dead and stiff model, just like part of “Ba Gu Wen” in Chinese, both advantage and disadvantage exist (Chen, 2001b, pp. 189-196).

Elizabeth’s way of knowing represents a reclamation of a writer’s agency as the core of meaning making. Her epistemological perspective on the relative and contextual nature of knowledge and her conception of a constructed self are parallel to that which is expected in the use of citations. Her way of knowing is marked by a deeper dialogic engagement manifested in her active, passionate pursuing of understanding of what it means to cite. She presents a responsible and responsive way of knowing and is willing to change in her deep mind. Her dialogic engagement is reflected in her commitment to finding her own “light” and her attempt to constantly challenge her thinking and find a position for herself.

Elizabeth: When I call myself a dialectic person, I mean that I have developed a habit of believing everything if it is reasonable and confirming in itself but also a habit of doubting everything if it’s not so confirming. For example, when I thought over my literature review, I tried to take everything I had been reading into my consideration so that I could search and reach a more convincing conclusion. If there was something
contradictory to my idea, I did not totally refuse everything, rather I’d like to accept those useful parts to build up my own ideas with a very critical manner. My principle is “only after persuading yourself, can you convince the others” whenever I do everything, including writing my thesis ...(Chen, 2001b, p. 214).

The ways of knowing identified above represents a continuum from John to Elizabeth. This continuum can be read as a developmental process in which the writer’s past resources are defined and redefined until he or she comes to an active understanding of the citation practices. The attainment of development represents a move from passive to active knowing, from dualism to relativism, and from monologic claim to dialogic interactions with others. The identification of versions of ways of knowing within the context of English academic writing is of great significance. Elizabeth’s case provides strong evidence that what activates the formation of a new way of knowing is transformation of thinking rather than the mere acquisition of linguistic structures or generic templates. This transformation comes from the dialogic engagement in redefining past resources and genre-mediated activities that involve the writer’s engaged agency. While this study suggests that dialogic engagement is the fundamental mediational activity through which students come to appropriate the genre, it is identified as a core element governing the students’ citation behaviour (see Chen, 2001b).

**Conclusion**

The conception of inner genre as a mediational tool for genre development puts knowers in the centre of meaning making and provides a dynamic picture of what grows, what drives the development and how it develops. The perspective argued in this paper suggests that the appropriation of genre forms involves a process of self-redefinition, which entails students’ intentional acts in readjusting their past inner unities (ways of knowing) and arriving at new inner discourse (new ways of knowing) appropriate to English academic writing as a result of their new language mediated activities.

**References**


