Genre: A Framework for Creating Written Texts in the Introductory Level German Classroom and Beyond

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Abstract:
This paper provides a literature review of the use of genre as a framework for teaching writing, particularly in the foreign language curriculum, for the purposes of both bolstering the institutional objective of writing across the curriculum as well as providing foundational writing instruction in the introductory levels of foreign language instruction. Beginning with a survey of critical terminology, the paper then turns to genre in relation to writing, and finally genre-based foreign language curriculum development. The paper concludes that while there is quantitative and qualitative research to be done regarding the synergistic relationship between the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, a genre-based framework holds vast potential for use at all levels of the foreign language curriculum.

The United States Military Academy at West Point (USMA) recently revised their 4-year curriculum and introduced the new curriculum with the class of 2019. One change was no longer requiring EN302 Advanced Composition through Cultural Studies as a core course requirement. In place of that second semester of English composition, each discipline has been tasked to incorporate advanced level writing into the requirements for their major.

Studying a foreign language will not replace the need for discipline-specific writing instruction, but in the context of USMA, where each student is required to take two semesters of a foreign language, we have a unique opportunity to support our fellow instructors of all disciplines by raising awareness of the elements of composition. The challenge is incorporating writing in the introductory level language courses, where the majority of cadets begin.

Acknowledging that each of the eight languages offered at USMA range in complexity, this literature review is written with the German language in mind, which falls near the middle of the complexity continuum. French, Spanish and Portuguese are considered less complex, Russian, Persian, Arabic and Chinese are considered more complex. While the more complex languages spend considerable time at the introductory level learning the script particular to that language, all introductory level courses at USMA focus primarily on the oral mode of communication, with less time spent on overt teaching of the skills of listening, reading and writing.
The purpose of this literature review is to query the field in order to lay the groundwork to answer the questions: what does the concept of genre offer in regards to developing students’ effective writing skills? How might an institution incorporate genre-based writing, especially at the lower levels of language instruction, to support “writing across the curriculum”? I will begin with an overview of foundational terminology, then survey the concept of genre, particularly in relation to foreign language instruction. Finally, I will survey some methods of incorporating genre-based writing into the curriculum.

Writing can be defined in a variety of ways, from learning how to create the shapes that form letters to composing a book. Suzanne Eggins summarizes the ideas of Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan to define a text as “any passage, written or spoken, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole” (24). Coherence and cohesion distinguish text from non-text (cf. 24). Coherence refers to the text’s relationship to the “social and cultural context of its occurrence,” and cohesion is “the way the elements within a text bind it together as ‘a unified whole’” (24). Finally, “the result of the interaction of these two dimensions is a piece of language which is using linguistic resources in a meaningful way within a situational and cultural context” (24). The focus of this article is therefore not on penmanship, but on creating those texts that are transmitted through a written mode of communication, that is, on paper or via digital media.

Another critical term in this discussion is genre. J.R. Martin provides the most succinct definition in that it is a “staged goal-oriented social process” (13). It is staged because “it usually takes us more than one phase of meaning to work through a genre” (13). Each of those stages typically has identifying structural and grammatical features. It is goal-oriented because “unfolding phases are designed to accomplish something” and social because “we undertake genres interactively with others” (13). Genre includes oral and written forms of communication, and each genre includes a particular set of cultural expectations regarding the linguistic resources used to realize it. Each instantiation of genre is unique, but stays within the boundaries of these cultural expectations.

James Gee provides foundational categories for the different kinds of language we use in the form of primary discourse and secondary discourse. These terms lay the foundation for defining literacy. Success in school and success in social interactions is dependent on literacy. Primary discourse, according to Gee, is the language of intimates, the informal and primarily oral language we use with family and close friends to accomplish daily social interactions (cf. 55). Secondary discourses involve social institutions outside the family and “require communication with non-intimates” (56). These are institutions like workplaces, school, church, the grocery store, etc. Secondary discourses “build on, and extend, the uses of language we acquired as part of our primary discourse” and can be oral or written (56). Literacy, then, is control of “uses of language in secondary discourses” (56).

