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Thesis writing course: Students' perceptions and attitudes toward the impact of the course on their thesis writing knowledge and skills

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Thesis writing course: Students' perceptions and attitudes toward the impact of the course on their thesis writing knowledge and skills

ABSTRACT

While the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) approach to genre-based pedagogy has enjoyed considerable popularity in the teaching of ESL (English as a Second Language) academic writing (Swales, 1990, 2004; Swales & Feak, 1994, 2000), discussion on the efficacy of such an approach on students' learning of specific genres has so far remained theoretical and anecdotal (Tardy, 2009). Few empirical studies have been done to assess whether such an approach has benefited the learners in their learning of a target genre. This paper examines the extent to which a 48-hour PhD thesis writing course has contributed to ESL/EFL doctoral students' understanding of the thesis genre and their attitudes towards it. The study also investigates the extent to which participants consider the various course activities useful to their learning of the genre. The study employs both pre-course and post-course survey questionnaires for an entire cohort of 136 third or fourth year PhD candidates who are mostly students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Results show that these students have gained a better understanding of the thesis genre and are more confident in writing such a genre after taking the course. Results also show that while tutor-directed activities such as tutorials and tutor-student feedback sessions are highly regarded by the students, peer-directed activities such as peer feedback sessions and student-led analysis of thesis segments are less popular. Implications of the findings for a thesis writing module as well as for genre-based pedagogy are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In institutions of higher learning, writing is prevalent in students' academic life as it often constitutes an essential part of their academic requirements (Deng, 2009). This is especially true of graduate students pursuing doctoral studies. As apprentice academics, these students have increasingly been asked to produce and publish research articles as part of their graduation requirements. Besides these and other types of writing, they will also be required to produce a thesis, which many of them, especially those from non-English backgrounds, may be unfamiliar with. To prepare these students for their research paper and thesis writing, many writing courses have been designed so that these students will be able to write their theses satisfactorily and be able to graduate.

In the teaching of thesis and research paper writing, the most dominant approach is probably the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) genre-based approach, which is often compared with the other two genre-based approaches (the Australian Genre Approach or the Sydney School, and the New Rhetoric) (Deng, 2005, 2007; Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2003; Macken et al., 1989; Feez, 2002; Coe, 1994, 2002; Swales, 1990, 2004). This is probably because the ESP genre-based approach is the only approach of the three to provide detailed structural and linguistic analysis of research paper and thesis genres. Such structural and linguistic analyses of specific genres, though sometimes criticized by other genre theorists as being static and ignoring the social dimension of the production of a particular genre (Artemeva & Freedman, 2008), serve as good instructional and scaffolding activities for genre learners, especially ESL/EFL learners (Paltridge, 1997; Swales and Freak, 2000, 2004).

However, genre-based mode of instruction has long been subjected to calls for evaluation (Hyon, 1996). Recently an increasing number of studies have been done to examine the writing development of ESL/EFL students through genre-based instruction (Artemeva & Freedman, 2008; Tardy, 2009; Manchón, 2012). However, most of these studies are longitudinal case studies of individual students. While the findings of these studies are illuminating for understanding the various factors (including the genre-based classroom instruction) contributing to the development of genre knowledge and expertise (Tardy, 2009), very few studies seem to focus on the evaluation of a particular genre-based course. The purpose of this study is to evaluate a research paper and thesis writing course in enhancing doctoral students' knowledge of the thesis genre as well as their skills and confidence in writing their theses.

This course has been running for many years. Each year, the course is offered to around 200 to 300 third or fourth year PhD candidates who are mostly students from non-English speaking backgrounds and are not exempted from graduate English courses on the basis of their performance in the Diagnostic English Test, which they take at the beginning of their study. The main purpose of the course, entitled 'Graduate English Course (Advanced) – Research Paper Writing and Thesis Writing' is to help these students with the writing of their research papers and final doctoral theses.

The course is a genre-based process writing course which is characterized by the instruction of structural and linguistic features of different parts of a research paper or thesis, analyses of students' and actual research paper and thesis segments, the writing of actual thesis sections, and the peer and tutor review of such writing. During the course, students are required to write five assignments: three for the Introduction or Literature Review chapter, one for the Conclusion chapter, and one for the Abstract. At the same time, they are also required to provide written and oral analyses of the Introduction, Results, Conclusion, and Abstract of a thesis in their discipline.

