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Using mind maps to reveal and develop genre knowledge in a graduate writing course



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ABSTRACT

Mind maps have an established reputation in education as a means for revealing students' prior knowledge and schema, as well as any changes that occur through instruction and practice. This study, which took place in a credit-bearing, genre-based writing course for graduate multilingual (L2) writers, compared the extensiveness, depth and accuracy of maps created by 47 students before and after instruction for the book review and literature review genres. Post-instruction mind maps showed significant advances in the extensiveness and depth of students' formal textual knowledge, and some evidence of progress in the rhetorical and process dimensions (Tardy, 2009) of their understandings. Students' reflective comments provided support for the view that map construction helped to raise their awareness of textual and rhetorical components of conceptual knowledge, and that it also boosted their motivation and sense of self-efficacy. On the basis of these findings, a number of suggestions are made for using mapping as an instructional tool to improve students' awareness of and ability to synthesise the multiple dimensions of genre knowledge.

1. Introduction

Since English is now the lingua franca of research and publication in a large number of academic disciplines (Hyland, 2013), students from non-English speaking backgrounds are increasingly choosing to study in institutions that offer English-medium instruction. I teach an advanced academic writing course for one such group of multilingual (L2) graduate writers, and the study reported in this article was motivated by two issues with regard to this course. The first was that most students reported having received very little explicit instruction in their home countries about how core academic genres such as essays and research reports are structured, or about appropriate language choices beyond the need for accurate grammar and vocabulary. As a result, many reported that they lacked confidence in their ability to compose texts, both in the writing course and in their disciplinary studies. I was therefore interested, like other teachers involved in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) genre-based writing instruction (e.g. Cheng, 2007; Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011; Swales & Feak, 2012), to gauge the extent of students' prior genre knowledge as a way of assessing their instructional needs. I was also aware that this group of students tended to take a *bottom-up* approach to their writing, focusing on analytic decoding and comprehension of meaning at word- and sentence-level. I wanted them to develop a complementary ability in *top-down* or synthetic processing that would assist them to grasp the macro-structure of a text and its various dimensions (Tardy, 2009) more easily, and achieve a global understanding of its main ideas.

In exploring possible ways of assisting students to overcome these challenges, I came upon literature describing the use of conceptual diagrams as an instructional tool. Widely used in content-based subject teaching (e.g. Eppler, 2006; Shavelson, Ruiz-

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Primo, & Wiley, 2005) and in some EFL courses (e.g. Farrell, 2009; Ferreira & Lantolf, 2008; Ojima, 2006), conceptual or mind maps appeared to provide a way of helping students to notice the macro-structure and multi-dimensional components of texts, as well as producing meaningful visual representations of pre- and post-instruction understandings that would be useful for them, and for me. This study therefore aimed to contribute to the literature on students' conceptual knowledge development in a genre-based ESP writing course by exploring how mind maps could be used to reveal students' prior knowledge, and their progress after instruction.

2. Genre-based instruction

A genre is a staged, goal-oriented text with a definite communicative purpose or purposes within a specific community (Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2015), and is currently “one of the most important and influential concepts in literacy education” (Hyland, 2008, p. 543). Although the three main models of genre-based instruction (ESP, Systemic-Functional Linguistics/SFL, and Rhetorical Genre Studies/RGS) have developed common understandings with regard to genre, on the whole they have different aims, draw on different pedagogic processes, and target different types of learners. Genre-based ESP approaches currently dominate in instruction for L2 writers because they allow for the kind of explicit teaching, linguistic analysis of formal schematic features (drawing on SFL research), and reconstruction tasks that can help to clarify the macro-structure of texts for students and build genre knowledge (Hyland, 2008). This type of pedagogy includes instruction to build awareness of the relationship between these text elements and their specific rhetorical purposes, and the relationships that exist between writers, readers, texts, and the micro- and macro-contexts in which the texts are created (Cheng, 2006; Hyland, 2004; Tardy, 2009).