Like Gee, who argues that in the absence of control of a particular secondary discourse, people tend to fall back on an inappropriate use of their primary discourse (cf. 56), Mary Schleppegrell, too, argues that “the grammatical choices that are functional for engaging in
informal interaction are not effective in accomplishing many school-based tasks” (44). How do we close this gap? Her solution is that “raising teachers’ and students’ awareness of how linguistic choices make the texts of schooling the kind of texts they are can enable participation in the contexts of learning those texts help create” (44). In other words, understanding how a text is structured, and what language choices contribute to making meaning in a specific discipline, is key to making academic success accessible to all students. Teachers especially need to understand what linguistic features make a text in their discipline successful. This assists not only in substantiating grades but also in providing students effective feedback.

Instructors teaching content courses, such as chemistry, naturally model secondary discourses, particularly those most relevant to their particular field. They assign readings that provide exposure to other models of the discourse. To varying degrees they provide overt instruction and correction to raise awareness in their students and assist them in learning the discourse. The effectiveness of this feedback is often influenced by whether the instructor grasps the mechanics of a successful text - and by that I mean that the instructor has the metalanguage to describe the linguistic resources used to accomplish the communicative task successfully - or if they are simply following their intuition. This is important because student mastery of the discourse is often demonstrated through writing tasks.

Marianna Ryshina-Pankova and Heidi Byrnes connect the act of writing itself with learning to know in their article, “Writing as Learning to Know: Tracking Knowledge Construction in L2 German Compositions”. Their article analyzes the use of nominalization and grammatical metaphor in early advanced student writing in their German curriculum, but they begin with the assertion that “meaning-making, knowing, and learning are fundamentally linked to language” and that “knowing involves an active knower who creates meaning in the process of composing” (179). They disconcertingly point out a glaring disconnect across disciplines, that “learning in schools is typically modeled in terms of training and developing [abstract mental] faculties as mental skills separate from content (e.g. critical thinking) and, quite remarkably, separate from the language-based discursive abilities that are necessary for shaping and expressing content and overtly manifesting what we call ‘thought’” (179). It can be argued that some of these language-based discursive abilities may be expressed through oral means, but according to Ryshina-Pankova and Byrnes, the focus is on writing “precisely because writing taps into the expansive capacities of languages as semiotic [that is, meaning-making] systems beyond what is otherwise the case in oral language and semiotically challenges those who are using language in the act of composing” (180). Indeed, they go so far as to suggest that “well-conceived writing tasks create something like an obligatory context for the full development of users’ language-based semiotic reservoir that enables them to become competent knowers” (181). This clearly is most successful when the study of language is not separated from the study of content, as is common throughout academia. It is just as rare to observe linguistic resources discussed in a history course as it is to observe historical content discussed in an introductory language course. This is, of course, a generalization, but the common expectation is
that the lower levels of language instruction are focused on grammar and conversation, while the upper levels are focused on content, e.g. literature, culture, and history. In the same vein, the required components of a history paper may be discussed in class, but not likely a discussion about how specific language is used to realize the various components.

In their introductory chapter to *The Powers of Literacy: A Genre Approach to Teaching Writing*, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, state, in a similar fashion to Ryshina-Pankova and Byrnes, that “a genre approach to literacy teaching involves being explicit about the way language works to make meaning” (1). They helpfully clarify that it is not a movement back to the basics, back to rote memorization of grammatical rules, but rather an attempt “to create a new pedagogical space,” and that this approach also “goes beyond the process pedagogies which stress ‘natural’ learning through ‘doing’ writing” (1). That is to say, it does not leave students free to write about whatever they desire with the guidance to write like they talk. Writing demands more than merely transcribing a conversation. Cope and Kalantzis assert that “the most powerful written genres are those generically and grammatically most distant from orality” (6). A helpful way to get closer to identifying these genres and raising teacher and student awareness of them, is to see that “texts are different because they do different things. […] How a text works is a function of what it is for” (7). Identifying the function of the text, i.e. what the text is trying to accomplish within a particular social context, is crucial to being able to recognize how the text is realizing that function.