How effective is such an approach to the teaching of research paper and thesis writing? What impact does it have on the enhancement of students' knowledge about the thesis genre and their skills and confidence in writing the genre? How do they perceive the

usefulness of the various genre-based instructional activities and/or course components? What strategies and resources do these students use in the completion of their thesis writing? The answers to these questions are important as they will not only help us understand the impact of the course on the writing of their theses, but also help us see whether the genre-based pedagogy is useful for the students' learning of the genre. In addition, the study also helps us understand what other skills and knowledge are needed by our students to complete their theses and research papers but are not found in this course. In this way, we will be in a better position to know whether any changes in the course are necessary to better cater to the needs of our doctoral students. Equally important, such findings will help us gain a more systematic understanding of how graduate students develop their knowledge of genres in their profession (Tardy, 2009; Manchón, 2012).

METHOD

This study is part of a larger study which investigates the impact of the thesis writing course on the actual thesis writing behaviours of doctoral students. While the larger study consists of data from interviewing students three months after taking the course as well as other qualitative data, the current study reports on the results of a pre- and post-course survey questionnaire which was used to assess the differences in the students' perception about their knowledge of, skills at and attitudes towards the thesis genre and its components. While we acknowledge the limitation of the use of survey data, such surveys can be an effective tool for evaluating whether a course has achieved its learning outcomes (Sumner & Capano, 2010).

The survey questionnaires were developed based on Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick's (1994) model of training evaluation. The original model consists of four levels of evaluation, which include reaction, learning, behaviour and results. While all four levels are intended to be covered in the larger study, this current survey study makes use of the first two levels: 1) Reaction – what participants thought and felt about the course components and activities; and 2) learning – the resulting increase in knowledge and/or skills, and change in attitudes.

Besides Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick's (1994) model of training evaluation, the design of the survey also draws upon Tardy's (2009) general taxonomy of resources and strategies that learners use to build genre knowledge. According to Tardy (2009), learners typically make use of six main resources and strategies to develop their genre knowledge, which include prior experience and repeated practice, textual interactions, oral interactions, mentoring and disciplinary participation, shifting roles within a genre network, and resource availability.

The pre-course survey questionnaire was administered in the first session of the twelve-week course whereas the post-course survey questionnaire was administered in the very last session. Five sets of questions are shared by both pre- and post-course

questionnaires. These sets of questions address students' perception about the different aspects of their understanding of the thesis genre and its components: knowledge about the organizational features of the thesis and its components, knowledge about their linguistic features, skills for writing the thesis and its components, confidence in writing the thesis and its components, and ways of achieving disciplinary genre expertise. A paired-samples t-test was used to examine whether there is any statistically significant difference between the students' pre- and post-course perception on the different aspects of their understanding of the thesis genre.

In addition to the common sets of questions for both pre- and post-course questionnaires, a few distinct questions were included. For the pre-course questionnaire, one question is asked on whether students think a module on thesis writing will be useful to them. As to the post-course questionnaire, another five sets of questions are asked on students' attitudes towards the five main types of activities used in the course: tutorials, students' workshop analysis, assignment writing, peer review, and one-on-one teacher-student consultation.

For all quantitative questions, students are asked to indicate the extent or degree of agreement to a set of statements on the different aspects of their understanding of the thesis genre, based on a five-point Likert scale with one for *strongly disagree*, three for *neutral* and five for *strongly agree*.

Altogether, 126 third or fourth year doctoral candidates from different disciplines and different nationalities participated in the pre-course survey; whereas, 129 of these students participated in the post-course survey. However, as we were able to locate 120 matched surveys, only these matched surveys were used for this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Knowledge, skills and attitudes

Table 1 shows our student participants' pre- and post-course perceptions about their knowledge of the organizational and linguistic features of the PhD thesis and its various components, about their writing skills for the genre, and about their confidence in writing the genre. It is clear that students' perception about their knowledge of the organizational features of the PhD thesis and its various components (i.e. Table of Contents, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Conclusion/Discussion, Abstract, and Acknowledgments) has significantly increased during the span of twelve weeks, except only for Acknowledgements. As Acknowledgments is one of the only two thesis components that this course did not focus on, it is not surprising that these students did not feel that they knew the structural features of this particular subgenre better at the end of the semester than at the beginning. What is also surprising is that even though Methodology is not a component that the course focused on, students still felt that they had gained better knowledge about the organizational

