An educational, or process, approach to the teaching of professional genres

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The application of genre analysis to language teaching has so far been mainly restricted to ESP. This paper considers the application of the techniques and results of genre analysis to more broadly-based courses, in particular those for learners aiming to use English in professional settings. The paper argues for an educational, or process, approach to the teaching of genres, as opposed to the training, or product, approach mainly employed until now. The paper examines distinctive features of professional genres in order to illustrate some of the types of variation which genres are subject to, and which learners need to be made aware of. A number of genre analysis activities are presented to demonstrate how learners can be taught to approach, adapt to, and ultimately acquire new genres.

Introduction

The application of genre analysis to English language teaching has been very influential in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), but less so in the more mainstream field of English for General Purposes. This paper will consider the application of the techniques and results of genre analysis to more broadly-based courses, in particular those directed at learners aiming to use English in professional settings.

The term genre is defined by Richards et al. (1985) as 'a particular class of speech event which has certain features common to that particular event'. Swales (1990), similarly, defines genre as 'a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes'. Genre is an important concept in professional communication because members of individual professions, or 'discourse communities' (ibid.), will share common purposes of communication, or genres. It is these genres which teachers of professional communication must introduce to their students.

A degree programme has recently been introduced at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong (CPHK) in English for Professional Communication (EPC). Such a programme in similar to English for Specific Purposes courses, in so far as one of the key objectives will be mastery of professional genres. However, where the typical ESP course focuses on one or a restricted number of genres, graduates of the degree in English for Professional Communication will be expected to cope with a much greater variety of genres.
A survey conducted on behalf of the English Department of CPHK identified the following broad areas of possible professional activity for graduates of EPC (Boswood, 1993):

—product promotion/marketing
—publishing/broadcasting
—customer–client liaison
—public relations
—human resources management
—office administration
—tourism and hospitality.

Such a range of activity in which to use English is likely to be similar in many parts of the world where English is used as a medium for conducting business.

To function professionally in any of these areas implies an ability to participate in a whole range of genres. To take just one area, someone working in public relations would need to be competent in the genres of customer–client interview, press conference, oral presentation, press release, publicity brochure, and business report, to give just some examples.

The students of English for professional communication at CPHK need to be competent in a number of genres. More importantly, they will need the skills to adapt to and acquire a wide range of new genres. To borrow a pair of terms used by both Widdowson (1983) and Larsen-Freeman (1983), an appropriate approach will be an educational rather than a training one, emphasizing the process of acquiring new genres, rather than the product. Larsen-Freeman contrasts the two approaches as in Figure 1:

**Figure 1:** The educating process

(Larsen-Freeman, 1983)

The educating process is individual-oriented. Objectives are more general and are stated in terms of developing an individual’s skills so that he or she can adapt to and function in any situation.

Students are educated to be independent learners: to have ‘the capacity to generate their own learning as needed’. (Harrison and Hopkins, 1967:439)

Students learn how to set objectives, define problems, generate hypotheses, gather information, make decisions, and assess outcomes. The emphasis is on the process, not the result.

Since objectives are more open-ended, assessment is based on the progress students have made toward meeting the objectives. Success is more relative than absolute.

The training process

The training process is situation-oriented. Since the trainer can customize the training to the situation, finite objectives can be specified.

The content of the training program is matched to the finite objectives. The information is transmitted from the trainer to the trainees.

Trainees are expected to do as the trainer (or the acknowledged model) does. The emphasis is on obtaining results that conform as closely to the model as possible.

Criteria for success can be specified. Measurement of these and therefore knowledge of the degree of the trainer’s success is immediately attainable.

This paper will look at a number of distinctive features of professional genres to illustrate some of the types of variation which they exhibit; it
will then make a number of suggestions as to how learners can be taught to approach, adapt to, and ultimately acquire new genres.

Genre analysis, in linguistics, has concerned itself most with describing the higher level organization and structure of written or spoken texts.

