Students' essays from a genre-based perspective: Applying genre theory to the analysis of students' written productions in first-year Humanities essays in L2

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss a genre-based pattern for the study of students' written products that rethinks the teaching and assessment of academic writing in EFL in a first year course as the teaching of generic rather than linguistic skills. The focus we suggest adapts Halliday's three components of communication —i.e. the ideational, the textual and the interpersonal components— to the specific features of academic discourse, in order to observe students' learning progress from the point of view of field-specific discourse genres. The implementation of this model is further exemplified by some illustrating extracts from a sample of literary essays written by a group of non-native first-year students of Humanities in an English Literature course. Despite students' L2 problems —in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, register, and such— a generic point of view allows for a more flexible review of students' work regarding their personal implementation of the identifying features of the essay genre.
Key words: Academic genres, textual component, ideational component, interpersonal component, foreign language writing.

Resum

En aquest article, proposem un patró per a l'anàlisi dels escrits dels alumnes en L2 amb un enfocament basat en la noció de gènere discursiu, reconceptualitzant l'ensenyament de la llengua escrita a primer de carrera com un aprenentatge de característiques de gènere més enllà dels aspectes purament lingüístics. L'enfocament que suggerim adapta els components comunicatius descrits per Halliday —és a dir, els components ideacionals, textuals i interpersonals— a les característiques concretes del discurs acadèmic, amb el propòsit d'estudiar el progrés dels aprenents des del punt de vista dels gèneres discursius propis d'una disciplina. La implementació d'aquest model d'anàlisi està il·lustrada per un recull d'exemples d'assajos escrits per un grup d'alumnes de literatura anglesa dins del programa d'humanitats. Malgrat la manca d'expertesa dels alumnes en

aquesta llengua —en vocabulari, estructures, registre, etc.—, el punt de vista de gènere ens permet una visió més flexible de la feina dels alumnes tot observant la seva implementació personal de les característiques identificatives del gènere de l'assaig.

Paraules clau: Gèneres acadèmics, component textual, component ideacional, component interpersonal, escriptura en llengua estrangera.

1. Introduction

The internationalisation of present-day university demands from students the ability to understand and produce academic discourse in English, since in academic contexts generic expertise is both the essential instrument and the object of learning. Producing and understanding academic genres determines students' likelihood of becoming part of the expert community. However, students find themselves entrapped by problems regarding not only their foreign language skills, but also their ignorance of the culturally coined conventions of their knowledge communities, their domain-specific procedures and their substantive concepts. A Bakhtinian (Bakhtin, Holquist & Emerson 1986) conceptualisation of academic discourse as a set of sub-genres built by the community of users allows university instructors to focus on the features that define such genres as a short term learning goal, regardless of the other long-term issues mentioned above.
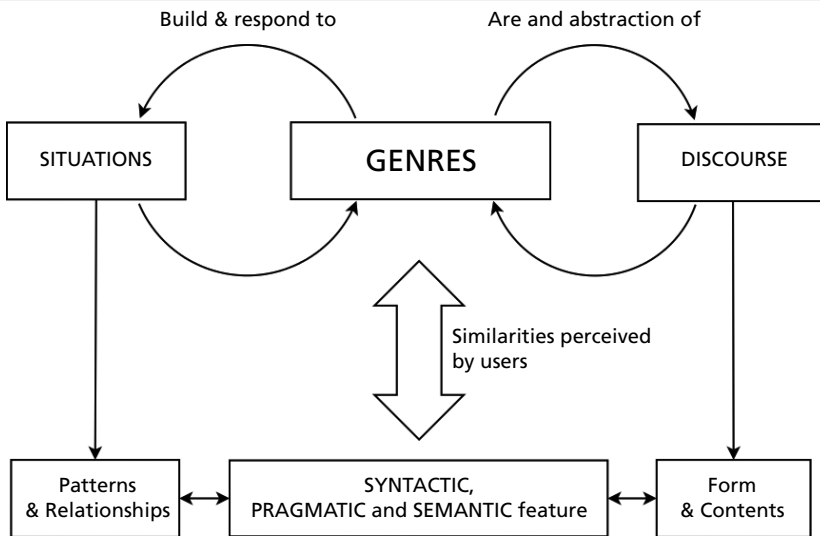
1.1. Genres and Academic Genres

To begin with, we will sketch the main features of discourse genres in order to construct a working definition of genres based on a socio-functional perspective. Then, we will describe the particularities of academic genres as a subgroup within discourse genres in terms of their learning and status-marking functions.

