A genre-based approach to teaching EFL summary writing

Yuan-Shan Chen and Shao-Wen Su

This study utilizes a pre-test/post-test assessment to investigate the instructional efficacy of a genre-based approach to teaching summary writing. Forty-one EFL university students in Taiwan were asked before and after the instruction to summarize a simplified version of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer in a maximum of 500 words. All the students’ summaries on the pre- and post-tests were evaluated against content, organization, vocabulary, and language use. The statistical results showed that such an approach was effective in improving students’ overall summarization performance of a narrative source text and that the students benefited to a greater extent in content and organization than in vocabulary and language use. The results were also supported by the students’ interview comments.

Introduction

It has long been recognized that reading and writing are closely related (Krashen 1984). Reading-to-write tasks have been extensively observed in many university settings. One such task, summarization, is defined as ‘the process of synthesizing and organizing individual idea units into a summary or organized series of related general ideas’ (Irwin 1986: 5). To write a good summary, one needs to be able to

- understand the text
- select the most important information
- delete the minor and redundant details
- combine similar ideas into categories
- write in his/her own words (Casazza 1993).

In Taiwan, much attention has been paid in recent years to student summarization tasks. First, almost all university students in Taiwan need to pass a large-scale, standardized test to graduate. These proficiency tests generally involve a writing section. Second, according to the Ministry of Education, there have been about 25,000–30,000 Taiwanese students pursuing their graduate studies in the United States. Before they enter US graduate institutes, they need to take the new TOEFL test, part of which requires testees to summarize a short source text. Finally, writing research indicates that when asked to summarize a lengthy academic text, L2 learners tend to copy from source texts—an act considered as plagiarism (Keck 2006; Yu 2009). Taiwanese students, of course, are no exception. Although researchers such as Casazza (op.cit.) proposed models of direct instruction to teach summary writing to college students, the target
audience is basically L1, rather than L2 writers. More importantly, these models fail to distinguish the discoursal features of narrative, expository, and argumentative source texts, which have been demonstrated to have differential effects on students' summarization performance (Yu op. cit.).

Seen in this light, a genre-based approach provides another alternative for writing teachers to enhance students' summarization abilities. It may be worth clarifying what is meant by 'genre' before such an approach is introduced. Hyland (2007) sees genre as a group of texts which share similar discoursal features that are easily identifiable by members of a community. Sidaway (2006) used the term 'The magnificent seven' to categorize genre into

- recount
- narrative
- explanation
- information report
- procedure
- discussion
- exposition.

Each genre may present itself in various text forms. For example, a film review can be categorized as an exposition. On the other hand, a narrative may be found in email messages, newspaper articles, novels, and so forth.

Drawing on Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics, a genre-based approach to teaching L2 writing focuses on the conventions of a particular text type and attempts to help students understand why they are writing a text (purpose), who they are writing for (audience), and how to write a text (organization) (Widodo 2006). Hyland (op. cit.) argues that genre-based writing instruction places considerable emphasis on scaffolding (or teacher-supported learning) and collaboration (or peer interaction). He suggests that the teaching–learning cycle of a genre-based approach involves five major stages, which are

1 setting the context: to explore the purposes and setting in which a given genre is normally applied;
2 modelling: to analyse the key discoursal features of a sample text of the genre;
3 joint construction: to provide teacher-guided activities to reinforce the organizational pattern and grammatical features of the genre;
4 independent construction: to withdraw teacher support gradually and to monitor independent writing; and
5 comparing: to associate what has been learnt from the given genre with other genres to identify particular social purposes.

Empirical studies (for example Kongpetch 2006; Cheng 2008) have shown that a genre-based approach can enhance students' abilities in constructing narrative, expository, and argumentative essays. It is therefore assumed that such an approach might similarly benefit students' summarization performance in relation to narrative, expository, and argumentative source texts. If students have an explicit understanding of how a source text is structured, it should be easier for them to distinguish between major and minor points and to synthesize ideas in a more effective way.
To test this assumption, a seven-week lesson plan based on Hyland’s first four stages was designed for a class of 41 university sophomores. We did not include the last stage—comparing—in our lesson plan because only after the students have acquired at least some genres would it be worthwhile comparing and contrasting other genres. In this study, we limited our scope to examining the instructional effectiveness of a genre-based approach to teaching summarization of a narrative source text, so we set out to answer two research questions:

1 Does a genre-based writing instruction enhance students’ overall summarization performance?
2 If the answer to research Question 1 is positive, in what aspect(s) does a genre-based writing instruction benefit students’ summarization performance?

