Using a genre-based approach to teach writing to Thai students: A case study

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ABSTRACT

Thai university students are required to write expositions for different purposes, for example, for their class assignments and independent study research projects. Yet, many are not able to write them successfully as they encounter problems such as organisation of ideas and appropriate rhetorical style. This paper discusses issues that arose in using the genre-based approach to teach writing to students at the Department of Foreign Languages, Khon Kaen University, in the northeast of Thailand. It also provides insight into the impact of the genre-based approach on students’ writing and the implications for applying it to other Thai educational contexts.

Introduction

The genre-based approach was initially developed in Australia. It has been found to be an effective approach to teach writing to native speakers and in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to non-English speaking migrants (for example, Hammond 1989; Hammond and Hood 1990; A Burns 1990; Drury and Webb 1993). While research into its application has been carried out in other educational contexts, for example in Indonesia by Sutojo (1994), in Singapore by Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) and in Vietnam by Dang (2002), I did not find any cases where the genre-based approach has been applied in any systematic way in Thailand. This paper explores the way in which the genre-based approach was used to teach writing in a Thai university and documents the possibilities of this approach in other settings.

I begin with a brief explanation of the ‘genre-based approach’. This is followed by the research context and methodology, which leads to its impact on students and implications of its use in other educational contexts.

Purpose of the research

This research project focuses primarily on English writing skills (and reading skills to some extent). A number of educators and linguists (for example, Halliday 1985; Martin 1985; Christie 1990; Matthews 1995) note that in Western culture, writing skills are considered prestigious. As Martin
(1985: 51) argues, ‘the most prestigious users of language become writers, not speakers’.

However, teaching approaches in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context have typically put greater emphasis on speaking skills (for example, Direct Method and Audio-lingual Method). While writing skills are taught, they usually emphasise the mastery of the grammatical structure of individual sentences and vocabulary. Students may be able to write sentences and a short paragraph correctly, but they usually have difficulties, or are even at a loss, when asked to sustain argument in writing a complete text or article. Hammond (1989) notes that these traditional approaches do not provide students with sufficient guidance about structure, organisation and development of the written texts. Kaplan (1966, 1984) adds that these approaches do not explain to students that rhetorical patterns of written texts vary from culture to culture. In their studies, Kaplan (1966, 1984), Hyland (1990), McKay (1993) and Ballard and Clanchy (1993) found that one of the problems that students from EFL and ESL backgrounds experience in writing is their inadequate understanding of how texts are organised. Siriphan (1988) asserts that this problem negatively affects the class performance of Thais studying in colleges in the United States.

In Thailand, the English proficiency of Thai students even at the university level is often less than satisfactory (Komin 1998). This is because English is taught as a separate subject rather than being used as the medium of communication. Students, particularly those who live outside big tourist destinations such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Phuket, rarely have opportunities to use English outside the classroom. In Wongsothorn’s view (1994), the writing ability of Thai students is of particular concern because extended writing is not widely taught. Siriphan (1988) and Clayton and Klainin (1994) add that most writing programs are still taught using the traditional model, emphasising accuracy of grammatical structure and vocabulary. In addition, Wongsothorn (1994) found that the formative tests in most writing programs stress objective-type questions, which require sentence completion, reordering sentences, reordering words and error correction. Students have very few actual opportunities to represent their ideas and knowledge through the written mode.

In higher education, which is my particular interest, it is essential for students to be fluent in English writing because some courses or programs require students to write essays, reports and research papers in English (Wongsothorn 1994). This is in accordance with the national objectives as expressed in the Thai education reform agenda, which aims to ensure that Thais are able to actively participate in the global economy rather than to
serve as a source of cheap labour in multinational corporations (Office of the National Education Commission 1996). High-level research is increasingly globalised, so Thai graduates who have a good command of English will more easily be able to compete for international research funding for both domestic and international research projects. In the global competitive environment it is also the case that Thai graduates who have English will have an edge over their peers in terms of their career choices or professional advancement. While the establishment of international educational institutions that offer courses in English has mushroomed in recent years, only students from affluent backgrounds can afford to attend. This heightens the need for the government to investigate alternative approaches to teaching writing that would lead to significant improvement in students' writing ability.

Graduates from courses at Ubon Ratchathani University, where I work, and in similar courses at vocational educational institutions will enter the workforce needing English reading and writing skills to communicate with foreign and local English-speaking business contacts. It is for this reason that my research attempts to explore a new method for developing students’ writing competence.

I am particularly interested in the Australian genre-based approach to the teaching of writing, which was developed by Martin and Rothery (1980, 1981) and their colleagues such as Christie (1984), Derewianka (1990), Gerot and Wignell (1994), Hammond (1987), and Hammond et al (1992). The theoretical basis of the genre-based approach draws heavily on the systemic functional linguistics theory developed by Halliday and others (for example, Halliday 1985, 1994; Halliday and Hasan 1985; Martin, Matthiessen and Painter 1997). Systemic theory holds that language is a resource for making meaning and that language use is functional. In addition, it emphasises the relationship between text and its context. It thus provides systematic explanations of how written (and spoken) texts are organised in different social and cultural contexts. Importantly, it focuses on rhetorical structure and realisation of that structure through grammatical choice. It differs significantly from other EFL approaches in that it takes into account language at the level of whole text and clause, as well as sentence (Hammond 1987, 1989; A Burns 1990; Derewianka 1990). I chose the genre-based approach from the available alternatives because it provides a sound theory on which to base practical methodology to teach writing that appears to have the potential to lead to the improvement of my students’ writing ability in actual social context.