Genres provide speakers with models of suitable responses to situations they are likely to encounter in their sphere of action. Devitt defined genres as "action rather than form, as a text-type that *does* something rather than is something" (Devitt 1996:606). Consequently, "knowing the genre means knowing, not only, or even most of all, how to conform to generic conventions but also how to respond appropriately to a given situation" (Devitt 1993:577). We are hence socialised into genres by learning such things as "appropriate subject matter, level of detail, tone and approach" (Devitt 1993:577), apart from the conventional layout and organization associated with each specific genre.
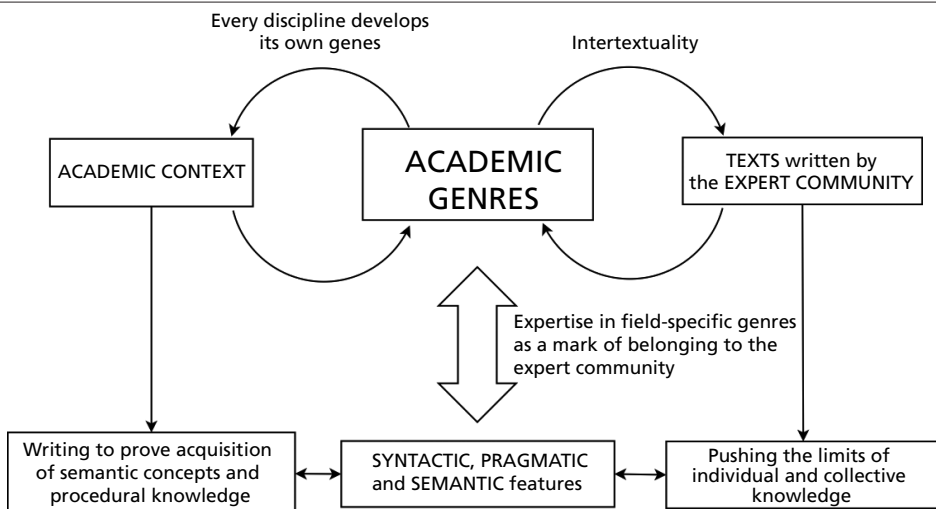
Genres facilitate communication by inserting it in predictable structures. Speech genres and context build on one another. Genres appear as the abstraction of recurring types of speech due to their successful occurrence in specific situations. Genres are hence characterised by what users perceive to be their defining features, not just in terms of language features, but particularly regarding content and relationships.

Illustration 1. Discourse genres and context.

Build & respond to   Are and abstraction of

SITUATIONS   GENRES   DISCOURSE

Similarities perceived
by users

Patterns
& Relationships   SYNTACTIC,
PRAGMATIC and SEMANTIC feature   Form
& Contents

Academic genres constitute a sub-group within discourse genres, with its own range of sub-genres and associated contents and roles. Academic genres involve pursuing the development of individual and collective knowledge. Each academic paper becomes a piece in a jigsaw of argumentation trying to solve a problem (Rienecker & Stray Jörgensen 2003). Within a community of knowledge, academic writers read each other's works and respond to them unendingly. Such an exchange of ideas results in the fact that all the academic texts of a field are interconnected into a knowledge network. Each text depends on the existence of many other texts, which themselves were written on the basis of former texts.

Illustration 2. Academic genres and context.