Mitchell (1957/75), in one of the earliest attempts at genre analysis (although he did not use the term) specified the following elements in the genre of shop transactions in Libya (Figure 2):

1. salutation
2. enquiry as to the object of sale
3. investigation of the object of sale
4. bargaining
5. conclusion

Swales (1990) proposes a three move 'create a research space' model for research article introductions (Figure 3):

1. establishing the territory
2. establishing a niche
3. occupying the niche

Ventola (1987) proposes the following structural formula for service encounters (Figure 4):

1. greeting
2. attendance allocation
3. service bid
4. service
5. resolution
6. goods handover
7. pay
8. closing
9. goodbye

Davies and Greene (1984) have identified a four part structure for 'physical structure' texts (Figure 5):

1. the parts of the structure
2. the location of the parts
3. the properties or attributes of the parts
4. the function of the parts

Bhatia (1991) proposes the following seven moves for the genre of sales letter (Figure 6):

1. establishing credentials
2. introducing the offer
3. offering incentives
   a. offering the product/service
   b. essential detailing of the offer
   c. indicating value of the offer
4. referring to enclosed documents
5. inviting further communication
6. using pressure tactics
7. ending politely

Some examples of genres
As Swales (1990) points out, individual instances of genres vary in the degree to which they conform to the prototypical structure. The above models are thus not fixed, rule-governed patterns, but rather prototypes which are subject to individual variation. Elements of these structural formulae may be omitted, repeated, occur in a different order, or be embedded one within the other. Thus in sales letters (Fig. 6), the element ‘offering incentives’ might not be appropriate for some products and would thus be omitted; in service encounters (Fig. 4), the element ‘pay’ might be repeated in some circumstances, if more than one transaction takes place; the element ‘pay’ in service counters, again, may occur before or after ‘goods handover’; finally, in shop transactions (Fig. 2) investigation of the object of sale might in some cases be embedded within ‘bargaining’.

One way of defining genres is as language events in which the configuration of contextual features comes together. Hallidayan linguistics (Halliday, 1978) divides up context according to three parameters: field (what the text is about), tenor (the relation between text producer and text recipient) and mode (the type and purpose of the text—written to be read, written to be spoken, etc.). The three contextual parameters of field, tenor, and mode together determine discourse structure and choice of linguistic realization. Genre analysis, according to this view, is the study of how the contextual parameters, discourse structure, and language interrelate.

Thus, to give some examples, shop transactions, or service encounters, are in the field of goods and services, tenor is that of salesperson to customer, and mode is that of spoken interaction. Introductions to research articles are in the field of academic enquiry, the tenor of expert to expert and mode of written to be read.

Individual variation in the realization of particular genres is a result of variation in these contextual parameters. Thus, at the level of discourse structure, in the sales letter, for those products where ‘offering incentives’ is not appropriate, this would be due to the field, as type of product is a field, or subject matter constraint. Similarly, the element ‘establishing credentials’ would not likely be included if the customer was already a client of the company; the relationship between vendor and customer is a tenor constraint. In a face-to-face sales pitch, as opposed to a sales letter, the move ‘inviting further communication’ would be unlikely; the difference between a written text and a spoken interaction is a mode constraint.

At the level of language, in the service encounter genre, again, clearly, lexis will vary according to whether the field is ‘shop’, ‘post office’, ‘train station’, etc. Similarly, terms of address will vary according to the age of the interlocutors (a tenor constraint), ‘sir’, ‘madam’, etc., being used for older customers. The use of demonstratives (this, that, these, those) will depend upon whether the service encounter is face-to-face, in which case reference can be made to the object of sale by means of demonstratives, or
conducted over the telephone, where the article for sale is not visible to the customer and therefore cannot be referred to by means of demonstratives. The face-to-face versus the telephone medium is a mode constraint.

An educational, or process, approach to the teaching of genres

Clearly, as already stated, we cannot hope to predict the wide range of possible genres students of English for Professional Communication will need to participate in. This, I would argue, is where EPC differs from much of ESP, where the application of genre analysis has been most widespread until now. In many ESP courses the specific purposes are often quite narrow (hence the term ‘narrow-angle’ ESP, also referred to as ‘hard-core’) and courses can focus on one or a limited number of particular genres. Courses in laboratory report writing or research article writing spring to mind here. However, even in such narrow-angle courses I would question the fixed, rigid way in which these genres are sometimes presented. Indeed, because they are not clearly delineated constructs, susceptible to rule-governed description, we would not want to present such product-oriented description of genres.

What teachers of English for Professional Communication can do is to make learners aware of how genres differ one from another and within each other, and how they can go about discovering these differences. Or, to put it another way, we can show students the parameters which shape genre and the sorts of ways in which these parameters affect discourse structure and linguistic encoding.

What I am arguing for, then, is a procedure which focuses on the process of learning about, and how to participate in, genres (an educational approach), as opposed to a procedure which focuses solely on the end-product of specific varieties of genres (a training approach).

