

## **Research Project Report**

This practitioner research project was carried out as part of the Research Development Fellowship programme (RDF) organised by Sunderland Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT), University of Sunderland, UK under the auspices of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), England, UK. The support received from the SUNCETT team and LSIS had been fundamental in completing this project; also, I am grateful to my employer (a community teaching organisation) for their support during the research process. To facilitate readers' understanding of the whole project this research report had been structured into the following sections –

- (i) Introduction
- (ii) Literature review
- (iii) Methodology
- (iv) Data Analysis and findings
- (v) Conclusion

### **Introduction**

As a teacher of adult ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) in a community learning setting, I had been influenced by Brookfield's (1990) assertion that '...Teaching is about making some kind of dent in the world so that the world is different ... you must continually ask yourself the most fundamental evaluative questions of all – What effect am I having on students and on their learning?...' (p16 - 19). One of the main aims of my teaching had been to try and equip my students to use learning in their day to day life, especially with their aims of seeking employment and/or maintaining their job(s). In my effort to teach these students, I wanted to identify ways in which my teaching could promote aspects of learning that they could use at workplace and in the society they live in.

Most of my students were voluntary learners and could choose either to take or not take an examination to attain a formal ESOL qualification. Thus I had the opportunity to plan a curriculum more on their needs related to work and life. Carnell and Lodge (2002) recommended formulating a curriculum based on the learners' '...context, experience and concerns ...' would possibly encourage them to '...engage in activities or solve problems that have meaning to them so that their learning is intrinsically significant...' (p16). Hence I was more inclined to investigate strategies that I could use in my teaching to ensure what my students learnt was helpful in the context of their work and life.

Reflecting on my teaching strategies was instrumental in discovering a possibility for using a teaching method within the curriculum of my course/s aligned with some of the needs for the use of English at workplace of my students. Consequently, I started to explore the scope of designing a particular strand of my teaching that could enhance the possibility of bringing learning closer to life. As I was involved in teaching writing therefore I wanted

to focus on exploring teaching method/s for teaching writing; I had an interest in the area of teaching writing using genre based approach (GBA).

This process of exploration though positioned within my realm of action as a teacher wasn't easy to undertake because my reflection created what Argyris and Schön (1974) would call '...the tacit knowing of a problem whose solution we do not have yet...' (1974 p36). Within the context of my teaching, the problem I had was that I wasn't convinced my learners were engaging well with the curriculum content of my writing sessions and whether such content was useful to them in dealing with the life needs they might have. Being a practitioner interested in supporting life-related learning it was important for me to define the 'problem' for research and detect an appropriate methodology. Consequently, the research question for this project was formulated in line with my interest: to what extent did the use of genre based approach to teaching writing improve (a group of) ESOL students' ability to write?

### **Literature review**

The purpose of this literature review was defined by my research objective, outlined in the previous section. Through this review I intended to generate a '...thorough understanding of...' (Ridley 2011 p17) the major influencing views in the field of GBA and learning theory/ies associated with it. As a researcher, through the literature review I was able to develop a '...picture ... of the state of knowledge and of major questions in the subject area...' (Bell 1999 p93).

The genre based approach (GBA) recommended teaching of English to speakers of other languages through use of texts and the conventions that each of such texts represented; in other words, teachers were advised to use types/forms of texts (e.g. recount, analysis, etc.) to teach their students elements of the language (English). The origin of the GBA could be traced back to the field of Systematic Functional Framework of Language (SFFL) (Halliday 1994) which advocated that language was a resource used to develop meaning within or related to a particular context. Moreover, the Framework proposed that two key elements in the development and use of language included – the structure of a text and its register (particular features of the language in a text and the way language could be used within a text). Both these elements had been explored in greater detail in the literature on GBA; within the SFFL model, users (and learners) of English language had to learn how to use language appropriately in light of producing a proper meaning and in the right context. Thus a text was considered as a part (or product) of language in a particular context (depending on its use and overall purpose). In the context of the use of GBA, it had been suggested that using genre-texts to teach students how to write could support their learning of the salient structural features of a particular genre and the linguistic features used in writing that genre-text. Paltridge (2002) and Hyland (2004) mentioned that using GBA allowed teachers and students to build a clear focus in their learning by revealing to students some of the concrete language points they needed to learn to be able to use language effectively.

