

THE USE OF GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING TRANSACTIONAL LETTERS

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ABSTRACT

The study's objective is to investigate the effectiveness of Genre approach to the teaching of transactional letters for grade 11 students at Luong The Vinh high school, Dong Nai province, Vietnam. This paper also includes a discussion on a current trend in teaching writing: genre-based approach. Based on its benefits and drawbacks, implications to the teaching of writing will be recommended. Questionnaire, pre-test, post test, interviews and classroom observations will be used to record students' improvement in writing.

Keywords: *Genre approach, transactional letters, benefits, benefits, solutions*

I. RATIONALE AND JUSTIFICATION

Writing transactional letters is part of workplace duty. Therefore, upon entering the job market, students will find themselves writing transactional letters. Teaching transactional letters in high school means preparing students for their future needs. For this anticipation, Vietnamese textbooks include a focus on transactional letters. The preparation for students' future practice is very crucial. According to Einstein (1954) cited in Rothstein et al (2007) "The most important method of education always has consisted of that in which the pupil was urged to actual performance."

Yet, in the reality of teaching English, I have noticed that students show very little interest in writing skills in English, which is also a skill that students find very challenging. When assigned writing tasks, they often copy from answer books or do not write at all. The writing exercises in the textbooks only provide the requirements without any guiding steps. This creates considerable difficulties and confusion for both teachers and students.

Then I was introduced to the genre-based approach. I find that genre approach, with the feature of showing learners the relation between texts and social contexts as well as providing them with explicit language instructions, might help to improve my students' writing. These scaffoldings may free the students from the anxieties of not knowing anything to write about. In this research, I am going to look at how to guide students to write transactional letters through the genre approach. The definition of terms will be provided later in this paper.

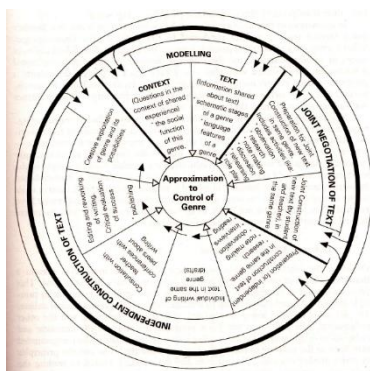
II. THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE RESEARCH

The genre-based writing instruction method emerged in the 1970s in Australia and has had a positive impact on the country's education system. Not only is this method widely applied in Australia, but it is also highly regarded in other countries such as North America and England (Gee, 1977; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993).

1. Definition of the genre approach:

The genre approach is a functional method based on the theoretical framework of functional linguistics developed by the British linguist Halliday. The genre approach in writing instruction aims to provide learners with the necessary language to develop texts according to different genres and specific purposes (Byram, 2004). The genre approach helps learners see the relationship between communicative purpose, texts, and the language used.

2. The processes of the genre method are illustrated in the diagram by Callaghan, Knapp, and Noble as follows.



Processes of the genre method

2.1 Analysis Phase:

This stage introduces the types of texts that students will write, analyzes the purpose of the texts as well as the language features including structures, grammatical aspects, vocabulary, and the functions of the genre.

2.2 Cooperative Writing Stage

In this stage, the teacher and students write together on a topic, discussing and contributing ideas for the writing. Students can write in pairs or groups. The teacher's assistance will gradually decrease as they begin to write independently.

2.3 Independent Writing Stage

Students write independently, review and correct their works, and conduct peer checks with their group members. The teacher provides feedback and advice. Students may write and revise several times before submitting their work, which will be formally assessed.

3. Characteristics of Transactional Letters

Transactional letters are often related to daily life and serve specific purposes such as informing, confirming, or complaining. These letters require a formal writing style and adhere to high conventions, thus the language used in them is very distinctive. According to Derewianka (1990:18) as cited in Đặng Thị Kim Anh, "Different cultures have very different ways of using text structures. When we examine the structure of a text, to understand its purpose, we pay attention to its genre."