Some activity types

I propose six types of activity which might contribute to such a procedure:
1. using the results of genre analysis
2. ‘metacommunicating’ (talking about instances of genres)
3. learners doing their own genre analysis
4. concordancing
5. ‘on-line’ genre analysis by learners as an aid in creating their own texts
6. translation based on a sample of instances of a given genre.

Although quite different, each of these activities has the unifying attribute of highlighting the inter-relation and interaction between the contextual, or generic, parameters of field, tenor, and mode on the one hand, and discourse structure and linguistic encoding on the other. Rather than inculcating in the learner a fixed conception of the discourse structure and linguistic encoding of individual genres, the activities seek to develop a sensitivity to the subtle interplay between the various parameters affecting genre and how a change in any one of the parameters is likely to affect discourse structure and linguistic encoding. This is what is meant by a process, or educational, approach to the teaching of professional genres.
1. Using the results of genre analysis

In the approach most commonly adopted in ESP courses, a product-focused analysis of a given genre serves as a model for the learner’s own attempts at creating instances of the genre. In contrast to ESP courses, the emphasis here would not be on trying to develop as near-perfect mastery as possible of one or more genres, but on showing how genre analysis can be applied to a range of genres, and on learning about the sorts of variation that affect instances of genres, and on what levels. The emphasis would thus be on the techniques rather than the specific results of the analysis, although the teacher would develop the materials based on published genre analysis, as illustrated above (‘Some examples of genres’).

Specific activities which can be used to highlight the techniques of genre analysis are as follows:

—flow-chart analysis of structural formula, highlighting possible variations
—analysis of structural formula using colour coding
—matching of possible utterances to structural slots in structural formula
—paraphrasing—students provide alternative encodings for structural slots
—gap filling of structural slots
—reordering of jumbled structural slots
—role-play focusing on variation of field/tenor/mode.

2. Metacommunicating

‘Metacommunicating’ is a term borrowed from Candlin (1981). It refers to an activity in which learners analyse and discuss a piece of discourse. In the context of genre analysis this might take the form of glossing the stages in the structural formula in functional terms, assessing field (e.g. lexis), tenor (e.g. relations between form and force, levels of formality and politeness), and mode (spoken and written forms, dialogue vs. monologue, etc.). It is not necessary to use the terminology employed in this paper in discussing genres with learners, although the question of an appropriate metalanguage is one worthy of consideration.

3. Learners doing their own genre analysis

This activity is the reverse side of the coin in relation to Activity 1. Whereas Activity 1 makes use of the results of genre analysis carried out by applied linguists (and there are enough published examples available for this—see the references accompanying the examples in the section of this paper, ‘Some examples of genres’) here the learners do their own genre analysis, examining a number of instances of a given genre to discover its prototypical features and the sorts of variation it is subject to. I have used the material of the type illustrated in Figure 7 successfully in this way. This material focuses on what might be called a mini-genre, that of short news item newspaper headlines. Students are asked to examine the headlines and discover the specific features of this genre. These have
to do with the contextual parameter of mode (which might be described as written to be read very quickly, or to be scanned, and to catch the attention of the reader). Features which have been identified include a lack of articles and auxiliary verbs, a grammatical structure consisting of either subject + verb or a nominalization emphasizing some sort of activity, and the use of present tense or no tense. These features have to do with the need to present information in a concise way, to attract the attention of the reader, and to make the events sound fresh or new. The point here is not the result of the analysis, however, but the process learners are engaged in to be able to come up with features specific to a given genre and to try to account for them.

1. Festival arrests
Police arrested 559 people, mainly for drug offences, at a pop festival in the south-west. The event attracts a crowd of more than 75,000.

2. L-test assault
A young man was today fined £150 with £95 costs for punching the examiner after he failed his driving test. He was also ordered to pay £75 compensation.

3. Hit by lightning
Two climbers airlifted to hospital after being struck by lightning in the Brecon Beacons in south Wales. One was unconscious for half an hour and the other suffered burns and a suspected broken leg.

4. Concordancing
Concordancing could have been tailor-made to help learners investigate specific features of genre. In this activity learners are provided with a corpus made up from instances of a particular genre or, better, for comparative purposes, two corpora made up of different genres, and asked to look for particular generic features. Figure 8 is an example of a concordance included in a recent paper by Tribble (1991), showing the different uses of the lexical item ‘say’.