Table 1. Students' pre- and post-course perceptions of their knowledge and writing skills of the thesis genre as well as their confidence in writing the genre

		Organizational Features	Linguistic Features	Writing Skills	Attitudes
PhD thesis in general	Post	4.35** (.57)	4.22** (.61)	3.73** (.67)	3.96** (.67)
	Pre	3.65 (.80)	3.21 (.75)	3.10 (.79)	3.19 (.72)
Table of Contents	Post	4.39** (.63)	4.28** (.65)	3.99** (.73)	4.20** (.69)
	Pre	3.72 (.84)	3.45 (.80)	3.50 (.77)	3.54 (.77)
Introduction	Post	4.43** (.58)	4.32** (.61)	3.82** (.72)	4.04** (.72)
	Pre	3.65 (.87)	3.31 (.75)	3.05 (.78)	3.09 (.74)
Literature Review	Post	4.36** (.56)	4.33** (.64)	3.78** (.70)	3.99** (.66)
	Pre	3.75 (.85)	3.42 (.72)	3.20 (.81)	3.22 (.81)
Methodology	Post	4.20** (.65)	4.29** (.60)	3.96** (.67)	4.17** (.62)
	Pre	3.92 (.83)	3.53 (.77)	3.51 (.82)	3.61 (.77)
Results	Post	4.27** (.62)	4.23** (.64)	4.06** (.73)	4.17** (.66)
	Pre	3.78 (.81)	3.45 (.80)	3.37 (.77)	3.45 (.76)
Conclusions/Discussion	Post	4.39** (.54)	4.28** (.67)	3.89** (.69)	4.07** (.70)
	Pre	3.63 (.82)	3.35 (.76)	3.10 (.81)	3.19 (.76)
Abstract	Post	4.41** (.56)	4.27** (.64)	3.95** (.72)	4.10** (.66)
	Pre	3.61 (.83)	3.39 (.78)	3.09 (.82)	3.20 (.80)
Acknowledgments	Post	3.87 (.79)	3.93** (.75)	3.74** (.72)	3.98** (.71)
	Pre	3.70 (.93)	3.45 (.81)	3.45 (.80)	3.52 (.86)

**<0.01

features of this subgenre. We postulate that as they read and analyzed many different theses and research articles during the 12-week semester, they have been exposed so often to the methodological part of these theses and articles that they unconsciously acquired their knowledge about the organization of this component (Krashen, 1985, 2004). In addition, when students analyzed and wrote thesis components other than Methodology, they invariably had to include some information about their method of study (Swales, 1990, 2004). For example, before they reported their results, they might choose to highlight some of the methods they had employed for obtaining the results they got. This also applies to the writing and analysis of Introduction, Literature Review, Conclusion/Discussion, and Abstract.

A similar pattern appears for the students' perception of their knowledge about the linguistic features of the thesis genre and its different components (see Table 1). A significant difference between pre-course and post-course survey has been found in their perception of the knowledge about the linguistic features of all the different thesis components, including the two components not covered in the course: Methodology and Acknowledgements. As we argued earlier, this may not be surprising for Methodology as they would have been exposed to and would also have practiced writing the methodological part of the thesis during the semester. But it is much unexpected that they

believed that they had also gained knowledge on the linguistic features of this subgenre. It may be because the course has placed great emphasis on the linguistic features (such as verb tenses and language expressions) of the various sections of the thesis genre. This may have given the students a better understanding of what linguistic features to use for the writing of their thesis in general and specific part of the thesis in particular.

With respect to the writing skills, there is also a significant difference in the students' perception of their skills at writing all the different components of the thesis genre, including Methodology and Acknowledgements, although the gain for the writing of Acknowledgements is the smallest among all the components.

When students were asked whether they were confident in writing their PhD thesis and its different chapters, it is obvious that their confidence level has increased significantly over the course of twelve weeks.

