

Implementing a Genre-Based Approach to Enhance Essay Writing Skills in Saudi EFL Learners

Albandary Ibrahim Alhammad

English Department, College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Alkharj, Saudi Arabia

Abstract—This study investigates the impact of explicit instruction in writing using a genre-based approach (GBA) on Saudi EFL students. It examines emergent themes derived from learner interviews and assesses teachers' awareness of employing this pedagogical approach. Conducted at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU), the mixed methods study involved 32 EFL learners and 4 teachers from the BA program. A specifically designed intervention aimed to train teachers in genre-based essay writing instruction. Results indicate a significant improvement in students' writing performance, with scores increasing from 12.97 in the pretest to 14.90 in the post-test (Sig. = .000). Students reported heightened confidence in utilizing GBA for writing, while teachers displayed a positive disposition towards adopting efficacious methods to enhance student writing skills, despite potential gaps in their knowledge of recent developments in ELT.

Index Terms—EFL learners, essay writing, genre-based approach, teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is perceived as a demanding and arduous skill by EFL learners, given its inherent complexity. Despite the presence of a prescribed syllabus in the Saudi EFL curriculum across all English learning levels, writing remains the least developed skill among Saudi EFL learners. The language learning process is primarily skills-based rather than content-based, emphasizing that proficiency in these skills comes through practice (Al-Ahdal & Abduh, 2021). To illustrate, teaching someone to swim cannot be accomplished solely by observing others; learners must comprehend the principles involved and engage in practical application (Al-Ahdal & Alqasham, 2020).

Traditionally, as noted by Schröter and Molander Danielsson (2016), teaching in the language classroom involved a unidirectional flow of information from teacher to learner, with learners heavily reliant on teachers and minimal opportunities for independent practice. This paradigm persisted in English language teaching until the first half of the last century. Meanwhile, advancements in fields such as psychology and linguistics were enhancing classroom dynamics, prompting the ELT community to integrate these developments into English language instruction (Yazan, 2017; Khazaie & Ebadi, 2023).

Theories pertaining to language and language acquisition have laid the foundation for various methodological approaches. Early theories can generally be categorized into three perspectives: Structuralist, Functionalists, and Interactionists. The Structuralist view regards language as a system built upon elements across different levels, such as phonemes, morphemes, and grammatical structures (Kwok, 2017). Grammatical operations, such as shifting and substituting these elements, are seen as essential for constructing meaningful units (Piaget, 2015). In contrast, the Functionalist perspective emphasizes language as a tool for conveying functional meaning, expanding beyond grammatical structure to include communicative and contextual dimensions. Interactionists view language as a means for establishing interpersonal relations and facilitating social transactions (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017).

A critical factor influencing language learning is the methodological design adopted, which is shaped by the chosen theory of language acquisition. Another pivotal component is the classroom procedure encompassing techniques, practices, and behaviors applied during teaching, production, practice, and feedback phases (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The genre-based approach, often categorized as a methodological "approach", primarily concerns itself with this procedural aspect of classroom instruction.

Writing, particularly free writing, presents significant challenges due to its less spontaneous nature compared to speaking or listening. It demands cognitive effort, precision in language usage, coherence, cohesion, and clarity for the reader (Albelihi & Al-Ahdal, 2022). Learners commonly struggle with writing due to inadequate skills and confidence in their expressive abilities (Al-Ahdal & Abduh, 2021). In EFL contexts, such as Saudi schools or colleges where Arabic is the predominant medium of education, writing anxiety is exacerbated as students often navigate the task independently (Aljafen, 2013). This isolating process can be daunting for non-proficient learners, compounding the challenges in an EFL classroom setting (Ramadan, 2018).

