

## Introduction

The last two decades have seen the development of approaches to the teaching of L2 writing. The traditional product-oriented approach that emphasized linguistic and rhetorical form has shifted to focus on the writer and the cognitive processes used in the act of writing. These two approaches have dominated much of the teaching of writing in the EFL classroom.

A typical product approach involves the students familiarizing themselves with sets of fixed patterns, analyzing and imitating rhetorical models provided either by the teacher or the textbook. Writing teachers attach paramount importance to grammar and correctness and focus mainly on accuracy and forms. Brown (1994) argues that a good deal of emphasis was placed on “how well a student’s final product measured up against a list of criteria that included content, organization, vocabulary use, grammatical use, and mechanical considerations such as spelling and punctuation” (p. 320). In short, the product-oriented approach involves the analysis of sample readings and writing development as mainly the result of the imitation of input, in the form of texts provided by the teacher.

Zamel (1987) found out that a number of studies done to compare the effectiveness of different approaches to the teaching of writing provide few significant findings and are often contradictory. Nevertheless, since the early 1980s, the paradigm shift (Hairston, 1982)—from finished product to process—in writing theory and instruction has given us insight into the behaviors, strategies, and difficulties of writers and has made the writing-as-a-process studies become the central focus in both L1 and L2 writing (Cumming, 1998; Flower, 1985; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Raimes, 1987; Silva, 1993; Zamel, 1982, 1983, 1987). These studies discovered a number of common characteristics among L1/L2 “skilled” and “unskilled” writers. For example, Emig (1971) reports that during writing, students seemed to perform a variety of behaviors, and all indicated the nonlinear nature of writing. Flower and Hayes (1981) also state that although there is a hierarchical ordering of the processes involved in writing, it should not be considered a sequence of stages activated in a linear fashion.

Despite its popularity, process writing has its drawbacks. Applebee (1986),

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1985), and Silva (1990) have indicated the oversimple application of a process approach. They argue that process writing downplays the academic discourse genres which are important for learners to successfully deal with the writing tasks in school. A genre-based approach to writing instruction aims to make students aware of the structure and purpose of the texts of different genres—the significant features—and to empower students with the strategies necessary to replicate these features in their own production. Because process writing has little to say about the ways meanings are socially constructed, it fails to consider the forces outside the individual which help guide purposes, establish relationships, and ultimately shape writing. To address this deficit, genre pedagogies offer students a principled way to identify and focus upon different types of English texts, providing a framework in which to learn features of grammar and discourse. More important, genre pedagogies offer the capacity for initiating students into ways of making meaning that are valued in English-speaking communities.

The present study does not delve into the issue of the effects of genre pedagogies on students' writing skills. An experiment to determine the effectiveness of an innovative teaching method can last for a few hours or for days, weeks, months, or years. It may not be reasonable to expect that students' writing abilities can be affected by an experiment of short duration. Instead, this study investigates the problems Taiwanese university students have when they deal with a range of non-fiction genres in a process-genre integrated EFL writing classroom.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to report on the introduction of a genre-based approach into writing instruction and look at the problems Taiwanese university students encounter when they work on a range of non-fiction genres in a process-genre integrated EFL writing classroom. Specifically, the present study is designed to answer the following questions.

- (1) In terms of the degrees of difficulty, how do Taiwanese EFL students assess the different genres they are writing on?

- (2) What are the factors that make a genre easy or difficult for Taiwanese EFL students?
- (3) What do the Taiwanese EFL students think about the introduction of genres into their learning to write in English?

## **Method**

This research is mainly qualitative in nature as the researcher combined genre and process approaches to the teaching of writing in the EFL classroom and elicited the opinions of the students about their problems with a range of non-fiction genres.

### **Setting and Participants**

The participants in this study were 22 juniors majoring in English at a technological university in Taiwan. They were required to enroll in an English writing course at a junior composition level. This course was conducted 3 hours a week for 2 semesters, and the students would have 2 credits for each semester after they had met all the requirements of the course. These students were placed into the same writing class after they had taken the placement test—Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency—at the beginning of the first semester and before the study took place. Based on their scores on the test, which was a mean of 73, they were classified as intermediate to upper intermediate EFL learners and accordingly considered as a homogeneous group of students.