Every discipline develops
its own genes   Intertextuality

ACADEMIC CONTEXT   ACADEMIC
GENRES   TEXTS written by
the EXPERT COMMUNITY

Expertise in field-specific genres
as a mark of belonging to the
expert community

Writing to prove acquisition
of semantic concepts and
procedural knowledge   SYNTACTIC, PRAGMATIC
and SEMANTIC features   Pushing the limits of
individual and collective
knowledge

As shown in the diagram, the acquisition of academic genres works towards three different aims. Firstly, towards the acquisition of the essential knowledge (conceptual and procedural) in their field. Secondly, to signal the author's belonging to the expert community. On top of that, in the context of university learning writing is the main form of assessment, evidence of the students' acquisition. Academic essays are therefore writing-to-learn activities (Kapp & Bangeni 2005) and proof of learning simultaneously, whose success is measured according to their generic suitability (Swales 1996); i.e. to what extent they employ the vocabulary, style and compositional patterns typical of their field of knowledge, the ones used and expected by the discursive community they belong to.

2. Developing a genre-based perspective

One of the obstacles that prevents students from fulfilling these three functions of academic discourse is that their instructors at university tend to view their learning process differently from them, and provide feedback in terms of language or writing problems only, rather than in terms of generic issues (Lea & Street 1998). Consequently, students are not given concrete ways of adapting their writing to the specific demands of their field, and are forced to linger in the learner stage, not allowed to move onto more powerful roles.

Our essay-genre pattern, on the other hand, allows instructors to review essays in terms of their adequacy to the basic features of the essay genre. It focuses on whether essays fulfil these aims, rather than on imposing concrete language forms that only students with proficient linguistic skills in L2 can apply. We arranged these basic features of the essay genre according to Halliday's (1970) three systemic functional categories. These were: the textual component, namely the compositional patterns of essays and related features; the interpersonal component, dealing with intertextuality and the relationship between the writer and the readers; and the ideational component, regarding the semantic concepts of their field-knowledge and students' use of non-standardised expressions.

Illustration 3. Halliday's functional components of communication.
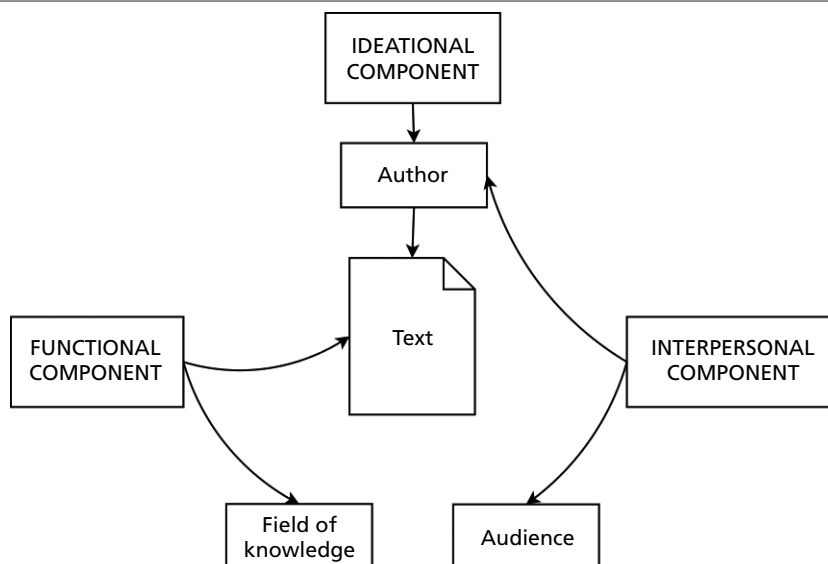
2.1. The interpersonal component

Halliday's (1970) interpersonal component describes the dialogical aspects of texts, how writers speak to the audience about the text and about their relationship to it and thus establish different degrees of closeness with the community of readers. By using modality and metadiscourse, writers can tell their readers how reliable a proposition is, or their inclination towards an idea or opinion (Teberosky 2007; Gruber 2004). As for modality, since academic writing deals with cognition and its limits, it is important for scholars-to-be to gain skills for engaging in remote discussions with other academic writers while clearly establishing their attitude towards their role, their readers and their statements.