Writing instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms often faces delays and uncertainties, exacerbated by the absence of prescribed textbooks offering systematic guidance. Teachers, consequently, may struggle to effectively teach writing

processes, leading to reluctance in providing formulaic guidance to learners (Bin-Hady et al., 2020). However, both formulaic writing training and genre-based approaches have demonstrated positive impacts on EFL writing in prior research. This study thus focuses on the genre-based approach to essay writing within the Saudi EFL context, aiming to address these educational challenges. In this research I aim to answer the following questions:

1. Does the provision of explicit instruction in the genre-based approach to essay writing significantly influence the writing proficiency of Saudi EFL students?
2. What are the predominant themes derived from students' perspectives regarding the utilization of genre-based instruction?
3. To what extent are writing instructors at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU) knowledgeable about and familiar with the genre-based approach in essay writing?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the genre-based approach (GBA) has garnered increasing attention among researchers, resulting in a substantial body of literature on its application in English language instruction. Halliday's (1994) Genre Theory has profoundly influenced the implementation of EFL writing instruction, as evidenced by various studies. Additionally, Hyon (1996) underscored the formal instruction and linguistic characteristics intrinsic to the genre-based methodology. Derewianka (2003) provided an initial definition of "Genre Theory", emphasizing its focus on text, purpose, meaning, and choice.

Genre-based Approach to Essay Writing

The genre-based approach (GBA) in teaching essay writing emphasizes understanding and adopting the conventions and styles specific to various essay genres, such as persuasive, argumentative, narrative, and expository essays (Truong, 2017). This approach integrates both process and product approaches, akin to a dual-faced coin (Chen & Su, 2011). From a process perspective, it involves strategies and techniques for teaching and learning writing, while from a product standpoint, it emphasizes the structure, content, communicative intent, and linguistic features of essays (Malek & Myriam, 2020).

GBA begins by encouraging learners to analyze the characteristics of specific essay genres using provided samples to identify common patterns and structures (Haryanti & Sari, 2019). This process provides insight into reader expectations and establishes a framework for writing (Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021). Each essay genre serves a distinct purpose, whether informative, persuasive, entertaining, or analytical, guiding learners in organizing their ideas accordingly (Carina et al., 2019). Linguistic features also vary by genre; for example, narrative essays use descriptive language, whereas argumentative essays employ logical reasoning and persuasive language (Trinh & Truc, 2014). Furthermore, effective writing considers the audience's knowledge, interests, and background to effectively convey ideas and engage readers (Bean & Melzer, 2021).

Pham and Bui (2022) addressed the insufficient measures for teaching writing skills in Vietnamese universities, highlighting the need for a refined genre-based approach in classrooms to improve proficiency. Similarly, Huang and Zhang (2020) investigated the impact of a process-genre approach on argumentative writing among L2 learners in a Chinese university, revealing significant improvements in writing quality. Bin-Hady et al. (2020) explored the efficacy of GBA in enhancing opinion essay writing among Yemeni students, demonstrating notable improvements in post-test scores.

Malek and Myriam (2020) evaluated a GBA informed by systemic functional linguistics (SFL) for teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language learners to narrate routine events in Arabic writing, reporting positive changes in writing skills. Hermansson et al. (2019) conducted a quasi-experimental study on primary students to assess the effects of genre-based instructional practices on narrative writing abilities, highlighting mixed results regarding the effectiveness of Joint Construction stages in enhancing writing quality.

Suksawas (2018) emphasized the integration of ESP, SFL, and EAP within a genre-based approach, emphasizing the importance of combining linguistic and communicative skills for effective EFL writing. Additionally, mind-mapping has shown promise as a pre-writing exercise to structure writing, complementing the genre-based approach's focus on specific writing tasks (Alqasham & Al-Ahdal, 2022).

Dirgeyasa (2016) reviewed various implementations of GBA in teaching essay writing, demonstrating significant improvements in student performance post-intervention. Similarly, Tuan (2011) and Chen and Su (2011) conducted studies on genre-based approaches to enhance writing skills, revealing positive impacts on students' ability to structure and compose essays effectively.

The genre-based approach benefits both instructors and learners by providing opportunities to engage with authentic texts and understand how language functions in real-world contexts. Its aim is to enable learners to use language meaningfully and effectively across different genres of writing.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employed an experimental design to investigate the impact of genre-based essay writing instruction on students' writing proficiency. Pre-intervention and post-intervention assessments were conducted to evaluate changes in

students' ability to write narrative essays. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of seven students at the end of the semester to gather qualitative insights. The research was conducted during the second semester of 1444 A.H. at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia.