The study

Forty-one students (30 females and 11 males) participated in this study. All of them were English majors taking a required course entitled ‘Intermediate writing’ at a university of technology in central Taiwan. Prior to this course, they had taken ‘Beginning writing’, which focused on sentence and paragraph writing rather than essay writing. On average, their English proficiency was at an intermediate level.

This study used a test/retest design. The major source of data was the summaries produced by the students on two occasions: prior to instruction in the second week (pre-test) and after instruction in the seventh week (post-test). The entire experiment took 14 hours, with two class hours per week. The classroom activities are described below:

Week 1: reading the book

In the first week of the semester, all the students were required to read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. This book was selected from the Oxford Bookworms series, which offers graded reading at seven levels (Starter to Stage 6). *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is at the Stage 1 level, which contains 400 headwords. We decided on this book because it has a well-structured organization, clear narrative timeline, and low lexical diversity, which are believed to make the summarization task easier for students (Yu op.cit.).

Week 2: writing the summary

In the second week, all the students were asked to write a summary of this book in class with a maximum of 500 words.

Week 3: setting the context

Our aim here was to teach the students the structure of the prototypical narrative genre, also known as ‘story grammar’. It generally involves six elements, which include setting, initiating event, internal response, attempt, consequence, and reaction (Stein and Glenn 1979). To illustrate these elements, we presented a 30-minute video made up of film clips from one of the world’s most popular stories, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* by J. K. Rowling. Having watched the video, we conducted a class discussion to answer the following questions relating to these six elements:

Setting
Where does the story take place? When does the story take place? Who is the main character? What is the main character like? Who is another important character? What is this other character like?
Initiating event  What is the major problem the main character confronts?

Internal response  What is the main character’s reaction to the major problem?

Attempt  How does the main character attempt to solve the major problem?

Consequence  Does the main character solve the problem? Is there any unexpected result in the story?

Reaction  What is the main character’s response to the consequence?

**Weeks 4 and 5: modelling**

The purpose of this instructional activity was to explicitly teach the students how to write a summary of a narrative text. First, we analysed the introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs, each of which was equipped with appropriate story grammar features. For the introductory paragraph, we instructed our students to begin with ‘the hook’, followed by the background information, and the thesis statement. The hook is usually a simple statement or a question to attract the audience’s attention to read the summary. The background information, similar to the setting element of a story grammar, orients the audience to the characters, time, and place of the story. Finally, the thesis statement tells what the story is about and prepares the audience for the story that follows.

For the body paragraph, we instructed the students to identify the major problem the main character encounters (initiating event), to ignore the minor and unimportant events, to describe the main character’s reactions to the problem (internal response), and to indicate the main character’s course of action to solve the problem (attempt). For the concluding paragraph, we told the students to describe the outcome of the event (consequence) and a response of the main character to such an outcome (reaction). In addition, the students were asked to end their summaries with the lesson or theme shown in the story.

After that, we provided the students with three prize-winning summaries from a national contest. These summaries were written for *The Age of Innocence*, a reader also from the Oxford Bookworms series (Stage 5), and they were rated as ‘excellent’, ‘very good’, and ‘good’, respectively. We analysed the generic structures and the grammatical features of these works to reinforce the students’ knowledge of the organization and language of an effective summary of a narrative source text.

**Week 6: joint construction**

In this week, we shifted our role from authoritative figures to facilitators and cooperated with our students to summarize *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. To begin with, we asked each student to contribute one sentence in turn to compose the story while typing and projecting these sentences on to a large computer screen for later discussion (drafting). Next, we reviewed the generic structure of a narration and invited the students to comment on global content and organization of the summary. They deleted redundant information, added more details to the major events, and sequenced these events in a correct time order (revising). Then, we encouraged our students to check the spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors. With our...
assistance, they tried to use cohesive devices to mark shifts in events and to modify the words to convey the intended meaning more precisely (editing). Finally, the students completed the summary with a total of 435 words (publishing).

Week 7: independent construction

In the seventh week, we asked each student to again write a summary with a maximum of 500 words about *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The students wrote the summaries independently within the two hours of class time. They were allowed to consult the reader, if necessary, but prohibited from referring to their first draft produced in Week 2 and, most importantly, from directly copying words, phrases, or sentences from the book. The purpose of this stage was to give the students an opportunity to practise their writing skills and demonstrate their understanding of the summary of a narrative genre.

