Genre-based approach to teaching transferable critical reading skills

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Abstract

The advent of integrated language and content approaches has offered a theoretical grounding for developing skills that used to be taught in isolation in traditional language classrooms. This paper will describe an integrated methodology that combines critical reading activities with writing tasks, thus providing guided gradual instruction in both marketing/management concepts and academic writing. The methodology helps in creating a learner-responsible learning/teaching classroom environment. The author will provide evidence sustaining the idea that the integrated approach can be successfully implemented to develop transferable skills for both language and content learning.

Key words: Genre-based approach, transferable reading skills, integrated approach, content learning, learner-responsible learning

Résumé

L'issu de l'approche basée sur la langue et le contenu a offert un support théorique pour développper des compétences formées en isolation dans les heures de langues traditionnelles. Cette étude présente une méthodologie intégrée qui combine les activités de lecture critique aux tâches écrites, en offrant ainsi une instruction graduelle des concepts de marketing/management et de l'écriture académique. La méthodologie aide à créer un milieu d'apprentissage/enseignement responsable pour étudier. L'auteur offrira des preuves sur l'idée que l'approche intégrée peut être implémentée avec succès pour développer, à la fois, des compétences de transfert pour l'apprentissage de la langue et du contenu.

Mots-clés: Approche basée sur le genre, compétences de lecture transférables, approche intégrée, apprentissage du contenu, apprentissage responsable pour étudier

1. Introduction

Recent development and internationalisation of higher education have generated a repositioning of programmes and the way these are being delivered. A knowledge-based society produced a new generation of learners, who have developed inter- and multi- disciplinary skills and competencies. The learners of the new generation have been exposed to professional use of technology for learning purposes and to practical use of intercultural awareness in immersed or semi-immersed educational settings. Moreover, they now have the ability to navigate in a 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991). Furthermore, new terms have been coined to better describe learning needs in the new educational context: *academic literacy, competence, skills and abilities*. Over the years, *traditional literacy* has been defined as an essential or key knowledge or skill; for instance, an ability to read or write. More recently, the concept of *literacy* has gained a new meaning, being referred to as integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking (Baynham 1995) or, according to Bhatia (2004), not only a combination of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and problem-solving skills, but also an ability to use the new media in order to communicate appropriately in modern society. Thus, it becomes clear that new *skills* reflecting the nature of academic learning are integrated with *traditional skills* associated with basic academic literacy: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Furthermore, we can say that the ability to critique and develop a personal voice becomes of central importance; learners are being engaged in both learning and producing complex knowledge.

The concept of critical learning or 'learning to critique' (Young 1998) is currently used to emphasize the critical dimension of higher education, where learners acquire knowledge and skills in order to develop their own filtered version of knowledge. The critical dimension of higher education is rooted, on the one hand, in the complexity of approaches and issues addressed, and, on the other hand, in the applied nature of disciplines and research. Moreover, critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis sustain that understanding texts requires an understanding of the networks of social factors and interests which produce them (Benesch 2001). The socio-critical ability of the learners is, thus, both an aim and a skill put into practice in higher education. In a traditional learning setting, the social function of academic literacy was assumed. Learners were expected to acquire the rules and practices without being exposed to explicit activities built around academic texts. In a more explicit, integrated approach, academic skills are addressed both in terms of language competence and socio-critical ability.

The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach described in this paper deals with content and language simultaneously and is viewed as a learning tool that triggers learners' autonomy and creates a learner-responsible learning environment. CLIL tasks are used to develop academic literacies that carry out a set of functions: cognitive, communicative, social, critical, etc. As traditional approaches have not been successful in developing the integrated skills of new learners studying in inter- and multi- disciplinary tertiary education programmes, CLIL has been employed owing to its interdisciplinary nature. Moreover, the complex nature of academic literacy calls for an approach that integrates language, content, discourse, critique and cultural and disciplinary awareness.

