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# Genre Theories and Second Language Writing: Development, Trends and Tensions

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**Received:** 03 June 2024

**Accepted:** 20 August 2024

**Published:** 05 October 2024

**Abstract:** *This article reviews literature on genre theory and second language (L2) writing. Specifically, the application of genre theory in L2 writing classrooms and how genre theory together with other themes in the field of second language acquisition contribute to L2 writing development are discussed. Genre has emerged as an important concept in L2 writing studies because it helps teachers and learners to identify socially recognized ways of using language. Through different schools and theories, genre has become a formidable strategy that helps writers learn academic writing conventions. Despite the affordances, a major criticism of genre theory is its tendency to hinder creativity and agency in the classroom and strengthen dominant and privileged discourses. This article concludes with a discussion on genre innovation and studies that underscore the need for flexibility and innovation when developing genre-based pedagogies for classrooms. Despite the challenges, genre remains a crucial theory in L2 writing studies.*

**Keywords:** *Genre Theory, L2 Writing Instruction, Genre Flexibility and Innovation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, genre has emerged as an integral concept in writing studies (Tardy, 2011), and research on genre theory has also featured prominently in second language (L2) writing literature (Cheng, 2011). Hyland (2007) defines genres as abstract and socially recognized ways of using language. They are based on the assumptions that the features of a similar group of texts depend on the social context of their creation and use, and those features can be described in a way that relates a text to others like it (Hyland, 2007). Genre theory also emphasizes that “language is encapsulated in social realities, and it is through the recurrent use of conventionalized forms that individuals develop relationships, establish communities, and get things done” (Hyland, 2003, p.120). This article explores the relationship between genre theory and L2 writing. Themes discussed here include the history of genre-based pedagogies, the three schools of genre, the roles of teachers and learners in genre-based pedagogies and the relationship between genre theory and other areas of second language acquisition (SLA).



## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Three Schools of Genre**

Worden (2018) indicates that several theories have influenced genre-based writing instruction in recent decades, and it has become customary to discuss genre scholarship in terms of the three schools of genre categorized by Hyon (1996). These schools are the Systemic Functional Linguistics, commonly known as the “Sydney School” in North America, English for Specific Purposes, and Rhetorical Genre Studies (Hyon, 1996). Several studies (e.g., Harman, 2013; Hyon, 1996; Johns 2002) view these three schools as largely complementary in their approach despite their different foundations.

The Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) school is based on Halliday’s SFL theory (Halliday, 1994) and sociocultural theories of learning (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). SFL considers language primarily as a resource for making meaning, rather than as a set of rules (Halliday, 1994). Due to this orientation, the SFL genre school analyzes literacy levels of students by encouraging corrective and supportive feedback particularly among second language students (Christie & Martin, 1997). In SFL, genre is defined from a register perspective. Specifically, genre is considered as the form of language that is shaped by important features of the surrounding social context known as field (an ongoing activity), tenor (the relationship between participants), and mode (the channel of communication) (Halliday, 1994).

SFL theory focuses on developing a pedagogy to support students from lower socio-economic and indigenous backgrounds in Australia who often lack strong English literacy skills. This theory aids these learners in adapting to academic culture by emphasizing genres, language-context links, and meaning-making through narrative, recount, argument, and exposition genres. Some studies (e.g., Dufficy, 2000; Hyland 2003) highlight the importance of SFL in enhancing language and literacy education to cater to diverse student needs.

The third school in this sub-section is the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) school. This school conceptualizes genres differently from SFL and draw more from an eclectic theoretical foundation (Swales, 1990, 2004). ESP views genre as a class of structured and communicative events used by discourse communities that share an overarching social purpose (Swales, 1990). Specifically, Swales (1990) argues that the social function and form of spoken and written language (e.g., research article introduction, research group meetings and, grant proposals) in academic and research settings defines genre. Harman (2013) also indicates that ESP teachers are concerned with the communicative needs of academic and professional groups and so genres are seen as purposive actions routinely used by community members to achieve a particular purpose. ESP practitioners are also engaged with issues of L2 teaching; therefore, they strive to provide students with a knowledge of relevant genres so that they can act effectively in their target contexts (i.e. rhetorical consciousness-raising) (Harman, 2013).