After the instruction, the summaries collected on the pre- and post-tests were assessed. A blind assessment mechanism was adopted so that any identifying information, i.e. students’ names and numbers along with time of production, was removed and the summaries were shuffled and renumbered in a consistent way known only to our assistant to avoid a possible bias against particular students. All the summaries produced by the students were evaluated by the authors against rating scales adapted from the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey 1981):

**Content**
Is there a clear understanding of the story?Are major and minor points of the story distinguished?Does all information (i.e. setting, initiating event, internal response, attempt, consequence, and reaction) convey a sense of completeness?

**Organization**
Are there effective introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs?
Is there a topic sentence and are there supporting details in each paragraph?
Is the overall relationship of ideas between paragraphs clearly indicated?

**Vocabulary**
Is the choice of vocabulary accurate and effective enough to convey the intended message?
Is there appropriate use of transitional markers between ideas?

**Language use**
Are the grammatical features (for example agreement, tense, number, prepositions) correctly used?
Are the sentence constructions well-formed and sufficiently varied to express the intended information?

On the rating scales, each component has 25 points, making a total of 100 points. The weight for each component is further broken down into numerical ranges that correspond to four ability levels: ‘excellent to very good’ (21–25 points), ‘good to average’ (16–20 points), ‘fair to poor’ (11–15 points), and ‘very poor’ (6–10 points). To ensure higher interrating reliability, we first assessed two student samples and discussed the
outcomes until a consensus on the rating was reached. During the actual rating, we determined each component score within the range of a particular ability level that best described a given work. The final score for each component in each student work was the average of the two raters’ scores. If we differed by more than ten points in the total scores, we reviewed the criteria again and discussed the differences until we reached close agreement. Finally, we calculated the interrater reliability and ran statistical analyses to examine if the students made any progress after the instruction.

In addition to student performance, we conducted a focus group interview after the instruction with six volunteers recruited from the 41 students in order to understand their perceptions of the summarization task before and after the instruction. Considering the students’ linguistic proficiency, the interview was conducted primarily in Chinese, with a little English. The entire session lasted one hour. After that, the assistant helped transcribe verbatim the video-taped protocol.

Results and discussion

The Pearson Product–Moment Correlation analysis showed that the interrater reliability coefficients were 0.85 on the pre-test and 0.88 on the post-test, respectively. These values seem satisfactory since Politt (1991) suggests that an interrater agreement value of 0.8 is adequate for a writing test.

By means of paired sample t-test, a comparison of the overall score and scores on each component pre- and post-instruction shows significant overall improvement in the four components, while significance levels vary from component to component, as presented in Table 1. The statistics indicate that the score gains reached a significance level of \( P < 0.01 \), which suggests that the genre-based approach had a positive effect on the students’ overall summarization performance where students made significant progress in all four of the components investigated. However, the students improved to a greater extent in content and organization than in vocabulary and language use. The improvements in content and organization reached significance levels of \( P < 0.01 \) (\( t = -30.34 \), \( t = -14.52 \)), with the mean scores rising by 5.39 and 4.7, respectively. The improvements in vocabulary and language use, however, reached significance levels of \( P < 0.05 \) (\( t = -2.04 \), \( t = -2.39 \)), with the mean scores rising by only 0.17 and 0.16, respectively. The pairwise comparisons have clearly shown that the students benefited the greatest from the genre-based instruction in the aspect of content, closely followed by organization, among all the four components.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Mean Pre</th>
<th>Mean Post</th>
<th>SD Pre</th>
<th>SD Post</th>
<th>( t )</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Significance (two tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>12.76</td>
<td>18.15</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>-30.34</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>9.76</td>
<td>14.46</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>-14.52</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>9.80</td>
<td>9.97</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>-2.04</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.048*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use</td>
<td>10.46</td>
<td>10.62</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>-2.39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.022*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>42.78</td>
<td>53.13</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>7.21</td>
<td>-27.93</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( *P < 0.05; **P < 0.01. \)
The improvements in content and organization on the post-test could be attributed to the focus of the instruction. During the treatment, we spent a large portion of class time discussing the characters and events in the story, distinguishing the major and minor points of the story, analysing the rhetorical structure of a narration, and incorporating the story grammar features into introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs. In addition to the statistical results, the student progress in these two components can be further verified by analysing their summaries and interview comments. We found that the students’ summaries produced on the pre-test indicated unclear story lines with many digressions from the major events, as shown in the following example:

