Understanding the concept of "genre" and its implications for ESL writing instruction

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The concept of "genre" has been understood in different ways in different traditions, and these understandings may have didactic implications for how to conduct writing instruction. This presentation will first show how different scholarly traditions understand the concept of "genre". Second, it will discuss a study including a teaching experiment that has been carried out in English in upper secondary schools in Norway based on different understandings of "genre". The aim of this study was to see how linguistic theory may be applied through a genre-pedagogy approach to teaching writing to support students in improving their writing skills. The focus in this presentation is on how the theoretical understandings of the concept of "genre" were implemented in practice.

The teaching experiment included two types of interventions, or teaching materials, one based on the Australian genre-pedagogy with a focus on genre as a staging process (Martin, 2012; Martin & Rothery, 2012), and one based on the London Group's understanding of genres as redesigns from available designs (Cazden et al., 1996). Four classes of students received a pre-test where they were to discuss American values and social issues by referring to relevant text excerpts given in the exercise. Then, two classes were taught with the material based on Martin's theory, and two classes were taught with the material based on the London Group's theory, all for four weeks. This was followed up with a post-test on the same topic as the pre-test, with a different exercise on the same topic. Based on evaluations of the student texts, analysis was conducted to measure the students' improvement.

Both Martin and the London Group build on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics in their understanding of genre, and focus on how texts are constructed to fulfil social purposes. However, the London Group's understanding offers a more dynamic view closer to the North American New Rhetoric tradition with an emphasis on genres as social action (Miller, 1994). A previous review study (Hyon, 1996) has shown that the difference between genre-pedagogy and the New Rhetoric tradition when applied in writing instruction was that the former included a focus on linguistic features of texts, whereas the latter offered a fuller perspective of how genres function in various contexts. This presentation discusses whether there actually is such a clear difference between the Australian genre-pedagogy and a pedagogy based on the London Group's theory of designing redesigns from available designs when applied in the classroom.

Words: 403

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