Because the Thai education system differs from the Australian education system, where the genre-based approach was developed, it is necessary to
investigate which aspects of the genre-based approach will be appropriate for the Thai context. At the same time as providing research findings on the genre-based approach, I am conscious of Tudor (1993) and Samuel’s (1997) concern that simply adopting a method used in one cultural context in another is unlikely to be successful. It is necessary to investigate whether the genre-based techniques of teaching English can be adapted for the Thai cultural context. This research took a case study approach and investigated the use of the genre-based approach in one university classroom in Thailand. The goal of the research was to describe learners’ responses to this approach and the effects it had on their writing. Since it is a case study, it cannot be generalised to all Thai classrooms or even to all Thai university classrooms. However, it can provide insights into Thai students’ responses to the approach and the effect on learning outcomes.

This research represents only one attempt to investigate the trialling of different approaches to teaching and learning across the curriculum in the Thai education system. However, in my view it differs from a number of other approaches in that it draws on a substantial body of contemporary language theory, as well as on empirical research.

**Research methodology**

**RESEARCH CONTEXT**

The research questions are addressed through the study of a genre-based program implemented in the Essay Writing course, a compulsory course for English major and minor students at the Department of Foreign Languages, Khon Kaen University, in the northeast of Thailand.

It is a happy coincidence that the work of the Department of Foreign Languages at Khon Kaen has had a history of innovation, and has not simply pursued teaching using traditional methodologies. Most recently the American process approach has been used, so the staff members have a positive attitude to trying alternatives. The genre-based approach was an attractive option to try in Essay Writing at Khon Kaen University because the curriculum for this course drew on names and elements already familiar from other approaches, such as ‘description’, ‘narration’, ‘cause and effect’ and ‘arguments and persuasion’. However, the genre-based approach differs from the existing curriculum in its provision of systematic teaching/learning principles and practices to be applied for each of these compositional elements in context.

Students at Khon Kaen are generally less exposed to English in their day-to-day lives than students in Bangkok, so there are fewer outside influences, and the students’ need to learn in classroom contexts is great. There
were 42 students and none of them had been taught by the genre-based approach. The class was conducted over a 15-week semester from November 1997 to February 1998.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research approach of this study may be described as a qualitative, ethnographic case study. The underlying principles of ethnographic inquiry are relevant to my research because I did not intend to test or prove whether the genre-based approach is a more effective approach in teaching writing than the more traditional approaches. Rather, I aimed to explore ways in which the approach needed to be modified to suit the Thai educational and cultural context of this particular class. As indicated previously, the theoretical basis of the genre-based approach is developed from systemic functional linguistics, which holds that language and language learning are social processes that take place in context (Halliday and Hasan 1985). Therefore, research needed to be carried out in the real, natural and ongoing classroom. In order to gain an inside perspective of the actions, perceptions and beliefs of the students being investigated, I needed to become a part of the culture where the study took place over a period of time (R B Burns 1990, 1995; Johnson 1992). At the same time, I needed to be conscious of my role as a researcher so that I was able to analyse and interpret the data systematically and analytically. I also had to detach myself from the teaching situation and reflect on my students’ reactions towards the genre-based approach, my own experience during teaching and the effects of the genre-based approach on these particular students’ writing. To this end, I drew on the *emic* and *etic* principles underpinning ethnography. According to van Lier (1990), the *emic* viewpoint refers to the need for the researcher to generate and interpret the data from the perspective of the participants under investigation so that their behaviours, experiences, beliefs and situations can be fully understood. A Burns (1999) adds that an *etic* viewpoint refers to an understanding of the research context from an outsider’s perspective.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that this research deviates in some aspects from the conventional ethnography in that, to understand the impact of the genre-based approach on the context under investigation, I attempted to control the classroom environment by deliberately introducing the genre-based approach into it. Further, I was a participant observer, as I was both researcher and teacher. This occurred because I was the only person at the Department of Foreign Languages, Khon Kaen University, who knew enough about systemic functional linguistics to apply it in the classroom through the genre-based teaching practice. To overcome the problems of
being both teacher and researcher in the classroom, I used ‘thick’ description by collecting data that related to as many factors as possible that might impinge on the students being studied (Nunan 1992). The data included students’ diaries, photocopies of students’ written texts and audio-recordings of an informal discussion between students and myself. This will be discussed in detail below in the section ‘Students’ reactions toward the genre-based approach’.

Although this research drew heavily on ethnographic principles, it also constituted a case study. Nunan (1992) points out that a case study is similar to ethnography in its philosophy, methods and concern for the context of the phenomena under investigation. Nevertheless, there is a difference between them. While ethnography typically involves an intensive study of a particular culture, a case study is more limited in scope, focusing on a particular aspect of the culture or subculture under investigation. In this instance, it is a case study of writing in a particular EFL classroom (that is, of an Essay Writing course in one particular Thai university), rather than in all EFL classrooms. Nunan (1992) and Cohen and Manion (1994) argue that although the case study typically involves the study of a single unit such as a student, a classroom or a school, its findings may be generalisable to the wider population to which the unit belongs. Thus, although this research focused exclusively on the study of writing in the Essay Writing course at the Department of Foreign Languages at Khon Kaen University, the findings may be relevant to other foreign language classrooms in Thailand and elsewhere.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

I designed a teaching unit that focused on the genre of exposition. In Western society, exposition is valued highly (Martin 1985). Due to the dominance of English as a global language, I considered that it was essential for Thai graduates to be competent in this genre in order to immediately apply their knowledge of English to read model texts closely and be able to use the models to improve their own academic writing. The longer-term goals included competence to participate in international academic contexts successfully and communicate with native English speakers effectively.