Today, scholars (e.g. Bhatia 2004; Miller 1984; Swales 1990) agree that genre-based literacies appeared in response to the new interdisciplinary nature of higher education. Programs taught entirely in English in non-English L1 countries —which are becoming increasingly popular across Europe— or in mother tongue and English present challenges, such as immersion into a new language of instruction, the acquisition of academic content, etc. Thus, learners deal not

only with the complexity of another foreign language, but also with a set of unknown academic tasks and roles: academic socializing, in-class interaction, presenting academic content, engaging in complex academic tasks with a new register, etc. The complexity of these tasks and roles in higher education is supported by Bhatia (2004: 58), who believes that a "genre-based view of literacy that integrates content and language in multilingual, multicultural and perhaps most importantly multi- and interdisciplinary contexts, seems to be the greatest challenge for the teaching and learning of language in higher education". Consequently, genre-based programs built in the past twenty years address the complexity of the current academic learning environment.

2. A genre-based approach and critical reading skills

There is a general consensus among researchers that the term *genre* is used in educational literature to refer to a 'sociolinguistic activity' (Miller 1984). The sociolinguistic activity is used by learners to achieve various communicative purposes in a professional setting. Consequently, genre-based literacy is the ability to identify, construct, interpret and successfully exploit a specific repertoire of professional, disciplinary or workplace genres to participate in the activities of a specific disciplinary culture (Bhatia 1999). The aim of the approach is to develop learners' genre-related skills so as to enable them to relate features of genre to their appropriate functions. These skills construct a disciplinary literacy described as the ability of users to recognize, construct, interpret and use appropriate genres targeted at a specific *community of practice*.

A genre-based approach incorporates skills that trigger the development of high-level academic skills required for both theoretical and practical learning. According to Bhatia (1999), language-based literacy incorporates: *social competence* (capacity to use language socio-culturally), *professional competence* (capacity to be a competent member of professional culture), *generic culture* (ability to exploit language use appropriately to suit situated contexts) and textual competence (knowledge of language system). These competencies are frequently incorporated in disciplinary curriculum in a discrete, non-invasive manner. Explicit genre-based approaches aim at helping learners transfer —besides language and discourse— content knowledge from a passive repertoire into an active ability. Learners develop learning tools for accessing content through appropriate language.

The genre-based language approach proved to be highly efficient in programmes developing both academic content knowledge and language competence of learners. As academic content is delivered by means of texts, discourse and genre analysis provide textual patterns leading to text types with the emphasis on rhetorical patterns. Learners can develop abilities in recognizing and producing predictive rhetorical and grammatical structures as well as using appropriate register. Although genre analysis could be interpreted quite differently by different scholars —on the one hand, American scholars look more into social processes, and, on the other, Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990) are more interested in the communicative purpose of each genre - it is generally agreed that discourse variations are the core elements of a genre-based approach to integrating language and content.

Genre-based research has provided insight into the way discourse communities construct and communicate meaning, though unable to translate it into effective in-class activities in a non-native context. Multilingual teaching contexts add additional pressure in terms of genre handling. The first encounter of students taking courses in English with content is that of reading assignments. Instructors evaluate learners' reading skills using generic criteria not taking into account

specific skills and sub-skills required in an academic context. Therefore, reading skills are frequently assumed by content teachers and not taught explicitly. The genre-based approach activities for developing reading skills were considered to be effective in dealing with complex academic texts.

Reading skills have always been the core academic competence included in any disciplinary learning. The reflective or critical nature of purposeful reading has been underlined in recent definitions of reading: "reading is the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print" (Urquhart & Weir 1988: 22) and "comprehension occurs when the reader extracts and integrates various information from the text and combines it with what is already known" (Koda 2005: 4).

What type of reading are our learners exposed to in higher education? Learners in higher education read a wide range of discipline-specific texts simultaneously. The ability to read texts in order to develop a critical stance requires a set of strategies. According to William Grabe "reading in an academic contexts means an ability to synthesize, interpret, evaluate, and selectively use information from texts" (Grabe 2009:5).