Understanding how adult students learn within the context of GBA could be linked to Vygotsky's conception of a learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD); this Zone could be defined as the difference between what a learner could already do alone and what he or she could do with the aid from a more experienced individual or individuals (Carnell and Lodge 2002). The theoretical framework of the use of GBA in teaching writing underlined the value of 'scaffolding' in learning insofar that learners were supported through explanation from teacher/s, modelling or exemplification by teacher/s followed by joint practice of the task both by students working with other students and focused help from teacher/s culminating in independent work by students. Watkins et al (2002) identified the following stages in the learning process:

- learning by being told;
- learning by being shown;
- learning by constructing meaning;
- learning by joining a knowledge generating community.

To a considerable degree the above four stages could be equated with the GBA in teaching writing because learners experience a gradual process of developing their skills thorough a range of inputs from teachers and their peers. However, learners could be moving back and forth through each of these stages as they learn depending on their maturity as learners.

Cope and Kalantzis (1993) suggested that in using GBA to teach writing teachers would follow a triangular pathway of teaching with three main components – modelling of a text, joint construction of a text and independent construction of a text. From a pedagogical viewpoint, teaching through GBA could allow students to gain a clearer understanding of the genre-text by getting familiar with the functions of text, how the information within the text was organised and recognising the scheme of the language used in the text including grammatical elements. At later stages of their learning students could re-formulate their understanding of these features in accordance to their learning needs and the need for knowing or using a particular genre more over other genres. This feature of personalising of understanding of genre-texts by the learners could also be associated to Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning – wherein learners construct and reconstruct their learning according to the need of the application for such learning.

The literature was ripe with the indication that the GBA could be primarily linked to the tradition of communicative language teaching (Hyland 2004) where the emphasis within learning of a language was placed on the purpose, function and audience of (or for a genre-text); however, it could also be argued that in the use of the GBA in teaching writing there were some strategies of the traditional methodology of teaching English language implanted like teaching of grammar in a systematic way and providing a model text to decipher structural features. The pedagogical debate of teaching language as a 'process' as opposed to a 'product' had its impact on the use of the GBA. Hence the GBA pedagogy had never been given a status of its own though there had been a consensus on using a balanced mixture of teacher centered and learner centered teaching activities with the framework of GBA (Badger and White 2000).

## **Methodology**

In this section, I had explained my choice of methodology for this action based research project. According to Hussey and Hussey (1997) methodology could be defined as an ‘...overall approach to the research process, from the theoretical underpinning to the collection and analysis of the data...’ (p54); so, in this project the use of methodology started with my literature review to extend my understanding of the key concepts in this research. Other methodological aspects in the context of this research included my choice of the qualitative research paradigm, a case study approach and the methods for collecting data. In the next three sub-sections I would explain each of these three aspects in more detail.

### **Qualitative paradigm**

As this research was situated within my day to day practice of teaching, I felt it was important for me to consider this project as ‘open ended’ (Holliday 2005 p5) in the sense that it would either lead me to locate a/some productive outcome/s or raise more questions about my practice. Moreover, being a practitioner researcher (looking into my own practice), it was necessary for me to acknowledge that this study was an insider’s perspective towards an insider’s knowledge and understanding of a teaching phenomenon (Merriam 1998). Recognising these features in this study was in line with its ‘action based’ scope in terms of examining practice and reconfiguring it and perhaps following the same process again as part of my continual reflection as a teacher. Therefore I preferred the qualitative paradigm for my research as opposed to a quantitative framework.