**The genre of exposition**

As indicated earlier, the genre-based approach draws on the theoretical assumption that specific stages within each genre are realised by predictable and recurring patterns at the lexico-grammatical level and emphasise the explicit teaching of these stages. The following student text illustrates these stages.
Based on the work of Martin and Rothery (1981) and Rothery (1986), the generalised generic structure of the exposition genre is:

\[ \text{Thesis} \wedge \text{Argument N} \wedge (\text{Conclusion}) \]

In this structure, ‘thesis’ is the part of the text in which the writer states his/her position on the issue, and ‘argument’ is concerned with information provided to justify that position. The symbol ‘\(\wedge\)’ indicates that the element to the left of the symbol precedes that to its right. The sign ‘N’ means that...
this part of the text can be repeated. Finally, ‘conclusion’ is the part of the text where the thesis and arguments can be briefly restated. However, Martin and Rothery (1980, 1981) point out that use of this part is optional.

In order to be able to write the exposition effectively, the writer needs also to have control of language features peculiar to the genre because the choice of language features realises the stages of the genre (Butt et al 2000). The dominant language features of written exposition include the use of:

- **Generalised participants** – a whole group of human and non-human participants such as rainforests, plants and animals (Martin and Peters 1985; Derewianka 1990).

- **A variety of processes** that include (a) ‘relational’, establishing the relationship between participants and other participants (for example, rainforests are great natural resources of plants and animals); (b) ‘material’, describing what the participants do or what happens to them (for example, rainforests are being destroyed); and (c) ‘existential’, representing something that exists or happens (for example, there are many kinds of plants and animals in rainforests).

- **Present tense** is normally used because the exposition is concerned with generalised phenomena. However, other tenses can also be used where the timing of the text changes. For example, if the writer makes forecasts, the future tense is appropriate (Derewianka 1990).

- **Passives** may be frequently used to remove human agents and allow the writer to organise information differently.

- **Technical terms** are commonly found in the exposition as they enable members of some specialist disciplines to share knowledge efficiently and precisely (Derewianka 1990, 1998).

- **Causal conjunctions** are used to express causal relations between clauses. Other conjunctions such as temporal and additional are also used as they enable the text to link logically and cohesively (Metropolitan East Disadvantaged Schools Program 1989; Knapp and Watkins 1994).

The generic structure and some grammatical features of the exposition, central to my analysis of how using the genre-based approach affected students’ writing, are included in the exposition teaching unit discussed below.

**The exposition teaching unit**

The development of the exposition teaching unit was in accordance with the four stages of the teaching–learning cycle.
Activities associated with each stage of the cycle are summarised below.

**Stage 1 – Building up the field knowledge:** My aim here was to teach students the exposition genre through the subject of ‘rainforests’. I deliberately chose ‘rainforests’ because the teaching unit was designed when I was studying in Australia and I did not have the opportunity to negotiate with students about a subject in which they might be interested. In Thailand, English is taught as a foreign language. Students have limited access to English in their daily lives. In order to teach students English, it is necessary to bring English materials to the classroom. I considered that ‘rainforests’ might be of interest to students because this is a global issue and it is relevant to students’ real life situations because Thailand is facing a deforestation
problem. Before I left Australia I was able to prepare a range of written and graphic materials to distribute to students both as motivation and as a ‘starter kit’ before they started to write their own texts about the topic. In addition, they had extensive resources in English and Thai to do more research about the topic outside the classroom.

To enable students to research information about rainforests, as well as to practise language skills, a variety of activities were included: brainstorming, dictagloss, watching a video tape and note-taking, and oral group presentation (see Appendix 1 for examples of activities for this stage).

Stage 2 – Modelling of the text: The purpose of this stage was to explicitly teach students the generic structure and grammatical features of exposition so that they became aware of how it is structured to achieve its purpose.

Students were asked to analyse the generic structure of model text 1, ‘Why should we conserve our forests?’ (see Appendix 2), by responding to the following questions:

i) Questions concerning the context of the text:
   • What is the text about?
   • How do you know?
   • Who wrote it?
   • Why did he/she write it?
   • Where do you think you would find a text like this one?

ii) Questions concerning the overall organisation of the model text to find out what the writer did in order to present an argument and how he/she organised each paragraph:
   • What did the writer do first, next and last?
   • What does the first sentence of the first paragraph give information about?
   • What does the second sentence of the first paragraph give information about?
   • What does the last paragraph give information about?

To reinforce students’ understanding, I worked with them on the whiteboard to draw a schematic outline, summarising the generic structure of the exposition, consisting of ‘thesis statement/preview’, ‘arguments’ and ‘conclusion’.

Analysis of grammatical features focused on four relevant features of the
exposition genre, namely participants, processes, tenses and conjunctions. These language features were chosen because they are closely related to traditional grammatical terms, which students had been taught in their previous courses.

I explained the definition of each grammatical feature to students, providing them with examples. I asked them to re-read, individually, the model text and analyze it for each language feature. They then worked in small groups to discuss their findings. At this early stage, I used the traditional terms nouns and verbs that students were familiar with instead of lexico-grammatical terms, participants and processes respectively. This was to allow students to concentrate on acquiring content knowledge rather than having to worry about learning the new terms. The two new lexico-grammatical terms (participants and processes) were introduced to students when they could be related to specific items of knowledge.

To enable students to gain greater understanding of the generic structure and language features of the exposition, I provided them with, and encouraged them to analyze, model text 2, ‘Should rainforests be saved?’ (see Appendix 3).

Stage 3 – Joint-negotiation: To provide students with ‘first-hand’ experience to develop appropriate written language and with good model texts, students and I jointly constructed the exposition. Instead of the rainforests topic, students chose to write the exposition on the topic ‘Should students wear uniforms to the classroom?’ At that time, the university had just announced a policy requiring students to wear uniforms to the classroom. Hence, the uniforms topic was an issue of immediate concern to them.