Another school in the field of genre theory is the Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) school of North America. RGS is influenced by poststructuralism, rhetoric, and first language composition studies (Pho, 2013). This approach was developed by Miller (1984) and according to Miller (1984), genre refers to a conventional category of discourse that is characterized by rhetorical action. This action acquires meaning from the situation and social context in which



it is used. Genre in RGS is seen as “a motivated, functional relationship between text type and rhetorical situation” (Coe, 2002, p.195). Also, a pivotal focus of RGS is on the rhetorical context in which genre pedagogies are employed and not a detailed analysis of text elements and this is in contrast to ESP (Freedman & Medway, 1994). Han and Hiver (2018) indicate that because of its orientation, the contribution of RGS to L2 writing instruction has been minimal. Also, a critical position of the RGS approach is that writing is always part of the goals and occasions that bring it about. Therefore, it cannot be learned in the inauthentic context of the classroom (Freedman & Medway, 1994). This claim seems to differentiate RGS from SFL and ESP. SFL and ESP view the classroom as an integral component in genre theory.

Hyland (2003) remarks that all three schools of genre are united by a common attempt to explain the regularities of purpose, form, social action, and how it shapes our understanding of genre. Despite these foundational similarities, these schools differ in the kind of emphasis they accord to text or context (Hyland, 2003). Also, the kinds of research methods employed and the types of pedagogies that are encouraged are different (Hyland, 2003). For example, RGS focuses on the relations between text and contexts with a minimal focus on L2 writing. On the other hand, SFL and ESP genre closely engage issues of L2 writing with a common goal of providing students with relevant knowledge to be able to function effectively in target contexts. Hyland (2003) argues that ESP has had the most influence on L2 writing instruction globally as ESP draws from an eclectic set of linguistic theories and pedagogies. SFL is also considered the most theoretically sophisticated among the three schools and their genre theory is committed to literacy education (Johns, 2011).

### **Research Questions**

In what ways do different genre theories frame genre and L2 writing?

What are the roles of teachers and learners in the literature of genre-based writing instruction?

How does genre flexibility and innovation interact in genre approaches to writing instruction?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In this paper, the author carried out a procedure of reviewing the literature according to a suggested guideline for doing a rigorous literature review (Hagen-Zanker & Mallett, 2013). Overall, the procedure encompassed: a) a systematic database search b) initial title/abstract screening c) full-text article screening d) text coding through manual analysis. The current study also adopts a qualitative thematic analysis approach to data description and analysis. To increase research reliability, the author covered 6 data bases (table 1). These databases are justified by their social science citation indexes. There was also a method and inclusion criteria. The first round of review generated 102 papers and 44 articles were selected and exported to an MS excel spreadsheet with citation information including (author’s name, title of publication, year of publication, abstract, keywords etc.). The author searched the databases using keywords such as “genre theories” or “genre” as stand-alone search items and in combination with other keywords such as “L2 writing” or “genre-based writing instruction”. Articles on genre that focused on L1 writing were excluded and L2 writing articles that did not include genre theory



were also excluded. Some other parameters considered were clear study structure, focus, gaps, and findings. The selected articles were organized in a google spreadsheet.

Table 1 Databases and search results

<b>Database</b>	<b>Search Results</b>
Cambridge Journals Online	11
Google Scholar	7
Oxford Academic	4
SAGE	3
ScienceDirect	14
Wiley Online Library	9

A total of 44 articles were identified for manual coding and analysis. These journal articles were published between the years 1990 and 2019 (table 2). Most (over 95%) of the literature analyzed in the current study are peer-reviewed articles and this was done to make sure the data contained high quality scholarly works.

Table 2 Period and number of publications

<b>Period</b>	<b>Number of Publications on Genre and L2 Writing</b>
1990-1995	3
1996-2000	5
2000-2005	6
2006-2010	8
2011-2015	17
2015-2019	5

The author identified about 7 seminal articles out of the 44 articles. These 7 articles were the most cited articles in the scholarship of genre and L2 writing instruction (table 3).

Table 3 Number of citations

<b>Author and Year of Publication</b>	<b>Number of Citations (Google scholar)</b>
Hyland (2007)	1989
Hyland (2003)	1926
Hyon (1996)	1721
Negretti (2012)	353
Cheng (2008)	274
Cheng (2006)	268
Johns (2011)	236

The themes that emerged from the review are discussed below.