One of the most profound ways Cope and Kalantzis contribute to the conversation is their attentiveness to the social implications of genre-based literacy in schooling. “Genres are social processes,” they declare, and moreover, genres “give their users access to certain realms of social action and interaction, certain realms of social influence and power” (7). They offer the examples of a lawyer’s language, academic language, and a chess player’s language to demonstrate “social realms from which a lot of people are excluded” (7) and how that exclusion is marked linguistically. They point out that outside of academia, a person can get by and accomplish social tasks with language without knowing how it works. Outside of school a person is immersed in the social sphere where they can observe, mimic and practice. But school is different. Immersion, the authors argue, is inefficient, and advantages those who grew up in certain kinds of homes with a particular socio-economic status (cf. 8). Thus there is an ethical component to raising awareness of how language makes meaning in social contexts, and a genre-based framework can help us as instructors offer access to academic success to a wider audience.

Linking back to Ryshina-Pankova and Byrnes’ article, we organize knowledge by giving it a name, by putting ideas into words. Schleppegrell offers not only helpful terminology but also concrete examples of what makes a particular text successful in her book *The Language of Schooling*. The book presents “tools that can make visible the means by which language construes meaning in the texts of schooling” (163). Indeed, “recognizing the meanings in the grammatical choices reveals the basis for valuing certain ways of using language,” which factors into feedback and assessment (163).
In her chapter “Writing School Genres,” she organizes the seven prototypical school genres into three categories, which she borrows from J. R. Martin, namely personal genres, factual genres, and analytical genres (cf. 85). Personal genres include recount, a retelling of events; and narrative, events with a complication and evaluation. Factual genres include procedure, describing how to do something; and report, relating facts. Analytical genres include the most valued genres at institutions of higher education: account, which answers why; explanation, which answers how; and exposition, which argues and supports a thesis. Schleppegrell follows this with an in-depth analysis of the structure and grammatical and lexical components of the exposition genre, and then considers the differences in meaning making between the disciplines of science and history in the next chapter “Functional Grammar in School Subjects”. Unfortunately, this rich analysis goes beyond the scope of this review, but very helpful in providing that necessary metalanguage instructors can use to describe to their students how a successful text in their discipline is accomplished.

Cori Crane uses similar categories to in “Modelling a Genre-based Foreign Language Curriculum”. In her article she describes one way these genres have been used as stepping stones to organize a curriculum that sets the stage for students of foreign language to achieve advanced level proficiency. As Schleppegrell has demonstrated, these genres are not limited to use in the foreign language classroom. Crane embeds her definition of advanced language use within the framework of genre. That is, to realize the linguistic density, “abstract thought and multiple other-oriented viewpoints” preferred and even demanded by some genres, one must employ advanced language (227). The point, though, is that there is a way to design a foreign language curriculum that builds students up to this advanced language use. The same kind of language use we desire to see them express in English in other disciplines, thus supporting our mutual goal of developing effective written communication skills in our students.