Metadiscourse has a discourse framing function (Hyland 1998; Nash 1990; Crismore & Farnsworth 1989; 1990). It helps connect to absent readers; in some of the essays, for example, students used "we can imagine" with this purpose. Hyland (2004) further divided metadiscourse into stance and engagement, which refer to writer-oriented (or textual) and reader-oriented (or interpersonal) dialogic features respectively.

Regarding students' use of interpersonal metadiscourse, we found that by using a first person plural "we", students bridged the gap between them and their audience, thus softening the commanding force of the imperatives they used to guide them through their reasoning: "we can appreciate", "shows us", "let's see", "the author to make that the reader feel more close to him, explain us his past". In many of the essays, students chose this resource, in comparison to the more vulnerable "I think" or "In my opinion". As for textual metadiscourse, we found in the essays instances of announcements (Crismore & Farnsworth, 1989:94) such as "Now I will do an analysis", "Then I will explain this idea", or the use of glosses between brackets: "(in a real aspect, but of course, also in a figurative sense)"; "(which is negative)" and "(after talking about his wife and her first …)".

Modality determines the writer's relationship with the audience by taking out insurance on categorical statements, limiting them to conditions under which they can be regarded as acceptable or objectively valid (Nash 1990). This can be carried out via the use of modal auxiliaries, verbal hedges, adjectives, and such. One of the students softened the statement "He has an incipient problem with alcohol" to "Maybe he has an incipient problem with alcohol", so that it suggested rather than categorically stated an important part of the argument. The propositional content of the sentence was unchanged. By assuming a less assertive tone on the truthfulness of a statement, the author marked this part of the discourse as a contribution to the interpretation of the text, while simultaneously screening himself from criticism by other members of the literary community.

When modality fails to appear, the argumentative power of the essay is weakened by the appearance of categorical assertions and presuppositions (Simpson 1990). Signs of unmodalized discourse, they undermine writers' academic stance, showing misunderstanding of the author's relationship with the rest of the expert community. Presuppositions consist of using verbs such as "realize" or "know" to keep propositions beyond doubt, making them difficult to contradict without finding oneself outside the community of readers. Many students used "we know" in the essays, but then softened it with a modal. The following paragraph offers a very remarkable contrast between modality (text in bold) and its absence (text in italics). In order for the argument to proceed, this student needed to reinforce the bits of the story used as evidence, and hence the use of categorical phrasing. In order to prove the thesis, the student needed to state that "it's clear that this couple don't have a good relationship", that the wife's keeping of a poem and the way she felt when the blind man touched her face are both very important for her. The student's per-

sonal suggestions are marked with hedges to distinguish them from the evidence. A misspelling of "blind mind" in the last sentence shows the students' thoughts on the subject.

"*It's clear that* this couple don't have a good relationship but **maybe** the clue of all this story is that she is in love with the blind mind or **maybe** she admires a lot his character and can't value her own husband. *That's why* she conserves a poem she wrote when the blind man touches her face in a way she *never* could forget."

2.2. The Textual Component

The textual component shows how language structure binds together the ideational and interpersonal components (Freeman 1981; Halliday 1970). It designates linguistic issues —not in terms of grammatical accuracy, but rather in relation to the community's expectations on students' writing. We considered the generic conventions of literary analysis and the necessary command of English to implement them— lexical items, syntactic structures and compositional patterns. First we discuss the students' ability to follow the canonical compositional patterns for literary essays of introduction —argumentation— conclusion (McCleary 1985), to pursue one claim throughout the essay, and to avoid digressions.