The nature of this enquiry was quite personal and my role to a large extent was that of a participant alongside my research sample. Thus there was a naturalistic process of collecting data through my daily practice – the majority of the data was embedded in the qualitative scheme of words and feelings captured through marking a set of formative assessments, writing reflective notes and taking notes from an informal discussion. Merriam (1998) concurred with this element of qualitative research ‘...The researcher... is responsive to the context...’ (p7): therefore as a researcher my relationship with the research process and the research sample was personal and fully rooted in my practice. My relationship and connection to the research process were instrumental in conceding how I would be constructing knowledge both during the study and after, and more importantly the impact of that knowledge on my understanding of curriculum and pedagogical ‘re-versioning’ within my practice. I considered this ‘re-versioning’ as at least an attempt towards a change in my outlook to teaching (possibly a form of personal change in my teaching culture), hence choosing a qualitative model was in tangent with this objective.

This project was dominated by a constructionist slant because as a researcher my study would develop knowledge that was ‘...contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings...’ (Crotty 1998 p42). The value of such interaction was important in

the context of this study as they defined the course of my findings and helped to ascertain the effectiveness of this project to me as a practitioner. Another important factor in observing a qualitative framework for this project was that this project was an experiential learning process for me as a classroom practitioner (Kolb 1984); my experience was subjective and interpretive and had been influenced by the context of my work, my background as a human being and my beliefs about teaching and learning. In essence, I had reflected on a part of my 'concrete experience' with the intention to review my actions and re-formulate them to be used again. Though there was an objective to be achieved at the end of my study, however, the process of reflecting on practice would be on-going and I believed that the nature of this continuing reflection was qualitative as it would be a self-focused process.

### Case study approach

The project was focussed on the use of a teaching method with a cohort of students hence at a deeper level I was more interested '...in process rather than outcomes...' (Merriam 1998 p19). My practice could be considered as an individual case and so were my students who were beneficiaries of my teaching; this had been noted by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) in their recommendation that in case studies the researcher and participants jointly explore a process and the outcome(s) were valuable to both parties (p317). During the research process, my students and I had worked jointly in creating a shared 'value' that would support development of my teaching and its consequences both immediately and in future.

Arguably through this research into my practice, I investigated '... a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context...' (Yin 1994 p23), and this aspect of the project was closely attuned to the requirement of a case study approach. Furthermore, as the project was an inevitable part of my professional experience there was always an implicit interaction between me, my experience and my students' experience: therefore using a case study framework was helpful to understand these interactions in an in-depth way especially how they might influence my practice. As a practitioner and researcher, I was constantly undertaking reflection to sharpen my practice throughout the process of research – again, my reflection and its outcomes were more of a '...social action in its natural setting...' (Sarantakos 1998 p193); the interpretation of this reflection and its outcomes on my learners was a case in itself within the grand boundary of this project. Hence a case study approach was necessary to recognise the changes or ways of reconfiguring my action as a result of this research.

The case study approach had been criticised as a tool to generate '...equivocal evidence or personal views to influence the direction of the findings and the conclusions...' (Burns 2000, p.473). As my research was an investigation into my own practice with a sole aim to improve my teaching, I did not feel that this criticism of case study had much relevance in the context of my research. It was obvious that my research was a personal event and thus it would extend my personal understanding of an element of effective

teaching. In addition, many critics viewed case study approach as a ‘... narrow focus on a few units ...limiting...the representativeness...’ (Isaac and Michael 1995, p.52), thus questioning the overall validity of this method. Again, this criticism was not applicable to my project as I wasn’t intending to generalise my findings nor my aim was to develop a theory of teaching. The primary aim of my research was to enhance my teaching to support my learners’ learning so that they could use such learning beyond the classroom, thus I believed that the case study approach was appropriate for my project.