#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

##### **Genre Theory and L2 Writing Instruction**

The role of learners and teachers in genre theory is instrumental. Genre theorists locate participant relationships at the heart of language use and assume that every successful text will display the writer's awareness of its context and readers (Hyland, 2007). Due to this awareness, genre pedagogies view learners as social agents who act within constraints of contexts (Kress, 1989). Hyland (2007) reveals that the core idea underpinning genre-based instruction is that members of a particular community typically have little difficulty in recognizing similarities in the texts they use frequently. These members can also draw on their repeated experiences with such texts to read, understand, and write them with relative ease (Hyland, 2007). Several studies (e.g., Cheng, 2011; Hyland, 2007; Tardy, 2006) indicate that this relative ease could be ascribed to the fact that writing is a practice based on expectations. This means that the reader's chances of interpreting the writer's purpose are increased if the writer takes the trouble to anticipate what the reader might be expecting based on previous texts (Cheng, 2011; Hyland, 2007; Tardy, 2006). This idea of teaching learners how to write to "fit" into a particular community constitutes the foundation genre-based pedagogies.

In terms of learner support, genre-based pedagogies support learners by foregrounding the meanings and text types at stake in different situations (Hyland, 2003). Also, one of the core benefits of genre theory is that it offers writers an explicit understanding of how texts in target genres are structured and why they are written in the ways they are (Hyland, 2003; Paltridge, 2001). To enhance a learner's understanding of texts, genre pedagogies advocate for teachers to create an awareness of target genres and explicit instruction on grammar and linguistic choices. In doing this, some methods employed in genre classrooms include investigating the texts and contexts of students' target situations, encouraging reflection on writing practices, exploiting genre sets, and creating mixed-genre portfolios (Johns, 1997; Paltridge, 2001).

Genre-based approaches are typified by certain unique characteristics (Tardy, 2011). Some of these characteristics include explicitness, systematicity, needs-based orientation, and consciousness-raising (Hyland, 2007). In terms of its advantages, genre theory affords students a better understanding of the complex relationship between texts and social contexts (Myskow & Gordon, 2010). This is particularly helpful because some language learners may lack the knowledge of ways in which the target language is structured to achieve social purposes and explicitness in genre-based writing instruction (GBWI) can heighten their (learners) awareness of texts, social setting, purpose, and audience (Gebhard & Harman, 2011).

Despite the aforementioned affordances of genre theory for learners, Morita (2004) indicates that genre treats learning as one-way enculturation into a stable community with fixed rules and conventions. This fundamental idea seems to be problematic and other theories concerned with L2 writing instruction such as Translingual Practice (Canagarajah, 2012) and Translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2014) criticize genre theory because it does not account for the complex and multilayered process learners go through in learning how to write. For these theories, writing involves the negotiation of identities, the role of ideologies, power, and institutional discourses and genre theory does not capture these elements. Specifically, Canagarajah (2012) indicates that powerful institutional discourses and ideologies in a particular academic community should not be imbibed holistically by learners. Also, learners



should not only be encouraged to learn and embrace genre conventions but also resist them (Canagarajah, 2012). In line with this criticism of genre, Devitt (2015) reveals that current genre approaches are suitable for learners who are new to a genre task or unfamiliar with a genre's contexts but the problem of taking the next steps after initial familiarity in genre has not been explored. Devitt (2015) cites an example of writers moving from the linguistic and rhetorical patterns of a genre to the specific and unique textual instance of genres that writers have to produce. The foundational argument in this criticism is that once students have discovered the relatively simplified patterns of genre and once they understand a basic rhetorical move, creativity has to be introduced so that learners can move on to independent judgments and this would help them make unique responses to writing tasks.