B. Participants

Participants included 32 students and 4 teachers from the Bachelor of Arts program at the Department of English, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University. The sample was homogenous and convenient. Student participants were female, with English proficiency ranging from lower intermediate to intermediate levels, having undergone a minimum of eleven years of English education. They came from urban backgrounds with at least one moderately fluent English-speaking parent, and their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years. All teacher participants were female, held post-graduate qualifications specializing in TESOL or ESL, possessed a minimum of eight years of teaching experience, and had attended teacher development programs within the past six months.

Prior to commencement, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant ethics and research committee. Participants were informed about the research objectives, and confidentiality of data was assured throughout the study. The researcher personally conducted data collection activities, including classroom observations and in-person interviews with students, which were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed to identify key themes.

C. Instruments

Pre-intervention data collection involved two instruments administered to students: a perception survey regarding their essay writing abilities and analysis of random writing samples to establish baseline performance. At the conclusion of the intervention, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven voluntarily participating students to gain deeper insights into their experiences with the genre-based essay writing approach. Additionally, essay writing samples were collected post-intervention to assess improvements in writing skills.

A panel discussion was also organized with teachers to gather information on their awareness and implementation of the genre-based essay writing approach. Based on positive feedback, a two-hour workshop was conducted in the subsequent week to familiarize teachers with the approach, share recent research findings, and solicit their feedback.

D. Intervention

Saudi EFL teachers, primarily trained in TESOL or ESL, typically do not approach essay writing as a genre with explicit teachable conventions. This study reaffirmed previous findings that explicit instruction in genre-based essay writing steps significantly enhances writing performance, as evidenced by the improved performance of participants following specialized coursework in the pre-intervention assessment and the entire group in the post-intervention assessment.

Each of the four teacher participants was randomly assigned eight learners for twelve hours over three weeks to implement the genre-based approach in their essay writing classes. A rubric was provided to guide their lesson planning, starting with analyzing exemplary essays provided by the researcher to identify key attributes of effective writing. Subsequently, learners were tasked with evaluating their own essays against these criteria and identifying areas for improvement (two hours dedicated to this activity). To scaffold their writing development, participants received a structured essay outline with incomplete sentences, which they were instructed to complete under guided supervision (four hours allocated for this exercise). The remaining six hours focused on extensive free writing of essays, with each written piece meticulously reviewed by the assigned teacher to address specific weaknesses and enhance overall quality.

Throughout the intervention, the researcher provided guidance to the teachers as needed, ensuring adherence to detailed lesson plans and maintaining a consistent focus on the genre-based approach to essay writing.

IV. RESULTS

RQ1: Does imparting explicit instruction in the genre-based approach to essay writing have significant impact on Saudi EFL students' writing?

The impact of explicit instruction in the genre-based approach to essay writing on Saudi EFL students' performance was assessed using paired samples t-tests. Table 1 presents the results of this analysis.

TABLE 1
STUDENTS' PRE AND POST RESULT IN THE ESSAY WRITING TESTS

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	12.97	32	2.29	-9.213-	31	.000
Posttest	14.90	32	2.26			

The results indicate that students' writing performance significantly improved following explicit instruction in the genre-based approach (pretest mean = 12.97, post-test mean = 14.90, $p < .001$).

In the pre-intervention phase, demographic data revealed that only two students had prior exposure to essay writing as a genre, primarily through online courses preparing them for the IELTS exam. Unsurprisingly, these two students outperformed their peers in the initial writing assessments. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of students' confidence levels in English essay writing.

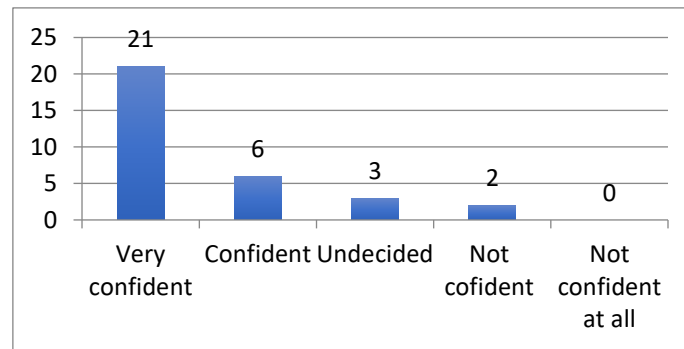


Figure 1. Students' Confidence About Essay Writing

These findings underscore the positive impact of explicit genre-based instruction on enhancing Saudi EFL students' essay writing skills, particularly among those with limited prior exposure to structured essay writing instruction.