Strategies and resources for building disciplinary genre expertise (Table 2)

Over the course of twelve weeks, students have attributed many factors to the development of their disciplinary genre expertise, the most prominent of which is 'attending writing and communication courses', especially the research paper and thesis writing course reported in this study. Other significant factors include, in descending order, mentoring of supervisors, interaction with peer students, writing similar genres, reading PhD theses, reading research articles, and mentoring of senior

Table 2. Ways of obtaining disciplinary genre expertise

		Mean	N	Std. deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mentoring of supervisors	Post	4.183	120	.7668	5.131	.000
	Pre	3.783	120	.9717		
Mentoring of senior students	Post	3.496	119	.9556	2.026	.045
	Pre	3.328	119	.8744		
Interaction with peer students	Post	3.661	118	.7869	4.681	.000
	Pre	3.246	118	.9239		
Attending writing and communication courses	Post	4.258	120	.7390	11.117	.000
	Pre	3.192	120	.9553		
Reading research articles	Post	4.333	120	.5846	3.446	.001
	Pre	4.100	120	.6909		
Reading PhD theses	Post	3.874	119	.8188	4.054	.000
	Pre	3.538	119	.9548		
Writing similar genres	Post	3.798	119	.7431	4.387	.000
	Pre	3.429	119	.8885		
Participating in international/local conferences	Post	3.467	120	.8593	.000	1.000
	Pre	3.467	120	.8294		
Participation in research group discussion and seminars	Post	3.571	119	.7873	1.532	.128
	Pre	3.445	119	.8507		

students. Two factors which have not shown significant differences are participation in group discussion and seminars, and participation in international or local conferences.

Perception of usefulness of the module before the course

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
A module on thesis writing will be useful to me.	0.8%	4.2%	13.4%	42.9%	38.7%

A great majority of the students (81.6%) either agreed or strongly agreed that a module on thesis writing would be useful to them. This is encouraging as the recognition of a need for such a course on the part of the students helps motivate them to do well in the course.

Attitudes towards the course activities

Attitudes towards tutorial instruction

I found the following course activities or components to be useful:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Tutorial on the thesis formats	0%	0.8%	9.2%	45.0%	45.0%
Tutorial on the writing of Context	0%	0.8%	10%	42.5%	46.7%
Tutorial on the writing of Literature Review	0.8%	0%	9.2%	43.7%	46.2%
Tutorial on the writing of Gap and Purpose	0%	0%	7.5%	45.0%	47.5%
Tutorial on the writing of Results	0%	0.8%	15.1%	44.5%	39.5%
Tutorial on the writing of Conclusion	0%	0%	6.7%	47.5%	45.8%
Tutorial on the writing of Abstract	0%	0%	7.6%	50.4%	42.0%
The course as a whole	0%	0%	8.3%	46.7%	45.0%

It is clear that students expressed their overwhelming endorsement over the tutorial instruction on the various components of the thesis, with their agreement or strong agreement ranging from 84% to 93.3%. The lowest rating is for the tutorial instruction on the writing of Results (84%). This is not surprising, as students were not required to write a results assignment; all they had to do is to provide a workshop analysis of the results section of a thesis in their discipline.

Attitudes towards students' workshop analysis of thesis segments

Four workshop activities were used. These workshop activities were conducted by students in a group, which to a great extent consists of students from similar disciplines. The four workshops focused on the four major sections of a thesis: Introduction, Results, Conclusion, and Abstract. It is apparent that this type of activity, though still deemed to be useful, is not regarded by the students as useful as tutorial instruction, with the extent of agreement or strong agreement ranging from 67.5% (workshop on Results) to 75.8% (workshop on Introduction).

I found the following course activities or components to be useful:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Students' Workshop on the analysis of Introduction	1.7%	2.5%	20.0%	55.0%	20.8%
Students' Workshop on the analysis of Results	1.7%	2.5%	28.3%	48.3%	19.2%
Students' Workshop on the analysis of Conclusion	1.7%	1.7%	22.5%	54.2%	20.0%
Students' Workshop on the analysis of Abstract	2.5%	0.8%	28.6%	48.7%	19.3%