### Data collection

The data collection was done over one teaching term during which students were taught writing using the GBA. The sample for this project was a convenient sample (Denscombe 2006) of a group of 16 adult ESOL students studying in a community learning setting. Their indicative profile had been summarised below -

- (i) Age of students: 21 – 40 years; though sometimes there could be a wider range of students’ age
- (ii) Gender: female students; a couple of male students.
- (iii) Students studied different components of the UK Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (Entry 3)
- (iv) Students might have some experience of learning (English and other language/s, subjects – in their home country). This varied from student to student.

To address ethics within my research, I had been given permission from the employer to conduct this project during the initial stages of my application to LSIS. Moreover, I had maintained complete anonymity in terms of using the data and used it only for this project. Also, I had referred to the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association on their website for the conduct of educational research.

The tools for collecting data for this project were influenced by its nature i.e. an action based case study. As a researcher I wanted to have sources of data which were real to the setting (Denscombe 2006) in which my research was undertaken and manageable in terms of use and analysis. One of the obvious choices was to use ‘marking notes’ from formative assessments completed by the students; in the context of my research, the marking was done in light of an overall criterion e.g. the extent to which the work met requirements (form and language elements: spelling, punctuation and grammar) of the genre-text/s taught. After the marking was completed, I would make notes on the ‘areas of improvement’ for the students. An advantage of using this tool for collecting data was that it gave me a live picture of the outcome of my teaching method which in turn fed into my planning and teaching of sessions while the disadvantages were – incomplete work from students, non-submission of work, absenteeism and errors in grammar, some punctuation and spelling errors. These factors had created some tensions within this data.

Another source for data was my use of ‘reflective notes’ filled at end of each session. Given the nature of this tool, it was important for me to use the

pointers from these reflective notes in planning my lessons. These notes offered an insight into 'how well or not my students understood the content of my teaching' and 'how did I teach i.e. the effectiveness of my delivery of the content'. It was important for me to accept that this tool might have some elements of bias as it was written by me. In the analysis of data I had taken this factor into account.

The final source of data was 'discussion notes' generated through an informal group discussion held with the participants towards the end of my project. The discussion was of twenty minutes duration in a lesson and tried to identify what the participants felt in terms of the way they were taught writing in the lessons. At the beginning of the discussion participants were given some time to discuss with their peers and then the whole group was invited to respond. I made some notes during the conversation. Again, as the candidates struggled with understanding and speaking English, it couldn't be guaranteed that their responses were accurate; also, there was a possibility that during my writing of notes I might have missed out some information or noted something incorrectly hence the data might suffer from some degree of inconsistency.

### **Data Analysis and findings**

Denscombe (2006) mentioned '...qualitative researchers will be on the lookout for the occurrence in the data of particular ideas and events...' (p. 271); as this research was descriptive and interpretive, in my analysis of the data I had considered trends in the overall data and then drawn conclusions as explanations for those trends.

#### **Formative marking**

The data was collected from marking students' work. The main trends identified were –

- (a) Students were familiar with the features of the genre taught in lessons and aimed at adhering to those features in their independent writing of the text/s*
- (b) There was some confusion amongst students in terms of the nature of the information included in their written texts (e.g. what to write)*
- (c) Grammar and punctuation were not always appropriately used*
- (d) Spelling errors were prevalent in most texts*
- (e) Some texts had incorrect construction of sentences*

#### **Reflective notes**

The data collated from the notes had the following key themes –

- (a) Students got quickly familiar with features of the texts used. Some of the texts used as models needed more simplification of its language*

- (b) Many students seemed to compare a given text with similar texts that they could have in their first language hence sometimes got confused with exemplar texts*
- (c) Reluctance amongst students to work in pairs or groups unless they were paired up with friends – this prevented them from learning through discussion or shared writing*
- (d) Not all students would complete homework leading to loss of time in lesson/s as I had to revise features of a text covered in previous sessions*
- (e) Students often struggled with grammatical aspects of the text*

### Informal discussion

During this discussion the students suggested –

- (a) Getting a model text helps*
- (b) More practice of grammar was important*
- (c) Pressures of daily life prevent/ed them studying at home hence no practice mostly*
- (d) Language in the text could be difficult to understand even when using a dictionary*