After the researcher informed the students of the present study and obtained their permission, a survey was distributed to the students for their demographic data prior to the formal study. The survey contained 12 questions concerning name, gender, age, native language(s), hometown, education background, years of studying English, time spent on the four language skills, experience in taking any language proficiency test, purposes of learning to write in English, and future career goal(s).

According to the survey, all of the participants were female except four being

male. Of the 22 participants with Mandarin Chinese as their first language, 11 students spoke Taiwanese as well. The ages of the students ranged from 20 to 26, with a mean of 21.5. All the participants were born and raised in Taiwan. Their average years of having received formal instruction in English were 8 with a range of 6 to 11 years at the time the study began. No proficiency tests were administered, but 13 participants who reported having taken one of the following English proficiency examinations: GEPT (General English Proficiency Test), IELTS, TOEFL, or TOEIC.

### **Data Collection**

The present study was conducted over an 8-month period of time; data collection was done from the fall semester of 2002 to the spring semester of 2003. For this study, the instruments used were the 22 students' 10 essays of 10 different topics that belonged to 5 genre types and a semi-structured interview with the students.

### **Writing Task**

The objectives of the writing class were for the students to increase their fluency in English writing, to build their confidence in composing various types of academic essays, and to develop into independent writers by doing peer-review and self-correction. Therefore, as the first semester began, the students were provided with plenty of opportunities to write and revise various types of English essays, including descriptive, process, narrative, critical, and argumentative writings, as well as engage in such activities as choosing and focusing a topic, generating ideas through prewriting, and organizing information into appropriate formats for academic writing.

Standards for a good essay would vary with different genres. In order to help familiarize the students with the convention of various writing genres and to build their confidence in dealing with different writing discourses, there were five types of essays in total for them to practice in two consecutive semesters. The five types were: descriptive (D), process (P), narrative (N), critical (C), and argumentative (A)

essays. The first three types were taught to and practiced by the students in the first semester and the other two in the second semester. For each genre, two topics were assigned for the students to write about. All the writing topics are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Genres and Writing Topics.

Time	Genre	Topic
1 <sup>st</sup> semester (Fall, 2002)	D	(I) A Foreign Country I like to Visit Most (II) A Happy Life
	P	(III) How to Cook – (IV) Coping with Nervousness
	N	(V) A Special Day (VI) A Childhood Dream
2 <sup>nd</sup> semester (Spring, 2003)	C	(VII) Article Review (VIII) Restaurant Review
	A	(IX) Leisure Activity (X) The Internet
Total	5	10

The instructor helped the students to distinguish between different genres and to write them more effectively by a careful study of their structures. At the beginning stage of familiarizing the students with a genre, the instructor adopted a highly interventionist role, ensuring that the students were able to understand and reproduce the typical rhetorical patterns they needed to express their meanings. At later stages the students required more autonomy. The classroom was characterized by talk, by many kinds of writing, and by the development of a linguistic *metalanguage* by which the students felt confident to describe and control the structure and grammatical features of the texts they wrote. Grammar was presented as a way of giving the students the language they needed to construct central genres and to reflect on how language was used to accomplish this.

For each writing assignment, the instructor provided a writing prompt to have the students better understand their writing task. To provide the students with plenty of time to write, all writings were done both in and outside the class. The students had a whole weekend to generate ideas and draft an outline before they

came to the class for the first draft on Monday. The instructor would collect and comment on their first drafts before he asked the students to do peer-review the next class period. Prior to submitting their second drafts to the instructor, the students had two more days to revise their drafts. In other words, the students were required to write at least two drafts and to submit all with the last draft revised. By giving the students more time to plan and revise their essays, the instructor believed it would decrease the pressure the students felt and enable them to produce better writing.

### **Interview**

The interview was conducted right after the students had finished the 10<sup>th</sup> writing assignment. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Based on the five genre types, namely description, process, narrative, criticism, and argument they had practiced before, they responded to the ensuing questions from the researcher. (1) What types of genres have they learned before they came to study at the university? (2) What types of genres do they consider relatively more difficult to write about and why? (3) What types of genres do they consider relatively easier to write about and why? (4) What types of genres do they prefer to write about and why? (5) What types of genres do they prefer not to write about and why? (6) What types of genres do they frequently come across when reading Chinese texts? (7) What types of genres do they frequently come across when reading English texts? (8) What have they benefited from this writing class?