How might a foreign language curriculum be ordered using this framework? Crane builds on Heidi Byrnes and Katherine Sprang’s article “Fostering Advanced L2 Literacy: A Genre-based, Cognitive Approach”, starting with their movement from “the primary discourses of home life to the secondary discourses of public institutions” (228, see also Gee). Crane notes that it is not a linear path, but rather a recursive one that builds and expands on previous linguistic patterns and their context of use (cf. 228). That means we can start with short, simple instantiations of a narrative in the introductory level German course, choosing a topic that uses familiar vocabulary, and then return to that genre in the intermediate level course adding a layer of complexity or increasing the length. Our students can write short, chronologically organized recounts of their day in the introductory level, that engage them in ordering ideas within a longer text, and build on those same patterns when writing a description of a procedure, such as a recipe, later in the curriculum. Learning these genres in their simplest form in a foreign language curriculum can provide the often-missing building blocks needed to write successfully in other disciplines.
Crane summarizes the genres used by the Georgetown University German Department at the time as an example of this recursive progression. For example the newspaper report is used at level 2 (intermediate), level 3 (advanced) and level 4. This would fall into Schleppegrell’s factual genres category. Schleppegrell’s categories build toward advanced language use, but Crane’s article points out that repetition of individual genres also contributes to achieving advanced language use. While Crane’s article focuses on written genres, the Georgetown University German Department curriculum maintains a balanced focus on all four skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking - and uses the same genre-based recursive framework to structure their conversational tasks as well (cf. *Curriculum Project*).

Indeed, the goal ought to be balance within the foreign language curriculum. Thoughtfulness in reading, writing, speaking and listening within the framework of a genre-based curriculum will inevitably foster thoughtful writing across disciplines. Writing provides the building blocks for thinking in "text," for coherently linking ideas, which in turn fosters more complex speaking, clearer communication of ideas, and more compelling writing in other disciplines. Learning ways to talk about language, but more importantly, learning how language makes meaning, and that our language choices matter, are crucial lessons that contribute to the overall success of the student.

Because this genre-based curriculum framework depends heavily on models, whether they be texts or speech, a necessary component is learning to read within this framework. To be able to recognize how an author’s language choices make meaning in a text is crucial not only to comprehending the text, but also to identifying the key features to understand how to create an original text within the same genre. Thus, a complement to this focus on writing is *Reading for Meaning: An Integrated Approach to Language Learning* by Janet Swaffar, et al, which offers a genre-based approach to reading, particularly in a foreign language. It focuses on determining the meaning of a text by noticing the structure, in addition to the content of the text. For the purposes of teaching, they provide a six-stage model for approaching a text that is flexible enough to incorporate listening, speaking and writing skills, even as it focuses on reading.

Stage one is the preview, in which students skim or scan the text to determine the content and organization of the text (cf. 77, 79-80). In stage two, students identify the episodic structure or key shifts in the text, and the discourse markers that identify those shifts (cf. 77, 81-83). In stage three, the students read for detail, and identify linguistic patterns that support the function of the different stages of the text. Especially important here is noticing the relationships in the text. Are ideas linked logically, chronologically, etc? Lifting phrases from the text, they list these examples in matrices (cf. 77, 81-83). In stage four, the students compare the patterns found in stage three, and, while still using only language from the original text, organize their notes to more coherently reflect the meaning they find in the text (cf. 77-78, 83-85). This is similar to an outline of the text, but rather than the student rephrasing the information in their own words, they maintain the original text’s lexico-grammatical features. In stage five, the students construct sentences based on their matrices, practicing the linguistic patterns, and reformulating the
content in their own words (cf. 78, 85-87). In step six, they build from these sentences a coherent text of five or more connected sentences (cf. 78, 87-89).

While this activity has the potential to be rather time-consuming if used to approach an entire chapter of a history textbook, it is helpful for noticing the structure of an argument in an article or essay, and, importantly, raises awareness of how that structure is realized through language choices.

While there is a wealth of research focused on achieving advanced level language proficiency through writing, writing at the introductory level is included only insofar as it functions as a foundational step. There is room for further quantitative and qualitative study of how writing at the lower levels also improves the other three skills of reading, speaking and listening, as well as how the ways of thinking about language in general - and especially thinking about language as text - may be beneficial for student academic performance across multiple disciplines. In a world that is increasingly digital and dependent on a variety of written genres to accomplish social tasks, it behooves us as teachers to invest in our students’ development of writing skills from the very start, especially in the realm of foreign languages.
Works Cited