Attitudes towards the writing assignments

I found the following course activities or components to be useful:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Writing of Table of Contents	0%	0%	18.3%	50%	31.7%
Written Assignment of Context	0%	0%	6.7%	51.7%	41.7%
Written Assignment of Review	0%	0%	7.5%	50.8%	41.7%
Written Assignment of Gap and Purpose	0%	0%	5.0%	49.2%	45.8%
Written Assignment of Conclusion	0%	0.8%	6.7%	50.0%	42.5%
Written Assignment of Abstract	0%	0%	9.2%	50.0%	40.8%

The students expressed overwhelming agreement with all the writing assignments the course required, with descending rate of agreement for Gap and Purpose (95%), Context (93.4%), Review (92.5%), Conclusion (92.5%), Abstract (90.8%), and Table of Contents (81.7%). Except for one student on the Conclusion assignment, none of them expressed disagreement to the range of writing assignments. This result is not surprising as all these assignments are not artificial writing that the students do for the fulfilment of the course requirements only, but rather, such assignments are supposed to contribute to the thesis they will be required to produce towards the end of the PhD study.

Attitudes towards peer review

I found the following course activities or components to be useful:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Peer Review for Context	0%	5.0%	25.0%	49.2%	20.8%
Peer Review for Review	0%	5.0%	24.2%	50.8%	20.0%
Peer Review for Gap and Purpose	0%	5.0%	26.7%	45.0%	23.3%
Peer Review for Conclusion	0%	5.0%	25.8%	45.8%	23.3%

The usefulness of the four peer review sessions, as perceived by the students, is comparable to that of the workshop sessions, with the degree of agreement hovering around 70%. This seems to indicate that students may be somewhat distrustful of the value of their peers' comments.

Attitudes towards one-on-one consultation with the tutor

One-on-one teacher-student feedback session was considered by the students the most useful activity for the course. Except for the discussion of Table of Contents and the

outlines of the first two assignments (85.8%), all the other one-on-one tutor consultation sessions received overwhelming endorsement from the students, with the extent of agreement or strong agreement all above 95%. If we compare the rate of their agreement for peer review and tutor feedback, it is very clear that students prefer tutor feedback to peer review comments.

I found the following course activities or components to be useful:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Discussion with the tutor on Table of Contents and on the outlines for the first two assignments (Context and Review)	0%	0%	14.2%	42.5%	43.3%
Tutor-student feedback session on Context	0%	0.8%	4.2%	45.8%	49.2%
Tutor-student feedback session on Review	0%	0.8%	3.3%	46.7%	49.2%
Tutor-student feedback session on Gap and Purpose	0%	0.8%	4.2%	44.2%	50.8%
Tutor-student feedback session on Conclusion	0%	0.8%	3.3%	45.8%	50.0%
Tutor-student feedback session on Abstract	0%	0.8%	3.3%	47.1%	48.7%

CONCLUSION

Genre-based pedagogy has gained great popularity over the past three decades, especially for the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (Swales, 1981). However, such pedagogy is not without criticisms. There have even been arguments against the explicit teaching of genres (Freedman, 1994). Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate genre-based pedagogy to see whether it can effectively help learners learn a particular genre. This study examined the effects of a genre-based approach to the teaching of research paper and thesis genres on doctoral students' learning of such genres. Specifically, it attempted to show whether the genre-based pedagogy had helped the students gain knowledge about the research paper and thesis genres, and enhance their skills at and confidence in writing such genres. In addition, the study also aimed to find out whether the genre-based instructional activities were perceived by the students as useful for their learning of the genres.

The results of the study have clearly shown that the genre-based pedagogy has contributed significantly to the enhancement of doctoral students' knowledge of the research paper and thesis genres, their writing skills, and confidence in writing the genres. Classroom instruction, among other resources, has also been considered a significant means that students use to achieve their disciplinary genre expertise.

Among the various activities designed for the course, tutor involvement is still regarded as the most useful. These include tutor instruction and one-on-one consultation with the tutor. The writing assignments are also considered to be very useful for helping students with the writing of their thesis. However, the two other activities – students' workshop analysis and peer review exercises – are considered to be less useful than tutor instruction, tutor consultation and the actual writing of the assignments.

In conclusion, the findings of the study have given strong evidence for the effectiveness of a genre-based approach to the teaching of the research paper and thesis genres. A majority of the students perceive that they have greatly benefitted from the instructional activities based on such pedagogy.

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