Research Questions 2 and 3: Emergent Themes of Students' Perceptions and Teachers' Awareness RQ2: What are the emergent themes of students' perceptions in using genre-based instruction?

At the conclusion of the three-week intervention, seven students volunteered for interviews conducted by the researcher. Themes emerged from these interviews were categorized into two primary areas:

Emergent Theme 1: Writing Confidence

The interviews revealed that enhanced writing confidence was a prominent theme among the students. Many participants expressed relief and satisfaction with their improved ability to structure and present their narratives effectively. One student candidly shared that prior to the intervention, writing was a daunting task due to disorganized and incoherent essays.

Emergent Theme 2: Challenges in Using the Genre-Based Essay Writing Approach

The second prevalent theme identified was the challenges associated with adopting the genre-based approach. Despite overall positive feedback, students acknowledged initial difficulties. However, they appreciated having a structured framework that supported their creativity in expression. Many students mentioned relying on online resources for vocabulary and expression while adapting to this new approach.

RQ3: What is the awareness of writing teachers about the genre-based approach in essay writing at PSAU?

A panel discussion with the four participating teachers aimed to assess their awareness and perceptions of the genre-based essay writing approach. The discussion yielded the following insights:

1. Limited Prior Awareness: The majority of teachers admitted to having minimal to no prior knowledge of genre-based instructional approaches, despite recent professional development activities.

2. Vague Familiarity: One teacher had some familiarity with the concept, albeit limited.

3. Interest in Efficacy: Teachers expressed willingness to explore and adopt the genre-based approach upon learning about its potential effectiveness in enhancing EFL learners' essay writing skills.

These findings underscore the need for further professional development and training to familiarize educators with effective pedagogical approaches like genre-based instruction, potentially improving the quality of writing instruction at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University.

V. DISCUSSION

The students' writing demonstrated notable improvement due to training in the Genre-Based Approach (GBA). Their performance increased from a mean score of 12.97 in the pretest to 14.90 in the post-test, indicating the effectiveness of the GBA in familiarizing students with the elements of essay writing. This improvement can be attributed to the explicit instruction they received, which is consistent with findings from Bin-Hady et al. (2020), Huang and Zhang (2020), and Pham and Bui (2021), all of whom reported the positive impact of explicit instruction on enhancing students' essay writing skills.

Pham and Bui (2021) specifically noted that Vietnamese students' expository essays often struggled with lexicogrammatical usage and adherence to the prescribed move-step structure. Their study recommended further research and provided best practices for EFL teachers and students interested in adopting the GBA for writing.

Additionally, the study revealed that teachers were not fully aware of how to implement the GBA. However, they expressed positive attitudes towards using this approach if provided with appropriate training and if research validated its effectiveness. This finding underscores the readiness of Saudi EFL teachers to enhance their students' writing competencies, as illustrated by Jerdhaf's (2021) case study. In a multi-ethnic Swedish grade-eight classroom, students were exposed to a variety of writing genres within a genre-based history lesson. The flexibility in presenting these genres fostered a writing environment that balanced autonomy and structure, thus not impeding the writing process but rather empowering learners.

Merely teaching a writing method or approach may not suffice to motivate learners to adopt it. Therefore, it is recommended that the genre-based writing approach be integrated with the evaluation process. For instance, Lee (2012)

examined how L2 schools utilizing genre as an organizational framework could effectively combine instruction and evaluation. This study aimed to understand how instructors applied genre-based instruction and assessment in traditional product- and exam-oriented writing classes, as well as to gauge the perceptions of both students and teachers towards this approach. Data collected from lesson observations and interviews in two Secondary 1 (Grade 7) classes in Hong Kong revealed that teachers integrated teaching and evaluation by emphasizing genre collaboratively and with a shared vision, despite acknowledging the limitations of the genre approach. Therefore, it is recommended that.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

There exists a relationship between the content and method of writing, particularly for learners who are less proficient and may require assistance in both areas. For those whose writing proficiency is significantly below expectations, a logical approach would involve focusing initially on structuring and guided writing exercises. EFL teachers should emphasize the writing process, which can be effectively facilitated through the Genre-Based Approach (GBA). Explicit instruction in areas such as cohesion, coherence, style, design, and audience can serve as foundational elements in the GBA. This approach is particularly beneficial in learning environments where the target language is not used regularly for daily communication.