This leads us to the idea that learners need reading for different purposes, especially in academic settings. Reading for academic purposes could be divided into six categories (cf. Grabe 2009): *reading to search for information* (scanning and skimming), *reading for quick understanding* (skimming), *reading to learn, reading to interpret information, reading to evaluate, critique, and use information and reading for general comprehension* (reading to entertain). Our learners need different levels of reading for different text types. As Linderholm & van den Broek (2002: 778) observe, "successful reading includes the ability to adjust processing in such a way that learning goals, as a function of reading purpose, are met".

Out of six types of reading mentioned above, *reading to evaluate, critique and use information* is of an utmost importance in academic learning. Learners are required to read complex academic texts or even make a selection of texts in various content areas. This type of reading involves building learners' background information before engaging them in text-related tasks. Readers do not only read the text for developing a personal, critical understanding, but are many times required to use it in further activities. Reading for academic purposes is a skill that, once acquired, can be used in different subject-areas. Academic texts have similar elements that reflect the pattern of academic critical enquiry. Readers of academic texts are able to transfer the acquired skill to different academic contexts providing that the complexity of inquiry matches the readers' level of understanding. Thus, the term *transferable skill* refers to the ability of learners to transfer the ability to read critically academic texts in order to develop their personal opinion in their further use of those texts.

3. In-class methodology

A methodology aimed at developing the critical reading skills of graduate students was designed within a reading intensive course —*Business English for Academic Purposes*— at the Al. I. Cuza University in Romania. The course was developed in close collaboration with the subject-matter teachers of Marketing. The instructor integrated reading activities into a set of academic tasks: understanding the communicative purpose, structure and language of a research article from an academic journal. The research article genre was chosen in order to help students understand the academic genre discussed in class by the content teacher.

The methodology was built around three main stages: *pre-reading, reading* and *post-reading* activities. In the pre-reading stage, the whole group of students was given a lecture on academic register and genre. The aim of the lecture was to develop initial background knowledge of the *research article* genre. For many students, it was the first time that academic genre was explicitly described and then exemplified using a research article. The instruction was enriched by the use of online journals in interactive labs which contributed to setting a learning context based on the in-class use of ICT; thus bringing research resources closer to learners.

The pre-reading stage also included a discussion on different types of journals that publish research articles. Journals from two different subject areas were presented contrastively: *Journal of International Marketing* and *Review of Business Communication*. In the second part of this pre-reading stage, the instructor organised a hands-on workshop in which students overviewed publication guidelines and instructions for authors. Students were asked to discuss publication criteria in their groups and then report their findings back to class. This activity contributed to learners' better understanding of external editorial requirements and strategies used by authors to comply with them.

In the second stage, guided reading activities were developed by the instructor, focussing on content and language. For this purpose, students answered a set of questions that helped them identify the main parts of the article and notice formulaic or repetitive language. They answered questions, such as: *Who is the author of the article and what are his credentials? What is the purpose of the article? Does the article contain a heading and sub-headings?* Questions were also formulated covering features of academic discourse. Students worked individually and delivered their feedback through a Power Point presentation, which contained comments on the title, research question, aim, structure, main ideas or study, conclusions and references used. This activity showed that students were motivated by the fact that they could choose the articles and deal with texts of high academic complexity.

As a post-reading assignment, the instructor used a more reflective tool —a personal critique of the article. As a follow-up to this critique, students read another article from a different subject-area and tested their ability to read an academic text and critique it without any assistance. It also provided a learning context for the transfer of critical reading skills. Students have reported that the acquired reading skills proved to be very useful for the study of other disciplines.

4. Conclusion

Anderson (2000) stressed the importance of generating automatic learning behaviour stating that "[o]ne dimension of learning is the conversion of the deliberate into the automatic. The process of acquiring fluency in the use of knowledge is called skill acquisition" (Anderson 2000: 305). Reading skills are essential in developing academic critical literacy. An integrated set of reading intensive activities combined with genre-awareness strategies have been successfully implemented in an in-class teaching scenario. The outcomes of the genre-based teaching approach have been seen in the improved ability of students to access learning strategies for understanding complex academic texts in different subject-areas. The methodology creates a learner-responsible educational environment where all elements of both learning and teaching are first scaffolded and then used in a coherent strategy built around reading comprehension.

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