### **The Role of Teachers in Genre- Based Writing Instruction**

Most genre scholars acknowledge that the success of genre pedagogies is highly dependent on adequate professional knowledge of writing teachers (Hyland, 2003). The need for adequate knowledge means that explicit teaching of genre also depends on the accuracy of a teacher's explicit knowledge (Worden, 2018). In terms of the professional genre knowledge of writing instructors, ongoing debates, and criticism regarding teachers in GBWI have focused on concerns that novice teachers may be tempted to engage in formulaic genre teaching, as they ignore the intrinsic variability and dynamism of genres (Worden, 2018). In a study on stability and flexibility in GBWI, Worden (2018) examined how an L2 writing teacher manages the simultaneous stability and flexibility of genres within her classroom. The results of Worden's (2018) study indicate that the teacher's representations of genre were not static, rather it evolved over the course of a semester. Specifically, Worden (2018) reveals a nuanced understanding of the multiple factors the teacher considered, and the challenges she faced while implementing genre-based writing pedagogies. Other studies on genre stability and flexibility have examined teachers' beliefs about the teaching of form, especially through the use of templates. After examining the responses of 48 English language teachers in a range of contexts, Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) indicate that the confidence afforded by genre knowledge makes teachers feel more comfortable. Also, most teachers find templates valuable for beginner and intermediate level students and the stability of GBWI provides students with genre models to which they can compare their texts with (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998). Despite this reported confidence in GBWI, Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) report that some teachers were concerned that genre approaches might become too prescriptive especially "in the hands of unimaginative teachers" and this might discourage students from genre innovation (p.311). In a study similar to that of Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998), Johns (2011) conducted a survey among teachers who employ GBWI in their writing classrooms. The teachers in Johns' (2011) study defended the use of templates because they enabled "students to learn with confidence" especially regarding the discourse structures of English (p.58). Also, Gebhard et al. (2013) report in their study that the use of templates is not the result of teachers' failure to understand genre flexibility and dynamism rather the use of templates is a response to educational systems and systems of assessment. These systems according to Gebhard et al. (2013) work against a more functional perspective of language.

Most of the literature cited in the afore-mentioned stability and flexibility debate refers primarily to novice teachers as the target group that could be most susceptible to an



overemphasis on genre stability. Nevertheless, other studies have also considered even experienced teachers in this discussion. For example, Johns (2002) posits that the temptation to provide templates in order to teach and test students in a GBWI framework is an everyday requirement of teaching which genre teachers face. This challenge is a result of curricular tendencies which emphasize regularities and a search for stability so that students can learn some concrete facts about texts (Johns, 2002).

In summary, existing literature indicates the complexity of teachers' thinking about issues regarding genre stability and flexibility (Worden, 2018). It appears that teachers are aware of the tensions between stability and flexibility, but they do not always agree among themselves on how to best manage this in GBWI (Johns, 2011; Kay & DudleyEvans, 1998). This debate has also led to the fundamental criticism that describes genre theory as being unable to account for the current demands of writing instruction.

### **The Role of Learners in Genre Based L2 Writing Instruction**

Cheng (2006) indicates that for a long time, genre-based approaches to writing instruction (especially ESP) did not have their focus on actual learning by learners. Nevertheless, several studies have examined the role of learners in GBWI after Cheng's (2006) assertion. For example, Worden (2018) conducted a qualitative study where the author followed the activities of a pre-service teacher for an academic year. Findings from this study indicate that students respond to the flexibility of certain genres such as the analytic essay with fear and insecurity. It could be inferred from the study that students' fear of "deviating" from genre norms and subsequently getting a low grade because of the deviation encouraged them to opt for genre stability. This fear constitutes one of the major criticisms of genre theory (Devitt, 2015). In Worden's (2018) study, fears of students led the teacher to emphasize genre stability throughout the class. Despite this, the teacher also explored genre flexibility through verbal explanations of materials and one-on-one interactions with students who could handle the concept of genre flexibility (Worden, 2018). Students' anxieties towards flexibility in GBWI might mean that a more structured approach should be favored in GBWI (Worden, 2018). In Worden's (2018) study, the teacher's movement to genre stability due to her students' emotional needs verifies the findings of Johns (2011) survey of EFL teachers. These teachers argue for the inclusion of templates on the grounds that they enabled students to confidently participate in genre structures (Johns, 2011) and as mentioned earlier, the argument for genre stability is what genre "antagonists" criticize as the transmission of powerful ideologies to students that hinders a learners' identity development. Similar to Worden (2018), in a study on the writing performance of L2 graduate students in a genre-based classroom, Cheng (2007) reveals that students writers employ certain features that are motivated by various rhetorical considerations. These writers tend to fulfill multiple purposes and create certain projected reader responses through the rhetorical (re)organization in their writing, yet they find solace in replicating stable genres they have encountered in their professional fields (Cheng, 2007). For Cheng (2007), the goal of genre pedagogy should not only be the development of the awareness of genres (generic features) but the development of the awareness of genre (sophisticated awareness of the rhetorical considerations motivating generic features) and this means genre stability cannot be overlooked.