The first section, the introduction, describes the issues to be discussed, and sets down the author's evaluative position towards it (Hood 2004). The introduction should include a short summary of relevant facts about the plot or topic and a thesis statement in which the author's view is openly stated. The paragraph below includes an introduction to the text under discussion and provides some useful background knowledge about the genre the story belongs to. However, it does not state what the aim of the essay is:

"Cathedral (1983) is a short story written by Raymond Carver (1938-1988) being an example of the literature called "dirty fiction" characterised by the nonrealistic and innovative elements."

Similarly, in the next introduction, we find no reference to the contents of the essay itself. It is more problematic in terms of structure than the previous one because it includes some argumentation (italics) and does not state what the point of the essay is:

"When Simon climbs the mountain and realizes that the Beast the twins had seen was in fact a parachutist, he descends in the dark to make the others notice about it, *because they were all scared and having a tribal behaviour because of their abstract fears. I say these fears are abstract because actually they have not seen it clearly, and the great majority of the group has not even sighted it.* Once Simon has met the others, they surround him and attack the poor boy."

In the next example, on the other hand, we find a good example of a genre-suitable introduction that includes a thesis statement (italics) about the essay:

"In this story, the contrast between characters is one of the tools that Raymond Carver uses in order to transmit the main message of his narration. The author uses one only narrator who explains and develops all the story from an internal point of view, many times using the first person narrator and, in some cases, through a third person narrator (specially for building the descriptions) and with free direct speech (when the characters talk between them)."

The writer of this essay has stated the focus of the analysis right in the beginning of the essay (italics) and has then complemented it with some technical vocabulary to qualify this statement

(semantic concepts are in bold). Moreover, the register used is very formal and articulate; there are no personal traces left. Similarly, another student used the same structure of statement + rephrasing in order to convey the main thesis of the essay (italics):

"This extract reproduces a <u>conversation</u> between Simon and the pig's head. What we can extract from it is the inner purpose of the author by resorting to this image, which is no less than suggesting the symbols of God and Evil. In other words, these two figures reflect the essence of life on the island, as its nature is constituted by the side of good ones' and by the bad ones'. So Simon **could** also be introduced to this **sort of** dismembered society, as he **would** occupy the privileged place on the top of good ones' group."

Content-wise, this introduction is more sophisticated and thorough than the previous one, making riskier inferences —he/she uses modality (bold) to tone down his/her assertiveness. However, there is hardly any technical vocabulary— he/she chooses "conversation" (underlined) rather than the more literary "dialogue".

Let us look at the opening paragraph of another essay, very close to the academic model, to see how modality and metalanguage contribute to the building of the introduction and the thesis.

"Lord of the Flies <u>deals</u> with a wild society without a rational law, THAT IS, the sort of social organization THAT doesn't have any hierarchy legitimated by a relation of powers divided into institutions AND controlled by a constitution. ALTHOUGH the weak symbol of democracy, the shell, the savage behaviour of the characters —especially after Simon's death— is caused by the suppression of social order, induced by Jack's vindication of an anarchist way of life. *Golding's book questions the principles depicted by Rousseau and the encyclopaedists in all their studies about humans' way of acting, AND <u>shows</u> THAT **we need** a democratic government THAT regulates all the social organism through the laws, WHOSE violation entails punishment.* **We find** an evidence of this affirmation in the reaction of all the characters after killing Simon."

This paragraph is successful as an introduction because it presents readers with a general overview of the essay contents (italics) and then narrows it down to how this applies to the text under discussion. This student used metatextual verbs (Teberosky, 2007) such as "deals" to mark his/her reference to the general topic, and "questions" and "shows" to mark the more specific ideas (underlined). Moreover, he/she used interpersonal elements such as "we need" and "we find" (bold) to guide the reader. Discourse markers (in uppercase) show competent reference management, leading to a cohesive text —see the use of "that", "that is", "whose".

In the second section, argumentation, students are expected to provide reasons and evidence to support the views they expressed in the introduction, and to maintain the focus of the essay. The idea behind essay argumentation is that the readers and the writer share some common knowledge about the topic, concepts and issues under discussion, so essays move from common ground (introduction) to new information (argumentation). Students use existing knowledge and re-elaborate it into new knowledge, which is then offered to the community for criticism.