Stage 4 – Independent construction: The purpose of this stage was to enable students to practice their writing skills and demonstrate their understanding of the genre of exposition. I asked them, independently, to write an essay of approximately 200–250 words on the topic ‘Should rainforests be saved?’ All students wrote texts independently outside the classroom. I was available to all of them by appointment to discuss their work in progress.

In an attempt to provide students with sufficient opportunity to practice writing, I allowed students to submit three drafts for comments. I responded to students’ drafts in terms of their control of generic structure, use of grammatical features relevant to the genre of exposition and development of arguments, but gave the grammatical structure of sentences less attention, as they were not my primary focus.

Data collection and analysis

The amount of data collected for this study was extensive.
Table 1: Summary of the collected data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Quantity*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Students’ diaries</td>
<td>38 note books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Audio-recordings of the informal discussion between students and me at the end of the semester</td>
<td>Approximately 15 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Photocopies of students’ written texts on the exposition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Draft 1</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Draft 2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Final draft</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Not all 42 students submitted every draft or their diaries

The reasons that the above data were collected are as follows.

a) **Photocopies of students’ written texts on the exposition:** During the semester, students were required to write 200–250 word essays to practise their writing skills and demonstrate their understanding of the genre of exposition. All their drafts were photocopied and collected. However, only their final drafts were used for detailed linguistic analysis to shed light on the impact of the genre-based approach.

b) **Students’ diaries:** To gain insights into students’ opinions and perceptions of the genre-based approach, at the end of each lesson I asked students to write diaries in English to reflect, and comment critically about, the activities that they had learned in the classroom. I provided them with guided questions to focus their written responses. Examples of these questions are:
   - What activities have you done?
   - Do you think the activities achieve their purposes? How?
   - What aspects of the teaching process or activities do you like/don’t you like?

c) **Audio-recordings of informal discussions between students and me at the end of the semester:** Close to the end of the semester, I held an informal small group discussion to elicit students’ opinions and attitudes about the differences between the Essay Writing course and other writing courses, and their opinions about the genre-based approach. The students were asked to respond honestly to a set of structured questions:
   - What aspects of the genre-based approach do you consider most/least helpful for your writing? Why?
   - Does the genre-based approach help you to learn to write better? How?
Analyses of the above data drew on two major approaches: linguistic and content analysis.

**Table 2: Data and analysis approaches**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Analysis approaches</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students’ diaries</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio-recordings of the informal discussion</td>
<td>Linguistic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ final drafts of the exposition</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Content analysis focused on the identification of key words or ideas occurring frequently in the texts (for example, Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1991; Descombe 1998). However, Halliday and Hasan’s work (1976, 1985) on lexical cohesion suggests that content analysis may be taken further by analysing the patterns of lexis, one of the major cohesive, text-forming devices in English. Analysis of such patterns provides insights into the systematic ways in which meanings are constructed across interviews or survey responses. Through the content analysis, I was able to select and summarise major issues emerging from the relevant data. The findings informed students’ reactions towards the genre-based approach. They provided insights into these students’ responses to the genre-based approach and into the ways in which pedagogical practices associated with the genre-based approach had to be modified.

Linguistic analysis was undertaken to investigate the extent to which the genre-based approach enabled students to write texts that approximated the model exposition. My analysis of students’ texts drew directly on the description of the exposition developed by Martin and Rothery (1980, 1981) and others (for example, Martin and Peters 1985; Derewianka 1990) as already described above. More specifically, the analysis focused on:

- students’ control of the generic structure of the exposition;
- students’ control of language features specific to exposition. These included participants, processes, tenses, passives and technical terms.

Students’ reactions toward the genre-based approach and the impact of the approach on students’ writing are discussed in the following sections respectively.
**Students’ reactions toward the genre-based approach**

To understand the extent to which the genre-based approach would need to be modified to suit this particular Thai EFL context, students’ reactions need to be taken into account. This part discusses students’ overall reactions toward the approach and at each stage of the teaching–learning cycle. To illustrate relevant points, extracts from transcripts of the informal discussions between students and me and from students’ diaries will be referred to. Students will be referred to by pseudonyms.

Students found that the genre-based program had worthwhile effects on their learning experience. The majority of students (30 of 42) reasoned that the program not only enabled them to know ‘how’ to write, but also to write texts better.

> In this class I learn how to write and how to do. A lot of things, a lot of knowledges and I got it. (Wannee, 2/12/97)

> I think that a new knowledge that I get, it’s very necessary for the writing course. I find the way to write the essay and how I can write it better. (Pattama, 27/1/98)

Students’ views that the genre-based approach helped them to write better are supported by analysis of their expositions. This will be elaborated in the next section.

During the informal discussion carried out at the end of the semester, students revealed their different opinions about each stage of the teaching–learning cycle. When they were asked to nominate the most useful stage of the cycle for their writing from their experience, the majority ranked the independent construction stage as most useful and the joint-negotiation as least useful. Six of the 42 students said that all stages were useful. The following table summarises this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building up the field knowledge</td>
<td>22 of 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling of text</td>
<td>31 of 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint-negotiation</td>
<td>9 of 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent construction</td>
<td>38 of 42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The independent construction stage was regarded as the most useful stage, as students valued the importance of writing practice. The modelling of text...
stage was attractive to students because it met their expectations of what a writing course should be, based on their limited prior experiences. It enabled students to learn ‘how’ to write. By contrast, the field-building and joint-negotiation stages appeared to be resisted by students because these stages were completely new and were outside their experiences and expectations. Students’ reactions towards each stage are summarised below.

a) **Building up the field knowledge:** As indicated earlier, the purpose of this stage was to help students to become familiar with and to have sufficient knowledge of rainforests. To achieve these purposes, students were expected to participate in the following activities: brainstorming, dictagloss, watching a videotape and note-taking, and group presentation.