Tribble based his analysis on two corpora of academic articles, one historical and one from engineering. The field was thus different, although the mode, and presumably the tenor, remain the same. What the
concordance reveals is that in the historical articles ‘say’ is used in a reporting function, while in engineering it is used to exemplify. This finding might lead to an investigation of other reporting verbs in the history corpus and other exemplifying items in the engineering corpus. The point to emphasize here, though, is that although this example was found by an applied linguist, this is the sort of information that learners, with guidance from the teacher, can find out for themselves. Given a corpus or a pair of corpora, learners, with guidance, can seek out particular generic features of the genre/genres to which a given corpus/corpora belong(s).

To take some more examples, given a corpus of sales letters, students could be asked to concordance the most frequent verbs and to identify their preferred grammatical forms and functions. This would lead to the discovery that a preferred verb form in sales letters is the imperative, and that its function is either to draw the attention of the reader/customer to some feature of the product for sale or to request some action on the part of the reader/customer (Ma, 1993). Similarly, with sales letters, learners might be instructed to concordance the word ‘please’ and to answer the question: ‘What is/are the function(s) of “please” in sales letters?’ The likely answer would be that ‘please’ is typically used with imperatives in requesting action on the part of the reader/customer (although not with those imperatives drawing attention to some feature of the product). (Ma, 1993). Having done these analyses of verb forms and of ‘please’ in the sales letter corpus, learners might then be instructed to do the same activity for another corpus, to compare the results from the two corpora which, of course, are likely to vary, and to account for any difference in terms of contextual constraints.

5. ‘On-line’ genre analysis by learners as an aid in creating their own texts
This activity involves creating a piece of text in the target language by examining carefully the specific generic features of similar texts in the same genre. The idea for this activity is based on my own experience as a speaker of foreign languages.

When faced with the task of creating a text in the target language, especially if it belongs to a genre one is not familiar with, a useful strategy is to closely examine similar instances of the given genre, in order to discover those generic features so necessary for the creation of an authentic-sounding piece of language. A close examination of instances of the target genre will invariably reveal typical lexico-grammatical and discourse features unavailable in dictionaries or grammar books.

I suspect that this is a procedure very often used by learners, although not acknowledged by teachers, as it is close to plagiarism. When faced with writing a business letter in a foreign language, a sensible reaction is to examine other business letters to see how they are written. How else, for example, would one learn that letters are closed in French something like—‘Veuillez agréer, Monsieur/Madame, l’expression de mes sentiments distingués’ (Be so kind, as to accept, Sir/Madam, the expression of my
distinguished feelings), where in English a simple ‘Yours sincerely’ would do? How else would one know that in English news-readers can omit the copula when referring to reports by other journalists (‘This report by X’, ‘That report by Y’), a grammatical construction not acceptable in most other genres, or that in sports commentary there tends to be a heavy use of so-called right displaced subject (‘He’s a great player, Gascoigne’, ‘She made a fantastic start, Gunnel’, ‘He hit a fantastic six, Botham’).

Indeed, this skill of seeking out instances of genre-dependent language use in English and incorporating them in one’s own writing or speaking is not limited to foreign languages. Many native speakers make use of others’ writing or speech to model their own work in their native language, where the genre is an unfamiliar one. It is time that this skill was brought out of the closet, and exploited as an aid to learning, instead of remaining a secret activity not acknowledged by teachers.

It would be easy to introduce on-line genre analysis in a principled way in language teaching. All that would be required would be for any given writing or speaking task to be accompanied by a set of parallel authentic texts. If the task was to write a sales letter, say, then learners would be provided with a set of sales letters on which to model their writing. Learners would not be able to copy exactly, because the subject matter and the relation between reader and writer would be different in each text. The role of the teacher would be to help learners to highlight key features of the discourse structure and examples of usage which typify the genre of sales letters, as manifested in the parallel texts, and which learners can incorporate into their own letters. In addition, the teacher would be able to demonstrate to learners just how much can be ‘borrowed’ from another text before plagiarism takes over.

6. Translation based on a sample of instances of a given genre
This activity is similar to the above one in so far as a piece of text in the target language is produced with the help of similar texts from the same genre. However, here the starting point is a text in the mother tongue to be translated into the target language. This activity is again based on my own experience as a speaker of foreign languages (in this case French).

As a speaker of French I have sometimes been called upon to translate for friends or colleagues texts which come from quite specialized genres. These friends or colleagues, not being aware of genre theory, assume that if one can speak French then one can translate any type of text.