Each argument should be assigned to one paragraph, which should only contain one argument. To illustrate the focus issue, we provide some examples, in which each different type signals a different point in students' argumentation:

"The narrator motivation is jealousy and uncertainty and **he doesn't want to enchanter the unknown and he has no respect or openness regarding "the other"**. We can see that the narrator is jealous of the connection between his wife and the blind man, especially because he really doesn't understand it, but is compelled by his wife's emotional blackmail to be more

accommodating to the blind man. He is also contemptuous (when the blind man wants to pray). HE STUDIES AND OBSERVES THE BLIND MAN."

The previous extract is problematic in terms of argumentation because it touches too many points and does not provide enough evidence or reasoning for any. Even when it includes a quotation to justify a point, it fails to discuss it and make it useful for the argument. The other three statements are simply not justified or discussed in any way, and the connection between them is left for the reader to guess. In order to reinforce these points, the student used unmodalised expressions such as "really" and "his wife's emotional blackmail". We may think some of the problems are due to a lack of competence in L2. Some expressions such as "enchanter the unknown" are incomprehensible, and we find structures directly transferred from L1.

"The husband is not sensitive: 'Robert was left with a small insurance policy and half of a twenty peso Mexican coin. The other half of the coin went into the bod with her. Pathetic.' **He is gelous, and he feels himself attacked by his incapacity to control everything, he is conscient about his limitations and that scary him.** In his limitations we can find the intolerance, which he shows with the idea of having a blind man in his own house (...)."

In this essay, contrarily, we find that the writer has been more successful even though we find evidences of trouble writing in L2. Expressions such as "he feels himself attacked" show L1 transfers. The difference lies in the fact that the author of the second example works on three ideas: the husband's lack of sensitivity, and its causes and effects. There is an easy-to-interpret direction in the argumentation, statements are justified either with direct quotations (in italics) or with references to the text ("which he shows with the idea of having a blind man in his own house").

The previous example, on the contrary, makes four or five statements. The sentence "He studies and observes the blind man", for instance, does not seem to be in connection to the other statements of this piece of argumentation, thus breaching the rule of continuity: a problem caused by not editing irrelevant information nor avoiding digressions. Their different use of modality shows their understanding of the mechanics of argumentation. The author of the first example does not use any hedges to tone down the inference that "the narrator motivation is jealousy and uncertainty", but softens with "we can see" the supporting argument. The author of the second one, on the other hand, does not misplace hedges, and uses them to accompany inferences based on textual evidence: "In his limitations [*discussed in the first part of the paragraph*] we can find the intolerance..."

Successful literary argumentation also needs quotations and reasoning to build its points consistently. A problem we encountered was that students hardly ever discussed quotations, but simply inserted them in the paragraphs without further explanation:

"(...) the reader understands that the blind man needs a woman who reads to him, a woman who takes care of him**.** 'I remembered having read somewhere that the blind didn't smoke because, as speculation has it, they couldn't see the smoke they exhaled. But this blind man smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin and then lit another one.'".

The lack of connection between the student's argument and the quotation is reflected in the use of a full stop to separate one from the other; there is no transition between them, and no guidance to understand the relevance of this quote. In the essay below, on the contrary, we find a colon between the argument and the quote, with some further explanation right after it, even though the relevance of this quote was more obvious than in the previous example.

"(...) he mentions he is annoyed because in one of the tapes his wife receives from the blind man, this man talks about him: 'I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn't even know!' *He is angry because Robert talks about him without actually knowing him* (...)".

In the conclusion, the writer rephrases the thesis by summarising the main points of the argumentation, and makes some assumptions for the argument to proceed. The two most important requirements for a conclusion are that it remains coherent to the ideas stated in the opening of the essay, and that it provides a wrap-up to the discussion without adding any new information.