Approximately half of the students (22 of 42) responded positively towards the field-building activities. They stated that the activities made them realise the significance of researching for information prior to writing and that they could not write factual texts successfully from their prior knowledge and ideas. Some of these students’ responses were:

I like this stage (field-building) … because we can get information from different activities … It is not boring. You gave us sheets, but you didn’t teach us only what is in the sheets. We have to read and find information by ourselves. This makes us know what to write in our texts.

(Burin, 3/2/98)

Because we are writing a factual text, we need to have factual information. Otherwise, we will only put our ideas in.

(Dara, 26/1/98)

However, the other half of the students (20 of 42) responded negatively towards the field-building activities. Of these, 16 argued that, as they were adult learners, they were capable of researching information by themselves. They added that, as I prepared most field-building activities for them, they felt they were being spoon-fed. This hindered them from developing self-directed learning skills. For example:

I think Thai students can find the information by themselves. So, this stage is a waste of time … Since you prepare the information for us, you make us lazy. Ah! Today I don’t have to do anything. I just come to watch a video-tape.

(Sunisa, 29/1/98)

I think you have prepared the lessons well. You tried to encourage us to do a variety of activities. That’s good … But, I think it would be better if you encourage us to be more independent. Otherwise, it is just like you ‘spoon-feed’ us.

(Panida, 19/2/98)
Students’ criticisms that I provided them with too much information indicated that they might not yet clearly understand the purposes of field-building activities. In other words, they might not yet realise that the activities were provided for them so that they would have sufficient information and English language vocabulary necessary to concentrate on writing about the topic prior to beginning writing their texts independently. This stage is also important in that it provides a shared knowledge and vocabulary, allowing assumptions to be made. However, it is good to see these students asserting their independence.

A further factor was that I had prepared the field-building activities while I was in Australia. I did not therefore have an opportunity to negotiate the topics for each of the specific activities with students. Students may have reacted more positively had I developed my program with a better knowledge of these particular students.

Despite some students’ resistance to the field-building stage, evidence from their written texts suggests that this stage is a valuable one. Analysis of their final drafts revealed that most students were able to write texts that were close to successful expositions. Their texts were based on facts relevant to the rainforests topic, as it had been discussed in class, rather than on their personal experiences.

b) **Modelling of text:** The majority of students (31 of 42) had favourable responses towards this stage. Most commented on the value of learning about generic structure and language features:

Today, I know a whole structure of the exposition writing. It was the thesis statement, argument and recommendation ... I think this method of writing will be effective for Thai students because it is an interesting skill. It recommend us to write skillfully, orderly as well. For a few years I haven't learned the method. I was confused and also I didn't know how I could write the good and interesting essay. (Anchana, 26/11/90)

I like most analyzing about verbs – dividing verbal groups into four kinds including v. linking, v. doing, v. saying, and v. thinking. For me, this helps a lot in dividing the essays into groups and in writing each kind of essay. I think being able to tell the kind of the text is the first step to write the same kind of text ourselves. As we know what it is, we would be able to write in the same way. I mean we would be able to use that knowledge to create our text. (Sunisa, 15/1/98)

In common with the field-building stage, the modelling of text stage also drew criticisms from some students (11 of 42). The most common
criticisms concerned the inflexibility of the generic structure. A few (6 of 11) considered that it was more or less like a recipe they needed to follow to be able to write their texts successfully. Also, they complained that it was not creative and limited their imagination.

> I think the idea of generic structure is very conventional and complicated. It limits my idea. I dare not express my ideas because I am afraid that it will be incorrect … I feel that we are like robots which are being fed by you. It does not make us to think and use our imagination.  
> (Ranee, 26/1/98)

In retrospect, I may not have ensured that students understood that the genre of exposition was essentially based on facts, so in this respect is significantly different from any of the genres that allow for or require an imaginative dimension.

The focus on analysis of language features also received some criticisms. Some students (5 of 11) argued that they never used or thought about such language features when they wrote their texts.

> About conjunctions and nouns, I never used them when I wrote my text. I never thought whether it is an abstract noun … Nor I used linking or thinking verbs. Even nowadays, I don’t know what thinking verbs are.  
> (Dara, 26/1/98)

Despite students’ criticisms, analysis of their texts shows that most had acquired a better control of the exposition’s generic structure and were able to use language features (that is, nouns [or participants], verbs [or processes], conjunctions and tenses) particular to the exposition in their texts successfully and effectively.

c) **Joint-negotiation:** Students who found the joint-negotiation stage useful (9 of 42) stated that it enabled them to share ideas with their friends and, importantly, to understand ‘how’ to write the exposition better.

> In my opinion, writing the Exposition text together in class is the useful guide for me … Finally, I would like to say that the complete text that we’ve written together make me feel very good for, now, I have a guide to write my texts. At least, it’s not totally dark (in my brain).  
> (Sunisa, 13/1/98)

However, the majority of students (33 of 42) expressed concerns of various kinds about the joint-negotiation stage. A third of these (11 of 33) stated that their experiences of writing in groups were less than satisfactory because some of their friends were not willing to share their ideas.
I don't like Joint-Negotiation stage because it is quite boring. Some people don't want to share their ideas. So, it was so boring that I do not want to think either. (Anchana, 28/1/98)

In hindsight, this might have been because I asked students to work in groups of three to four, without first adequately explaining to them how to work in groups effectively. Nor did I encourage or check whether students in each group actively participated.