### **Procedure**

The participants were taking a required English writing course in the department of English. The course was two-semester long with 3 hours of instruction per week. These students who enrolled in this writing course were at the same English proficiency level according to their performance in a placement test.

The objectives of this course were to help students increase their fluency in English writing, build their confidence in composing various types of English

essays, and develop into independent writers. In order to achieve these goals, the instructor adopted a process approach to writing instruction. He taught students composing strategies for exploring, planning, drafting, and revising their essays. These stages are regarded the fundamental process good writers should go through during writing (Raimes, 1983). The textbook used in the course was “The Process of Paragraph Writing 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition” (Reid, 1994) and was also used in other writing classes in this department.

Apart from the instruction on writing strategies, other in-class activities the instructor incorporated included grammar lessons, sentence combining exercises, discussion of student’s writing samples, and peer-review. Prior to the peer-review activity, students were guided on how to effectively review and provide feedback on their partner’s essay. Face-to-face conference between teacher and student was also scheduled every two weeks. During the one-to-one conference, each student had ten to fifteen minutes to talk to the instructor over the problems they had encountered during their writing process. Students were then required to revise/rewrite their drafts based on the feedback from both the teacher and their peer. Students were evaluated by the content, organization, structure, wording and writing mechanics (such as punctuation) of their writing pieces. The instructor used portfolio and self-evaluation as part of the assessment tools. Note that in this study, the quality of the compositions was not an issue, so no assessment was made of relatively better and poorer texts.

## **Data Analysis and Results**

When asked about what were the genres they had learned to produce in English writing before they came to study at the university, the students indicated the top 3 genres they had been familiar with were the descriptive, the narrative, and the process. Few students had ever had experience in producing argumentative or critical essays. The students also reported that the descriptive and narrative essays were the two genres they had most frequently come across when reading English texts, followed, in descending order, by the argumentative, process, and critical essays. Table 2 shows how the students rank their responses to the 5 genres.

Table 2. Rankings for the 5 Genres.

Item	Genre	Description	Process	Narrative	Criticism	Argument
Degrees of familiarity (1 <sup>st</sup> = the most familiar, 5 <sup>th</sup> = the least familiar)		1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
Writing experience in English (1 <sup>st</sup> = the most experience, 5 <sup>th</sup> = the least experience)		1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
Reading experience in English (1 <sup>st</sup> = the most experience, 5 <sup>th</sup> = the least experience)		1 <sup>st</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Degrees of difficulty (1 <sup>st</sup> = the most difficult, 5 <sup>th</sup> = the least difficult)		5 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>

As shown in the rankings, the degree of difficulty of a genre the students reported is closely correlated with the factor as to whether the students had a prior familiarity with the genre in writing. The descriptive and narrative were the easiest genres for the Taiwanese EFL students to produce in writing simply because these two genres were most familiar to them. To be brief, the more familiar the genre is to the students, the less difficult it is for them.

Furthermore, it is clear that the students' previous writing experience is also as closely related to the degree of genre difficulty as their familiarity with the genre; that is to say, when the students have less experience in performing a writing task of a particular genre, they would consider the particular genre to be more difficult.

As discussed above, it is clear that both the familiarity and prior writing experience are two principal factors in the students' perception toward the genre. We went further to explore more factors in their rating of the degree of difficulty for each genre and we have come to three noteworthy points.

First of all, the time these student writers had to spend on their writing task seemed to affect their perception of the genre to a large extent. Many of the students commented that doing criticism or argumentation was difficult for them since the two genres were more time-consuming. In other words, if the writing task of a particular genre took them more time to complete, they would rate the genre as



more difficult. This can be demonstrated as one of the student writers reported, “I consider that critical and argumentative essays more difficult than the other three genres because either one of them takes me far more time to deal with.”