### **The Relationship between Genre Theory and Some Major Themes in Second Language Acquisition Research**

One area of concern for genre researchers is the relationship between genre theory, learner roles and second language acquisition in multilingual contexts. In a study on institutional practices for teaching upper elementary English language learners' school-based genres, de Oliveira and Lan (2014) suggest an ecological approach to teaching and learning genre in an English for Academic Purposes setting and the need to ensure that students in multilingual contexts are able to develop and negotiate communication skills among multiple languages. de Oliveira and Lan (2014) argue that their approach has been scarcely adopted in GBWI research and it has the potential of solving the problem of genre theory especially in the area where genre overemphasizes monolingual ideologies. Similarly, in a study on the writing performance of an L2 Chinese-speaking graduate student in a genre-based classroom, Cheng (2006) reveals that the L2 Chinese student's writing samples, annotations, literacy narrative, and interview transcript suggests that he was able to transfer some previously noticed generic features in his L1 into his L2 writing. This study provides evidence for a multilingual approach to GBWI.

Another aspect of learner roles in genre-based pedagogies is individual differences and learner characteristics. Tardy (2009) indicates that of the various parameters that can shape genre learning and knowledge development, individual learner characteristics appear to be the most important (Tardy, 2009). Specifically, in ESP genre learning, Wang (2017) reveals that learner characteristics are largely concerned with students' knowledge base, language proficiency, education and disciplinary background, cultural background, and social interactions. In a study on learner characteristics in a genre-based classroom, Cheng (2008) reports that the participants' personal histories of learning discipline-specific writing shaped their "individualized engagement" with genre analysis tasks in an English for academic purposes (EAP) writing class. Also, in Cheng's (2008) study, the existing disciplinary genre knowledge of learners influenced their attention to various generic features of the target genre (research articles). In another study on individual differences, Tardy (2009) observed that students' immediate need for a target genre (job application cover letters) accounted for their diverse experiences with cover letter assignments in a postgraduate writing course. Most of the studies discussed in this paragraph argue for the importance of individual differences and learner characteristics in genre-based pedagogical contexts.

Another important SLA theme is the roles of motivation and cognitive factors in genre-based pedagogies. Motivation plays a key role in writing instruction in general and GBWI specifically (Han & Hiver, 2018; Negretti, 2012)). The crucial role of motivation in GBWI has led to a number of studies that examine the correlation between motivation and GBWI (Negretti & McCrath, 2018). For example, Han and Hiver (2018) examined the process of motivational change for middle school language learners within the classroom ecology of genre-based writing. Findings from Han and Hiver's (2018) study indicate that over the course of genre-based writing instruction, students were able to develop a stronger capacity for writing self-regulation and the ability to sustain their writing self-efficacy. This self-regulation finding by Han and Hiver (2018) could mean that as a pedagogical approach, genre based L2 writing instruction is able to empower learners to improve their writing skills by increasing their overall





control of the target genre. Specifically, this is done when learners develop a greater awareness of the criteria for success as writers and of the target genre conventions (Han & Hiver, 2018).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Genre theories are potentially empowering for teachers especially when it is compared to product and process writing approach (Hyland, 2007). Despite this affordance, GBWI can be complex and demanding for teachers, especially because it requires high levels of content knowledge (Hyland, 2007) and also because learners in genre classrooms might engage in mere duplications of conventional norms which can hamper their agency and identity development. The purpose of this review has been to explain how the application of genre theory in L2 writing classrooms has been studied in the existing literature and how genre theory together with other themes in SLA contributes to L2 writing development. Throughout this paper, a major criticism of genre theory which is its tendency to hinder creativity and agency in the writing classroom has been highlighted. This criticism also indicates that genre has the tendency of strengthening dominant discourses, privileged forms of language, and academic literacy practices that have enormous potential for social stratification and the reproduction of inequalities (Worden, 2018). In response to this criticism, genre researchers are advocating for flexibility in genre-based pedagogies and prioritization of genre innovation in the L2 writing classroom (Tardy, 2016). This approach of genre innovation requires a balance between genre stability and flexibility where learners are made aware of existing norms of a particular community, and in addition to that, they are encouraged to be creative in their writing. Discussions on stability and flexibility are still ongoing in genre-based pedagogical research (Tardy, 2016) and Devitt (2015) remarks that it would take some time for researchers and even teachers to catch up with the new “trend” of genre innovation. Despite this, genre theory remains a very important concept in L2 writing studies.

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