Almost half of the students who mentioned this aspect (15 of 33) questioned the usefulness of the joint-negotiation stage because they felt that I had tended to dominate it. To quote Dara:

At first, I didn't understand why we did it [the joint-negotiation stage] … Later, I found that it was useful because it provided me with guidelines to correct and improve my text. But, it was quite boring in the way that at the end you corrected and re-wrote the text for us. I didn't quite understand this!! (26/11/98)

In retrospect, I might have been too dominant because I was not confident with my own English, particularly with writing skills. When I helped students to revise and edit their texts, I tended to change the information in their texts to be similar to the text that I had asked a native speaker to proofread for me, that is, my model. Consequently, students considered that the jointly constructed texts had been significantly influenced by my ideas.

d) **Independent construction**: Almost all of the students (38 of 42) found this stage to be very valuable, probably because it met their expectations. In addition, the stage provided students with the opportunity to assess their own control of the genre. The following quotes illustrate this:

It's [the independent construction] the most important stage because we can practice writing … The crux of the writing course is to practice writing. (Anchana, 28/1/98)

It [the independent construction] enables me to know how well I can write and to know whether I understand what I have learnt. It gives me chance to put theory into practice. (King-Karn, 29/1/98)

Some students (8 of 42) suggested that they should have been able to spend more time on this stage:

I think we should spend more time on the Independent Construction stage. We need to practice writing. (Anchana, 28/1/98)

To conclude, students thought that their overall experience with genre-based writing was worthwhile, as the approach taught them to
write systematically and to produce texts appropriate to English conventions. However, their reservations about the most and least useful stages of the teaching–learning cycle suggest that the genre-based approach would need to be modified considerably to suit this Thai educational context. This will be discussed further in the final section.

The impact of the genre-based approach on students’ writing

Based on the results of the study, it was evident that the genre-based approach had significant impact on students’ writing. Analyses of students’ final drafts showed that their control of generic structure conformed to that which is typical of the exposition, containing the ‘thesis statement/preview’, ‘arguments’ and ‘conclusion’ (Martin and Rothery 1980; Martin 1985). In addition, most students were able to use language features appropriate to a written exposition. To illustrate this, the text of a student in about the middle proficiency of the class will be discussed. (See Figure 3.)

Analysis of Gaew’s text revealed that she was able to write a text that approximated successful exposition. In the first paragraph, the thesis statement was clearly established, leaving the reader with no doubts as to the purpose of the text, that is, to persuade the reader that rainforests should be saved. The last sentence in the paragraph functions as preview, foreshadowing the arguments to be presented in support of the issue proposed in the thesis statement. This enables the reader to predict that the arguments will be concerned with the effects of rainforest destruction in the areas of the greenhouse effect, the loss of medicinal plants, the reduction of food products and the disappearance of natural places.

Most arguments (arguments 1, 2, 3 and 5) focused on respective issues proposed in the preview. Argument 1 (paragraph 2) is about the greenhouse effect. Argument 2 (paragraph 3) covers the disappearance of plants and herbs used to produce medicines. Argument 3 (paragraph 4) details the consequences of the loss of rainforests in terms of food, drinks and natural products. Argument 5 (paragraph 6) is concerned with the disappearance of natural places. Each argument contains a topic sentence, clearly identifying the issue being focused on, and supporting details, providing evidence and examples to support the issue. However, Argument 4 (paragraph 5) contains information that is slightly different from that presented in the preview. It introduces the notion of provision of ‘other essential materials’. Even though this information is rather unexpected and thus attracts the reader’s interest, it is closely related to the information indicated in the preview. Gaew sums up the arguments and reaffirms her position in the ‘conclusion’ (paragraph 7).
Should rainforests be saved?

Rainforests are thick forests with all trees that are very close together. They are mainly found in tropical areas where there are a lot of rain. Presently, rainforests are being destroyed at harmfulness. The destruction of rainforests causes us a lot of problems, for instance, the greenhouse effect, the loss of medicinal plants, the reduction of food products and the disappearance of natural places.

The destruction of rainforests causes the greenhouse effect. If we cut down a lot of trees, we will have no trees to absorb CO2, and greenhouse gas CO2 and other greenhouse gases allow less heat energy from the sun to escape back in the atmosphere. When the heat energy cannot escape, it will come back to the world and our world will be warmer. The scientists predict that the next century the world’s temperature will increase between 1 degree and 3.5 degrees. This causes the world’s climate to change. For example, temperatures in the UK will become like the Mediterranean countries. Also, the world’s agriculture will be damaged. Moreover the ice-covered areas will melt and pour into the ocean. Some countries such as Bangladesh will suffer from floods.

Another problem is that many plants and herbs used to produce medicines will be destroyed. At least a quarter of important medicines came from the plants which grow in rainforests. Curare, ipecac, wild yam and Madagascar periwinkle are examples of forest plants used to fight major disease such as cancer, leukaemia, muscular and heart diseases. Possibly rainforest plants provide medicine for AIDS. If we destroy the rainforests, these plants will be destroyed also.

Furthermore, the loss of rainforests means the loss of food, drinks and natural products. Rainforests provide us with food and drinks such as rice, chocolates, oranges, lemons. In fact, many food crops actually originated in the rainforests. Although we can grow crops, the qualities of domestic crops are not quite good. They still need their wild relatives in order to save from devastation by diseases.

Besides, rainforests provide us with other essential materials, for example, furniture, cosmetics, stationery, musical instruments and logs for construction. If we wish to consume them in the future, we should stem the rate of rainforest destruction.

Moreover, if rainforests disappear, our natural places will disappear. Rainforests are placed which are full of natural things like shade, water falls, flowers and wild animals. They are beautiful parts of our world. They make us feel relaxed and happy. If rainforests are destroyed, they cannot give us enjoyment.

In conclusion, the destruction of rainforests follows a lot of enormous problems: the greenhouse effect, the loss of medicinal plants, the reduction of food products and the disappearance of natural places. If we do not want to face these problems, we should save rainforest before it will be too late.