Next, it appears that the effort these students had to put into their writing tasks would also affect the ranking of the difficulty of each genre. A number of students, when asked why they found descriptive or narrative essays easy, stated that because they can simply write down what they think and feel. To give examples, there was a student remarked that when she engaged in writing both descriptive and narrative essays, she can write whatever she came up with in her mind. Moreover, one of the students reported, “I think that description and narration are easy because not only that I can proceed with my own thought and experience, but that I don’t need to spend time looking for extra information for my writing.” On the other hand, the reasons these participants rated the genres, particularly argumentation and criticism, to be more difficult were that they need to find more information and to come up with more specific reasons to support their writing. “I need to think deeply to be critical and sometimes it is painful to think of supporting ideas to make my writing look more convincing,” stated by one of the participants. Similarly, one student argued that she considered the two genres, i.e., criticism and argumentation, difficult simply because when doing the two genres, she often took great pains and sometimes she found herself a “wishy-washy” writer at the end. According to these students’ arguments, it can therefore be inferred that when a genre requires the students more efforts, it would be considered more difficult to deal with.

The structure or convention of each genre per se is another deciding factor in the students’ attitude toward the five genres. Some students pointed out that they could undertake the descriptive and narrative essays with ease due to the fact that there is no need to think about the structure. One student stated, “It is more flexible to engage in these kinds of writing, I can write anything I like or describe everything I want without worrying about its structure.” However, some students would take advantage of the structure or conventions of a genre. As one of the participants argued, “I personally find argumentative writing easier to do because I can simply follow its pattern/structure.” “Although process writing is quite boring owing to its structure, I think it is thus very easy to complete,” another student

remarked. Therefore, it is fair to say that the structure or convention of a genre has an effect on students' perception of the genre.

In order to answer the third research question, all of the participants were asked how they like the writing class. Most of the responses were relatively positive. A number of students pointed out that they have learned the structure and convention of each of the five genres and have learned how to approach writing tasks that belong to different genres. One of the students stated, "I am so glad that I have the chance and time to practice a variety of writing topics and genres." Correspondingly, a student replied that she seldom pays attention to genres before she enrolled in this class; however, she is convinced that she has become a better writer since now she has more hands-on experience in writing various genres and knows how to better organize her writing. Furthermore, despite the fact that they considered some genres more difficult or they disliked writing some genres, most students reported that they therefore could train their writing skills and thinking. As one participant reported, "I do think that writing argumentative and critical essays grueling; nevertheless, I like doing them because they are more challenging and I can make myself think more."

### **Conclusion and Implication**

Several findings can be concluded from the analysis and interpretation of the interview data discussed above. First of all, as shown in Table 2, the average degree of difficulty of the five genres arranged in descending order is as follows: criticism, argumentation, process, narrative and description. In other words, the participants in this study considered writing critical essays the most difficult whereas descriptive essays the least.

Second, we have found a number of factors that make a genre easy or difficult for these students. As can be seen in Table 2, there are significant correlations between both the familiarity and prior English writing experience and the degree of difficulty of the genre. To be precise, when students are more familiar with and have more experience in writing a genre, they would perceive the genre at hand less difficult to deal with. In addition to familiarity and writing experience, the

period of time the student writers had to spend on writing an essay, the effort they had to make in writing an essay, and the structure or convention itself are the other determining factors in these students' perception toward the difficulty of a genre.

As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, students often find the process of writing intellectually and physically demanding. We suggest that this needs to be brought to the forefront of teachers' minds as they work with their students. Their teaching should take into account the findings of empirical research that shed light on what is involved in the writing process; and also the extent to which students are stimulated, entranced, and motivated into making the effort to express themselves in written language.

Long before learning to write in English, EFL college students have some kind of awareness of literary forms. This awareness of purpose and form in writing originates mainly from the language they learn as a child. To enable students to become aware of what target discourses look like, the nature and emphases of genre-based teaching approaches needs to make students identify and focus upon different types of English texts, providing a framework in which to learn features of grammar and discourse. As Christie (1987, p. 30) has observed, "Learning the genres of one's culture is both part of entering into it with understanding, and part of developing the necessary ability to change it." If EFL students are to become competent readers and writers of both narrative and non-narrative genres, they must be able to discover information and reconstruct it for their own purposes, and, more important, they require a sense of the overall forms of these genres and of the language which is commonly used.

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