For instance, Phan and Ngu (2020) conducted a study with the indigenous Orang Asli in Malaysia, investigating the impact of the GBA on improving secondary students' descriptive writing skills. The study highlighted how Orang Asli EFL students perceived the GBA as a framework to address challenges encountered during the teaching and learning process. The findings demonstrated the effectiveness of the GBA in enhancing writing abilities and recommended its application in rural and indigenous schools with students of low proficiency.

Globally, universities are increasingly adopting genre-focused research writing education at the graduate level to address the diverse needs of their student populations. In China, where there is a significant demand for research writing training among graduate students across various disciplines, aspiring EAP instructors are gaining practical experience with genre-based pedagogies as a foundational step towards real classroom application.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that EFL teachers integrate genre-based writing lessons into their curricula, taking into account learners' writing needs and proficiency levels. Additionally, teachers should ensure that learners' creativity is not compromised and that writing remains largely spontaneous. In other words, EFL teachers should adopt the GBA in a manner that allows the writing process to be driven by learners, both constructively and creatively.

It is important to note that the gender of participants can be a limitation in achieving broadly applicable conclusions in language research, as some studies have established gender as an influential factor. This study was limited to female participants, and it is recommended that future research replicate the study with male learners to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, the sample size was a limitation, and generalizing the conclusions would be more robust with a larger dataset. Finally, this study focused solely on the narrative essay genre. Further research is needed to determine whether the GBA is equally effective with other types of essays.

APPENDIX

Section 1: Demographic and Background Information

1. Gender: [Female/Other/Prefer not to say]
2. Age: [Open-ended question]
3. Native Language: [Open-ended question]
4. Parents' English Proficiency: [Open-ended question]
5. English Proficiency Level: [Beginner/Intermediate/Advanced as allotted by the University]

Section 2: Pre-Test Assessment

1. Have you received any previous instruction on essay writing as a specific skill? [Yes/No]
2. On a scale of 1 to 5, rate your confidence level in writing essays in English, with 1 being "Not confident at all" and 5 being "Very confident."

Section 3: Panel Discussion Tool using a set of questions to assess the teachers' understanding and perceptions of genre-based instructional approaches in teaching essay writing:

1. Have you heard of genre-based instructional approaches before?
2. How familiar are you with the concept of genre-based instructional approaches?
3. Do you believe that the genre-based instructional approach can enhance learners' essay writing skills?

Section 4: Semi-Structured Interviews of learners

Individual interviews with a subset of participants (volunteered) to explore their experiences and perceptions of the genre-based instructional approach to writing of essays, using the following open-ended questions:

1. How do you feel about using genre-based instructional approach to learn essay writing?
2. What challenges, if any, did you face while writing with the genre-based essay writing approach?
3. In your opinion, how did your writing confidence fair when using the genre-based methods in essay writing?
4. How has the use of genre-based instructional approach influenced your writing skills and performance?

Section 5: Post-Test Assessment

Participants' samples of essays before and after the genre-based instruction were analyzed. This aim was to gauge their essay writing skills and performance improvement, if any.

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Albandary Ibrahim Alhammad. With PhD in Linguistics from Liverpool University, UK, Dr. Albandary Ibrahim Alhammad is an Assistant Professor at the English Department, College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Alkharj, Saudi Arabia. She is interested in Pragmatics and Discourse analysis. She is a powerful negotiator and fluent in English and Arabic, with very efficient interpersonal communication skills. She loves research and believes that it is the key solution to all classroom problems and issues. Email: a.alhammad@psau.edu.sa