Gaew
KKU, 1998

Figure 3: Student text
Analysis of Gaew’s text also shows that she is aware of language features typical of written exposition. She frequently used the present simple tense to present arguments (for example, *rainforests are thick forests with tall trees that are very close together*). She also used future tense to make predictions about the consequences of deforestation (for example, *if we cut down a lot of trees, we will have no trees to absorb CO2, and greenhouse gas*). Passive voice was used to organise information confidently (for example, *if rainforests are destroyed and they are mainly found in tropical areas*), enabling Gaew to begin the clauses with information useful to the reader looking for information (Martin 1986). Her choices of participants were mainly generic (for example, *rainforests, forests and trees*). Many of these were realised by nominal groups (for example, *the destruction of rainforests and the loss of medicinal plants*), allowing her to pack information into clauses more tightly and abstractly (Eggins 1994; Gerot and Wignell 1994). While some specific participants are used to provide examples to justify her arguments (for example, *the UK, Mediterranean countries and Madagascar periwinkle*), they represent a greater level of generality than other particular known participants of the rainforest near Gaew’s home. Only a small number of specific participants were expressed using personal pronouns: *we, our and us*. Consequently, her arguments are more generalised, abstract and impersonal, which is typical of written exposition (Martin 1985; Martin and Peters 1985). The majority of processes were material (for example, *escape, destroy and stem*) and relational (for example, *are, cause and will be*). Her text included a substantial number of technical terms relevant to the rainforests topic (for example, *CO2, AIDS and leukaemia*). She used causal conjunctions competently to express cause and effects between clauses (for example, *if we destroy the rainforests, these plants will be destroyed also*). In addition, she used temporal conjunctions to mark the staging of the text successfully. For example, the conjunctions *furthermore, moreover and in conclusion* are used to mark arguments 3 and 4 and the conclusion in the text respectively.

Gaew’s control of the generic structure and language features makes her text achieve its purpose successfully.

**The implications for applying the genre-based approach in the broader Thai educational context**

While it is difficult to generalise from this one case study, the study does suggest implications for the introduction of the genre-based approach to writing instruction in Thai universities. The results of this analysis of students’ texts and their reactions suggest that the genre-based approach could be an effective approach to teach writing to Thai students. Yet, if it is
to be used effectively and successfully in Thai universities, the following factors need to be taken into consideration:

a) **Choices of topics and genres:** The data from my research suggest that when designing and developing the curriculum content for teaching English to Thai university students, it would improve their ownership of the process to take into account their choices of topics and genres. This implies negotiating with students about topics that interest them across a range of areas, including addressing their short-term needs for writing English in other subjects. In addition, the lecturer would need to provide them with topics that have some depth and which engage students to develop their knowledge of the topic independently to allow the teacher to focus on the relevant language and genre.

b) **Clarification of the language program objectives:** As with the implementation of any educational change, it is important for the teacher to ensure that students clearly understand:

- the objectives of the language program
- the nature of the genre-based approach
- its similarities to and differences from approaches that students have experienced in previous English courses and
- the activities being undertaken.

Realistically, it is difficult for students to understand explanations when a new approach is first introduced and before they have experienced any of the learning activities associated with it. Much of this reiteration needs to occur as supportive feedback to students as they participate in each activity.

c) **Change in teachers’ and students’ expectations:** As noted earlier, the genre-based approach has a number of features that are not a normal part of the teaching of writing in Thai universities. Thai teachers of English, as well as students, will be challenged by the differences. For example, the data from my research showed that some students resisted my teaching in this genre-based language program because I wished them to take a more active and collaborative role in their learning. This was a difficult experience for some as it is not culturally normal in the Thai education context and they had not been required to engage actively in activities in their previous writing courses. In particular, the genre-based approach required students to work both more cooperatively and more independently at the same time. Students’ confusion
was particularly evident during the joint-negotiation stage. In future, if the genre-based program is to be carried out successfully, teachers would need to spend time at the beginning of the semester introducing these adult students to the new, different ways of learning. They would need to repeat these expectations and discuss the proposed outcomes of each activity when students appear reluctant to participate. They would need to provide them with opportunities and time to practise, socialise and become comfortable with these new responsibilities that allow students to work together with the objective of learning from each other.

d) Changes in curriculum development: In adopting a genre-based approach to writing instruction, it would be important for EFL teachers to understand that language (that is, English) learning is interrelated to ‘content’. In other words, as Halliday (1979) has argued, language learning is not simply about language rules or functions. It is also concerned with learning about the world through language and about language.

By learning through language, the teacher provides students with the ‘subject matter’ or ‘content’ that they are expected to learn according to their school or university curriculum, rather than the ‘constructed’ lessons or exercises to teach particular grammatical points or language functions. This provides students with an authentic context in which to learn language. In addition, it has ‘the potential to support both language and curriculum learning, in a reciprocal way’ (Gibbons 2002: 120).

Learning about language concerns the explicit teaching of genre and about genre, especially its generic structure and language features so that students realise how language resources are used to make meaning in the text. This also provides students with language to talk about language – a metalanguage – that enables students to examine how other writers construct texts, in turn applying these techniques in structuring their ideas and expressions in their own texts (Hammond and Hood 1990; Knapp and Watkins 1994).

Conclusion

This research reveals that the genre-based approach offered enhanced outcomes for learning of English writing in this Thai university, conferring many benefits to students. The strengths of the approach encouraging students to think, plan and work at the whole-text level result in graduates having an expectation of working with extended and elaborated ideas. This is seen as necessary in communicating with English native speakers in a variety of business and professional contexts.
While the genre-based approach is not the final step on the long road to improve Thais’ knowledge of English, it has potential to make a significant contribution to the education achievement in Thailand, as one of the students said:

I think there should be more writing courses like this [that is, built around the genre-based approach]. As far as I am concerned, Thai students have writing problem. I think if we could not write well, we could not speak well either as they are related. I think writing practice involves thinking process. If we know how to think and can organize our ideas, we will be able to write and speak well. (Pannee, 5/2/98)

Pannee’s comment emphasises the significance of the integrated language skills curriculum, a distinctive feature of the genre-based approach, in language learning development in the EFL context. Given the positive learning outcomes of the use of this approach in this one context, it would be valuable to implement such an approach in other settings to determine its usefulness across the broader Thai context.