"*With all this*, the beast becomes in something that does not scare so like the boys, *and also*, if they hear Simon before his murder, the boys have been able to discover that the beast doesn't exist. *With this*, they *also* had discovered that a possible rescue was not so far".

This conclusion violates both conditions. Firstly, because all the information contained here is new. The words in italics must necessarily introduce inferences ("with this") and new ideas ("and also"). Moreover, the central idea in the conclusion does not belong in the topic of the essay. We can infer that the writer's representation of the conclusion's function is not clear, for even though this was a good plot summary, it does not answer the issues addressed by the task prompt.

"Then we can conclude that Ralph is the only one who understand what the Beast is, first of all because he is the only who wants to accept the things like they are. Simon was on the verge of killing the Beast discovering it in front of every component of the group of boys, but as the Lord of the Flies warned him, he was the one killed in order the Beast to stay alive. Maybe at this part of the novel, with all this corruption and savagery living inside the boys, maybe this Beast needs of them just as them need of it, and the fear founded by Jack and the guilty felt by Ralph were now necessary **to put everyone in their place of the cosmos, maintaining the harmony from the constant battle between good and evil**."

This second example, although still breaching the first requirement, is better constructed. In the first sentences, it summarizes the new knowledge pushed throughout the essay (italics), and builds on it at a more intellectual level contributing to a general and more abstract interpretation of the novel, which he/she describes in the second part of the conclusion (bold). This expansion of the level of interpretation is identified by the dubitative use of "maybe" and by abstract concepts such as "good and evil" or "cosmos".

The conclusion below fulfills both criteria. The opening sentences wrap up previously discussed argumentation in a short summary (italics) that includes counter-arguments and relevant references to the text. The last sentence rephrases the main issue in a catchy interpretation of the message, transferring the moral from concrete names to abstract qualities.

"So at the end, despite their world of differences, both men are able to see each other's point of view. Robert is able to feel what a cathedral is like in the eyes of the writer, and the narrator feels the great effort of understanding what other people can see. The blindness that separates them at the beginning joins them at the end."

From a formal point of view, by merely looking at the textual metadiscourse opening each paragraph ("with all this", "Then we can conclude" and "So at the end") we can safely guess at the function each writer assigns to this section of their writing. Whereas the last two clearly and un-

ambiguously put an end to the discussion, the first expression is more open both in terms of structural function and reference reach.

In order to maintain textual cohesion, academic writers also use linking expressions that guide the reader and contribute to better organize their arguments. These expressions are known as discourse markers (Teberosky 2007; Montolío 2000). They can be primarily classified into parenthetical connectors, which link paragraphs, and inter-sentential connectors (Siepmann 2005). The paragraph below illustrates students' use of textual markers —it contains only three sentences, but each sentence contains three co-ordinate or subordinate sentences, linked by markers (italics), and some of these sentences contain subordinate clauses introduced by a relative pronoun (bold). As a result, meaning is delayed, so that the reader needs to finish the whole paragraph to grasp the total concept.

"The reader supposes **that** with the storm dimming the scenery *and* blocking the light of the stars, everything would have been full of darkness (in a real aspect, *but* of course, *also* in a figurative one) *and* this caused **that** many boys could not be able to distinguish Simon from the Beast. *But* the reality is **that** they could see **who** he was, *because* Jack see on him the aspect of Simon *and* probably many of the others ("In the silence that followed each savage flinched away from his individual memory". This sentence on page 198 shows **how** they all feel guilty *and* need of an explanation **that** moves further away the responsibility of their act, *so* they could feel better), *and* Ralph even listen his words before to die (...)."

Even though parenthetical connectors are used more sparsely than intersentential ones, probably because they are more linguistically demanding, we cannot infer that students have not planned their arguments ahead or that they have not assigned each paragraph a function in advance. Some have organized their paragraphs using topicalized expressions to locate them within the discussion: "The love", "the protagonist", "the death of this woman" state the focus of the paragraph from the beginning and guide the reader throughout the discussion. Others have replaced markers with paraphrasing expressions of textual metadiscourse such as "Another factor", with the same meaning as "moreover".