Extensive discussions of the goals of genre-based instruction (e.g. Devitt, 2009; Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2008; Tardy, 2006, 2009) note that formal knowledge of text features and conventional language patterns is an initial stage of understanding that needs to gradually develop into a deeper and more nuanced awareness of the extent to which genres are shaped by influencing factors such as rhetorical purposes, interactions with readers, and disciplinary practices. Tardy (2009) identifies four interconnected dimensions of genre knowledge: formal knowledge of structural elements, process knowledge (how genres are composed, disseminated, and connected to other genres), rhetorical knowledge (rhetorical purposes, writer-reader engagement, the writer's stance and voice, issues of power and influence, specific circumstances, disciplinary norms), and knowledge of subject matter. In their first stage of development, learners acquire formal knowledge of genre features and are able to compose texts with appropriate macro-structures (e.g. moves and steps), micro-structures (e.g. verb choice and tense, register, metadiscourse strategies, and formulaic language patterns), and content. While this type of formal knowledge is only one component of a comprehensive understanding of a genre, it can act as a foundation from which more sophisticated aspects develop through experience in disciplinary discourses, and is therefore likely to be emphasized in academic writing courses (Johns, 2002; Tardy, 2006).

A principal aim of genre-based L2 writing courses is therefore to help students establish a basic understanding of discourse features through a pedagogy that is explicit and accessible (Hyland, 2007; Johns, 2008). It needs to include analysis of text exemplars in order to highlight standard macro-structures, and to show how particular steps and moves are connected as well as how, together with typical language patterns and a range of metadiscourse strategies, they achieve particular communicative goals (Hyland, 2004; Paltridge, 2013; Swales, 1990). One example is the explanatory “CARS” model, which illustrates how a gap or problem in current research or scholarship is identified and resolved by a new study or proposition (Swales, 1990). Some instructional methodologies draw on versions of the SFL-oriented teaching-learning cycle (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993) for the analysis of exemplars and the learning theories of Vygotsky (1978) to create a pedagogy that encompasses teacher-led analysis of text exemplars and a range of assisted, collaborative and independent writing tasks. In order to focus attention on rhetorical, process and subject-matter dimensions, students may be asked to carry out ethnographic explorations of a particular disciplinary genre (e.g. Cheng, 2007, 2008; Swales & Lindemann, 2002) or to compile genre portfolios (Hyland, 2000; Johns, 2008). Whatever approach is taken, scholars emphasize that teachers need to avoid giving the impression that genres are wholly conventional, unchanging, decontextualized, or independent of specific purposes and readerships, or that the macro-structure of any genre exemplar can be viewed as a transferable model (Hyland, 2008; Johns, 2008; Swales, 1990). They note the importance of ensuring that learners understand the need for extended practice and participation in academic discourse communities (Devitt, 2009; Freedman, 1993; Johns, 2008), since it is not possible to achieve comprehensive knowledge of a genre simply through exposure, or by consciously noticing genre features (Cheng, 2007).

Studies of the effects of genre-based instruction have reported development in aspects of students' conceptual knowledge such as the ability to recognise genre features in unfamiliar texts (Hyon, 2001), and to analyse the context and purpose of a text before making selections with regard to structure and language (Cheng, 2007; Johns, 2015; Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011; Yasuda, 2011). Positive effects on self-confidence and motivation have also been noted (Hyon, 2001; Johns, 2008). However, while genre-based instruction has been the subject of much scholarly discussion in recent years and a substantial body of research on genre learning in disciplinary contexts now exists (Tardy, 2006), researchers have pointed out the need for further research to extend the range of particular instructional possibilities (Cheng, 2006; Hyland, 2007; Tardy, 2006). In particular, the need for longitudinal studies of how students develop genre knowledge through instruction has been noted (Polio, 2017). The study therefore aimed to contribute to this topic area by exploring how mind mapping could be used to assist a group of graduate L2 writers with relatively weak prior knowledge towards a richer understanding of two academic genres within a genre-based ESP writing course.

3. Mind maps as a learning support tool

Mind maps are a type of diagram depicting items of conceptual content as words or phrases (often in bubble or box “containers”),

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