In one early attempt I was asked to translate a technical manual concerned with the operation of machinery for making polystyrene foam. My literary training in French not having extended to this genre, I had no idea of the conventions which I was required to use. Even after enlisting the help of a native speaker of French and of a technical dictionary I was not able to go much further, the native French speaker being equally unaware of the conventions attaching to the genre of technical manuals, and the dictionary providing a range of possibilities for every technical term, but not enough contextualization to indicate the difference between each.

The teaching of professional genres
A later attempt was more successful, however. On this occasion I was asked to translate the abstract of a research paper in botany for a colleague who wanted to attend a conference. Here I was lucky enough to find a journal of botany which published abstracts in both English and French, and was thus able to find instances of use which coincided with what I needed to translate. Figure 9 shows some of these.

Figure 9: Use of simple past tense instead of present

- L'acide indole-3-acétique *retarde* l'établissement de l'abscission du pedicelle chez la fève de soya.
  - [i.e. Indole-3-acetic acid delays the onset of pedicel abscission in soy beans.]
  - Indole-3-acetic acid *delayed* the onset of pedicel abscission in soy beans.

- La dissolution de la lamelle moyenne *précède* la separation cellulaire.
  - Dissolution of the middle lamella *precedes* cell separation.
  - Middle lamella dissolution *preceded* cell separation.

- Trois paramètres *sont mesurés* en différents stades de croissance de la plante.
  - Three parameters *are measured* at different stages of plant growth.
  - Three parameters *were measured* at different stages of plant growth.

Impersonality through passive and omission of agent

- Les auteurs conduisent que . . .
  - [i.e. The authors conclude that . . .]
  - It is concluded that . . .

- Les auteurs ont constitué une collection de 471 isolats de Fusarium oxysporum.
  - The authors constituted a collection of 471 isolates of Fusarium oxysporum.
  - A collection of 471 isolates of Fusarium oxysporum was obtained.

- Le paramètre D permet de dégager deux types d'évolution.
  - Parameter D allows to recognize two types of evolution.
  - From the evolution of parameter D, two processes can be recognized.

Note a. = original French version; b. = literal translation; c. = original parallel English form.

Detailed analysis of linguistic conventions

The first set of examples shows how the present simple tense is preferred in French where English uses the simple past in reporting experimental procedures (e.g. l'acide indole-3-acétique *retarde* . . . [i.e. Indole-3-acetic acid *delays* . . .] vs. Indole-3-acetic acid *delayed* . . .). The second set of examples illustrates how, where English would employ the so-called impersonal passive, French uses alternative devices to avoid the first person pronoun, either using the expression 'les auteurs' (i.e. the authors) + active verb, or an ergative verb such as 'permet' (permit), as in the last example.

These examples, I hope, show the sort of specific generic features which are to be found once one begins to examine instances of a given genre in any sort of detail. An anonymous reviewer of a previous draft of this paper pointed out that translation such as this is sometimes done in university Modern Language courses, where they are referred to as exercises de style. In my experience, however, such courses are not usually based upon a principled application of genre theory; they tend to focus at the sentence level and do not develop a systematic relation between contextual parameters, on the one hand, and discourse structure and lexico-grammar, on the other.
Summary and conclusion

This paper began by pointing out that the application of genre analysis to language teaching has been restricted mainly to ESP. It then argued that where learners are likely to be required to operate in a range of genres, an educational, or process, approach, as opposed to the training, or product, approach often used in ESP, is more appropriate. Following this a number of distinctive features of professional genres were examined, in order to illustrate some of the types of variation which genres are subject to and which learners need to be made aware of. Finally, a number of activities designed to promote an educational, or process, application of genre analysis were presented, with a view to demonstrating how learners can be taught to approach, adapt to, and ultimately acquire new genres. To conclude, it is hoped that the argument presented in this paper and the example activity types will encourage teachers to adapt a genre-based approach in courses more broadly based than those courses in which it has mainly been applied until now.

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Notes
1 This is a revised version of a paper presented at the International Conference on English for Professional Communication, City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, March 1992.
2 The possibility of deviation from the prototype, it should be pointed out, gives rise to the question as to at what point in such deviation does a language event cease to belong to the given genre and become a member of a different genre. An answer to such a question is beyond the scope of this paper (although interested readers might find the work of Rosch (e.g. Rosch, 1978) on prototype theory of interest). However, the question has potential for exploitation in the sort of process, or educational, approach advocated for genre in this paper. Asking learners to consider this question is very likely to stimulate their awareness of genre.
3 This material was originally provided to me by Richard Badger, to be used in another, not dissimilar, way to that suggested here.

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The teaching of professional genres 315

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