2.3. The Ideational Component

This component refers to the text's epistemological functions, how it contributes to consolidating field knowledge by mirroring the community's background knowledge. Technical terms are an essential part of academic discourse development (Teberosky 2007) since they contribute "to activate rich schemas of knowledge they have acquired from reading and writing the discourse of their specialities" (Peck 1990).

In their essays, students are expected to consistently use standardized terms. McCleary (1985) describes semantic concepts as the set of terminology students of different specialities need to become familiar with. Semantic concepts comprehend the definition of the concept itself, some examples that illustrate it, and the skills to be able to use it or identify its usage. The term "characterization" is one of the concepts used in the essays. Students are expected to know this term, its derivates ("to characterize", for example), its definition, and to find examples of different types of characterizations and be able to discuss them.

Below, we find the term "minimalist fiction" used successfully, since it provides an easy-to-grasp definition, and it is exemplified by the thesis of the essay itself ("he wants to transmit the meaning that is hidden behind the actions of his characters"). On the other contrary, the follow-

ing essay shows confusion between the terms "writer" and "narrator" in a short story that uses a first-person narrator:

> "At the beginning of the story the **writer** and his wife are waiting for Robert's arrival, a blind man who is a friend of the **narrator's** wife. For that motive, the **writer** explains to the reader the origins of each one of the characters and the bases of their relationships. With it, the reader discovers what is hinted under each character and that the authentically "blind man" is the **writer**."

The first "writer" refers to the narrator of the story — we know it because the narrator does not work as a writer. The second "writer" is more ambiguous. It could be referred to the author or to the narrator of the story, depending on whose intention it is to talk about the characters' origins, or on whether or not we group the narrator and the rest of characters together. The use of "writer" in the last sentence is unintentionally humorous, because it suggests that Carver criticized his own blindness through the story.

Concerning the use of non-standardized expressions, we found that students used a variety of resources to overcome their trouble with terminology. Some avoided it: "the most important characters" replaces for example the more specific term "heroes", maybe due to a confusion between the meaning of this word in English and the meaning of "heroi" in Catalan. When they failed to remember the exact phrasing, others translated the words directly from their L1: "principal characters". There are few examples of students misplacing or inventing terminology, as in "a second person narrator".

3. Conclusions

In the process of acquiring academic genres, first-year students experience the need to consider and articulate dense content questions while still trying to master the methods of their field and construct themselves as authorities of something they do not know much of (Sommer & Saltz 2004). Understanding genres as makers of meaning, generic patterns scaffold students' joining of the academic community by binding together formal and content-related problems, focusing on the product of their writing in relation to the other elements of communication and the functions that interconnect them. The genre of literary essays is then defined by the interaction of the ideational, the textual and the interpersonal components, by the way they co-operate in building the message. By tracing these relationships in the students' written products, instructors can deal with their problems from a semiotic rather than a merely formal perspective.

To perceive students' problems writing in academic contexts as language competence problems just because they write in L2 can only restrict our conception of academic genres to purely linguistic issues. Students' success at academic writing can certainly be hindered by linguistic proficiency, but we should be aware of the other obstacles on the way. There are culturally-coined differences derived from different academic and cultural traditions, and individual genres rely on domain-specific field and procedural knowledge that first-year students lack. The three-fold model applies a functional view on academic genres that incorporates the ideas of key authors such as Bakhtin and Halliday. Having taken into consideration the needs and requirements of a specific discursive community, the model presents genres as units of thematic content, style and compositional structures which are specific to the interpretive communities that use and develop them. It presents a view on genres as variable and unique recurrent patterns in their applica-

tion, determined and determining the context of their use. It can focus the participants' attention on what aspects of the product need to be worked on to fulfill the community's generic expectations, and use writing to reinforce field knowledge of contents and procedures.

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