... Tom didn’t like to go to school, but like adventures. He often go to do excited things with his friend Huck. Huck has a violent father and always got drunk. Nobody liked Huck. He was always dirty. When Tom and Huck visit the grave in the night, they see Injun Joe kill the doctor by accident. At first they swear not to tell the truth, but Tom does not care about the honor and his dangerous. He still insisted on appearing in court as a witness ... (Eva)

In this excerpt, the student writer digressed from Tom’s adventure and began to describe in detail his friend Huck, who in fact plays a less important role in the story. Such digressions could have been caused by the common belief prior to the instruction that summary writing involved recalling everything in the source text and writing it down in a shorter version, as reported by five out of the six students in the interview. This explains why the students did poorly on the pre-test since they did not recognize the importance of distinguishing between major and minor events in the story, not to mention highlighting the major and setting the minor ones as background information in their summaries.

After the instruction, the students were found to structure their summaries more effectively. On the post-test, the majority of the students summarized the story by focusing on the major events: how Tom and his friend Huck become witnesses of Injun Joe’s killing of Doctor Robinson and imputing the crime to Muff Potter getting very drunk in the graveyard (initiating event), how Tom struggles in his heart whether to tell the truth that Injun Joe, rather than Muff Potter, is the real murderer (internal response), how Tom plucks up the courage to testify for Muff Potter at the trial (attempt), how Injun Joe escapes from the court, hides treasure under the cross in a cave, and later dies in the cave (consequence), and how Tom and Huck decide to find the treasure after Injun Joes is dead and become the richest people in St Petersburg (reaction).

When it comes to vocabulary and language use, the slight improvements in these two components could have been a result of insufficient instructional time spent on developing the students’ linguistic proficiency. As Ortega (2003) argues, it generally takes up to 12 months of instruction to develop college students’ vocabulary complexity and grammatical accuracy. Therefore, even though we discussed the use of time adverbs, past time clauses, time connectors, and word usage in class, the students did not make as much progress in vocabulary and language use as they did in content and organization. Although the total number of errors made by the students...
decreased from 586 on the pre-test to 551 on the post-test, the major sources of errors on these two occasions were very similar, including verb tense inconsistency (for example ‘Tom and Huck appeared in court and testify against Injun Joe.’), wrong word forms (for example ‘Tom became wealth after he found the treasure.’), and sentence fragments (for example ‘Because Tom did not want to go to school.’). Table 2 shows the raw frequencies and percentages of different error types:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Verb tense (%)</th>
<th>Word forms (%)</th>
<th>Fragments (%)</th>
<th>Others (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>251 (42.83)</td>
<td>222 (37.88)</td>
<td>70 (11.95)</td>
<td>43 (7.34)</td>
<td>586 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>214 (38.84)</td>
<td>225 (40.83)</td>
<td>83 (15.07)</td>
<td>29 (5.26)</td>
<td>551 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our interview data also echo what the statistical results have shown that the areas of vocabulary and language use were still the two biggest obstacles for students to surmount when constructing the summaries on the post-test. For example, the translated interview comment made by Peter indicates,

I think I learned a lot from this class . . . What I liked most about the instruction was the paragraphing which featured story grammar elements. Now I know what is a summary and how to write it better . . . But I still found it difficult to express what I intended to say. Finding the appropriate word was hard, and I often struggled with my grammar . . . That’s my biggest problem.

One might not find Peter’s recount of failing to master vocabulary and language use surprising. As it takes longer for students to develop language proficiency, it would be impractical to expect them to make much progress within a seven-week period.

**Conclusion**

This empirical study contributes to a genre-based approach to teaching EFL writing, while proving it to be a feasible and effective model to enhance students’ summarization performance of a narrative source text. During the instruction, we introduced an explicit genre template and used guided practice to scaffold our students’ understanding. We also introduced the lexical and grammatical patterns that were directly relevant to this genre type. Then we helped the students learn more effectively through collaborative work and gradually removed support to foster their growth as independent writers.

This study reveals that such an approach enhances L2 learners’ writing abilities in content, organization, vocabulary, and language use. Moreover, it confers more benefits to the students in terms of content development and rhetorical organization than linguistic accuracy and lexical diversity. When generalizing the findings of the present study, however, one should use caution since assessment tools and genre types are crucial variables that may lead to different results. With the genre-based approach in vogue in L2 writing instruction, it is suggested that greater efforts be put forward by practitioner-researchers with an interest in teaching EFL writing to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of genre-based instruction in
In order to probe further into how to maximize the effectiveness of this kind of instruction.

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