REFERENCES


Appendix 1

Examples of activities for the Building-up the Field Knowledge stage:

1  **Dictagloss:** It aims to provide students with opportunities to use language in order to learn about rainforests. The following paragraph was read out at normal speed to students. They jotted down the key words or phrases and then reconstructed their own passage with approximately the same meaning as the original but from their own understanding or gist of the text.

   Rainforests are dense closed forests found in the areas where it rains regularly. There are two main types. The first one is Tropical rainforests, located close to the equator where the climate is usually warm and wet all year round. Their largest areas are in the Amazon basin of South America, the Congo Basin of Africa and throughout much of Southeast Asia.

   The second one is temperate rainforests, growing in the higher latitude regions where the climate is wet and maritime-like. They cover the Northwest coast of North America, South coast of Chile, Southern Australia and New Zealand.

   Rainforests are homes to a large number of plants and animal species. All are interdependent. If any part of them is harmed or destroyed, the rest would suffer too.

2  **Oral group presentation:** The purposes of this activity are threefold:
   - to enable students to develop language to talk about rainforests;
   - to assist them to develop reading, listening and speaking skills; and
   - to help promote a learning-independent process.

   Students were asked to work in small groups and each to present one of the following topics:
   a) rainforests and food products;
   b) rainforests and plant and animal species;
   c) rainforests and medicines;
   d) rainforests and rainfall and soil erosion;
   e) rainforests and global warming;
   f) rainforests and indigenous people and their cultures.
Example of reading articles for the above topics:

**Rainforests and Medicines:**

Some of the plants of the rainforests have proved to be of great importance to people because they provide vital medicines. At least a quarter of the world’s most important medicines are based on rainforest plants. The variety of treatments from these tropical products includes painkillers, cough mixtures, drugs that relieve anxiety, birth-control pills, anaesthetics, antibiotics and cancer-fighting drugs.

Only one per cent of tropical plants have yet been carefully tested for their potential as medicines. Some scientists believe that as high as ten per cent of untested plants may have the potential to fight cancer. Also, a species of tree found in the Amazon and Australia contains a substance which is being researched in London as a possible treatment for AIDS.

Once a rainforest has been destroyed, it cannot be replaced. Even if only the larger trees are removed, the fragile ecosystem will be destroyed. In the process, a unique community of plants and animals will be lost forever. Many of them are immeasurable value to people. For centuries, people who live in the rainforests have used the chemical compounds of many plant species as drugs and medicines. Now the value of these herbal remedies has been recognized by modern science too. Curare, ipecac, wild yam and Madagascar periwinkle are just a few examples of plants whose compounds are used to fight major diseases such as cancer, leukaemia, muscular and heart diseases. They also form the basic ingredients of birth control hormones, stimulants and tranquilizing drugs. Possibly the best known drug is quinine. Quinine comes from the bark of a South American tree, the Cinchona or ‘Fever Bark’ tree. It has proved to be a very effective cure for malaria.

Appendix 2

Exposition Model Text 1:

**Why should we conserve our forests?**

All around the world forests are being cut down. If we cut down too many trees there will be enormous problems for our world.

**Firstly, trees help stop the greenhouse effect.** They do this by taking in carbon dioxide and by giving off oxygen.

**Secondly, trees prevent soil erosion.** The roots of the trees hold the soil together and stop it being blown away by the wind. They also stop it from being washed away by heavy rain.

**Trees also provide shelter for many native animals and birds.** If we cut down too many trees, many creatures would die because they would have no home.

**Finally trees are a beautiful part of the world,** giving us fresh air, shade and enjoyment.

As you can see, it is vital that forests be conserved for everyone's benefit.

Appendix 3
Exposition Model Text 2:

**Should rainforests be saved?**

Rainforests are complex communities of plants and animals. They occur in tropical to temperate areas which have a high rainfall. They must be considered communities at risk because they are being destroyed at such a rapid rate. Rainforests should be saved since their removal will have considerable impact on the number and variety of organisms, the rate of increase in greenhouse gas levels and on global climate.

The loss of rainforests means the loss of large quantities of unique plant and animal species. The ten percent of land surface which is currently covered by rainforests support forty percent of the world's plant species and fifty percent of the world's animal species. These plant and animal species evolve to suit specific environmental conditions. When these conditions are modified or removed the species will frequently become extinct. If rainforest destruction occurs at the present rate, the people of the late twentieth century will bear total responsibility for the removal of nearly half of the world’s plant and animal species. To prevent this horrific prospect action must be taken to stem the rate of rainforest removal.

Another strong argument for retaining rainforests is the role that all plants play in assisting in the lowering of greenhouse gases. Plants absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen into the air. Carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas, which is produced by burning fossil fuels such as petrol, oil and gas. Greenhouse gases form a blanket around the earth and trap heat. The trapped heat will change the climate in all parts of the world. The consequences of climate change could be disastrous. They include increased flooding, drought, famine and melting of polar ice caps. Removal of large areas of rainforest will increase the amount of greenhouse gases which blanket the planet.

There are clearly many reasons for saving the world’s rainforests. The role of rainforests in the reduction of greenhouse gases and their contribution to the stability of the climate are two important reasons why the world community should stop this widespread destruction of a natural resource.