### Findings

1. Students benefit from identifying the Genres that were relevant to their work

Majority of these ESOL students worked in a range of practical jobs as opposed to office jobs hence one facet of their learning agenda was to be able to use English to communicate (speaking and writing and reading) in light of their roles and responsibilities at workplace. Through the research it became obvious that these students would benefit from being exposed and introduced to genre-texts that they would come across at places of work (e.g. accident reports, absent notes, etc.). Of course the variety of such texts was large however, finding out from students the kind of work they do and their duties could help to identify the genres that might be appropriate to teach. On reflecting on my findings from the literature review, it was important for me to be aware of the need to re-contextualise the concept of 'genre' in the light of my students' needs and learning agenda.

2. Teaching Genres which were relevant to students' workplace needs could give students a 'push' to engage with sessions and content

Though my research wasn't aimed at measuring the degree of student engagement however, during the research process it was evident that students were more inclined to participate actively in the learning if they understood that their topic/s of learning would help them at their workplace/life. At the start of a course or term, if students were consulted on what topics would be covered and why along with their views sought on



what they thought would be important to include in the list of topics – such a process would generate better ownership of learning amongst the students and in turn encourage retention of students.

3. Teaching functional grammar in conjunction with teaching writing was beneficial / essential. A tension existed between teaching a genre-text and embedding grammar skills at the same time in such teaching; this was also important when marking students' work

In the context of my research, it was important for me to address teaching of functional grammar simultaneously with the teaching of conventions of particular genre-texts. Although most of these students were able to use particular elements of functional grammar, but it was crucial that their knowledge of grammar usage was consolidated and extended. This had to be integrated in their learning process and during assessment (both formative and summative assessments). For summative assessments it would be vital for students to know how the elements of grammar usage that would be marked/ assessed in conjunction with the genre elements in their work.

4. Students responded well to authentic teaching materials

The use of authentic materials in delivery of learning content was more appropriate than using materials from textbooks. As these students needed to know how the texts look in real life, it was helpful for them to engage with authentic materials.

## **Conclusion**

This research was an important part of my continuing professional development as a classroom practitioner. The design of the project ensured that I focused on the actual experience of ESOL learners and teaching of ESOL in a particular educational context. Through this research I had gained valuable insights into the process of using genre based approach in teaching writing and had realised how to 're-contextualise' a theory within the context of one's practice. This research had played an important part in developing my ability to reflect through action based research which was an important aim of the Research Development Fellowship programme.

## **Limitations of my research**

This was a small-scale project with a very small sample. The structure of the project limited the range of literature that could be considered and the project looked at one single case without a control and experimental group. Also, the educational context was singular. As my data was quite personal, in no way my research findings should be generalised. Furthermore, my sample of 16 respondents did not sufficiently represent the mass of ESOL students hence in a way my data was limited. Next, the objectiveness of my interpretation of the data could be challenged on the basis of intrusion from the self

(Denscombe, 2006) – hence my data analysis was not free from bias as this analysis was subjective interpretation of my teaching within a particular context. In spite of these limitations my data analysis indicated certain patterns as discussed earlier.

Recommendations from my research

The key recommendations from this research were:-

1. Use the idea of genre to help align teaching content according to the learners' needs and agendas for learning e.g. why they were (are) learning a particular text/topic; how would they apply such learning in the context of their work or life in general.
2. Genre Based Learning tasks and materials should be as authentic as possible to allow students to take ownership of their learning process and use such learning outside the classroom. Finding and selecting authentic materials could be time consuming and expensive for teachers, hence there should be institutional/faculty policy in supporting practitioners with this aspect of their teaching.
3. A staged and balanced approach in marking students' work and providing feedback should be developed through sharing of marking criteria with students. In the marking criteria getting a balance between criteria for conventions of the genre-text and grammar should be crucial to ensure effectiveness of the feedback given on students' work.

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