4. Advantages and Disadvantages of the Genre Approach

The genre approach has attracted significant attention and interest from a large number of authors and has received both praise and criticism from educators. This method has been studied for its strengths as well as its limitations in language teaching, particularly in writing instruction. The first advantage of the genre approach is that it helps learners see the relationship between social context and types of texts. According to Bamforth (1993) quoted in Nunan (2001) "the genre approach emphasizes the conventional nature of the binding relationship between language and social context" (p. 94). Callaghan, Knapp, and Noble (1993) also point out that "it is crucial for students to understand the relationship between social context and genres, as genres are shaped by the social purposes they serve. Therefore, an effective text must fulfill the writer's intention and meet the reader's needs" (Urquhart, 2005). When writing transactional letters, the writer must consider who their reader is and accordingly use appropriate text structures and vocabulary.

The second advantage of the genre approach is that it provides students with the appropriate language for a specific genre to achieve a communicative purpose. In this method, teachers use typical text types to help students become familiar with and analyze the form, function, structure, and vocabulary needed in that genre. "Providing the necessary words or phrases for the genre is an essential preparation for students" (Lewis and Wray, 1992, p. 1).

One outstanding advantage of the genre approach is its broad applicability. Several studies conducted in different contexts have shown that the genre approach can be widely applied to learners at various levels. Lewis and Wray (1992) conducted an experimental study with children of average writing ability and found this method to be very beneficial. Research on low-level English as a foreign language students conducted by Firkins (2007) has also proven successful.

This approach has also been studied in the context of foreign language teaching in Japan and South Korea and has received positive feedback. Kim (2007) concluded that the genre method can be effective for Korean students. Cheng (2007) effectively applied it to teach writing to Chinese students.

However, this method has also received some criticism as follows: Some argue that this method will limit students' creativity and make them passive. However, Nunan (1991) states that "Creativity, and the freedom to create, can only exist within certain limits, and for communication to be effective for foreign language learners, mastering conventions is a central task" (p. 88). Furthermore, if pair and group activities are used effectively to maximize student participation, this method can encourage students to express themselves as well as come up with ideas for their writing. To help students avoid dependence on teachers' model essays, Knapp & Watkins (2005) suggest developing students' reading skills. Nunan (1999) also advises students to read various texts to examine the structure and language use of the texts.

From the analyses above, it is clear that the advantages of the genre approach are evident. However, to ensure that this method can be applied effectively, it still needs to be reviewed and researched.

III. RESEARCH AIMS

I have two objectives when conducting this research as follows:

- To investigate whether the genre-based approach is effective and feasible in the foreign language learning environment of Vietnam;
- To propose solutions to improve students' writing skills.

IV. SUBJECTS AND RESEARCH METHODS

1. Subjects

I have chosen class 11M with 50 students as the experimental group and class 11P with 45 students as the controlled group. The group of teachers applying this method are at Luong The Vinh High School. Class 11P were taught writing transactional letters with the old method while class 11M were taught with genre-based approach.

2. Methods

Methods such as questionnaires, test analysis, and classroom observation are used to ensure the reliability of the collected results.

2.1 Questionnaires

The students from classes 11M and 11P at Luong The Vinh High School were given a pre-questionnaire consisting of 15 different questions, including open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions, etc. (Appendix 1) and 24 post-questionnaire questions (Appendix 2).

2.2 Test Analysis

The tests include categories such as: writing thank-you letters, requesting information, and making complaints, which are used for research purposes. These text types are part of the students' curriculum (see Appendix 3). Students must demonstrate their writing skills at both fluency and accuracy levels. The tests have been evaluated based on criteria of content knowledge (ideas, organization, conventions, style, and genre) as well as language knowledge (grammar, spelling, punctuation) to identify the students' weakest points (see Appendix 4).

2.3 Classroom Observation

The observation method was conducted in the above mentioned 2 classes: 11M and 11P. The teaching sessions were observed closely. The content of the observation and the criteria for analysis and evaluation are detailed in the observation checklist (see Appendix 5).

Two teachers, Dang Thi Tu teaching class 11M and Le Thi Hoa teaching class 11P at Luong The Vinh High School took part in my research. They were introduced to this method, discussed the lesson plan for the letter writing session (Appendix 6), and collaborated on the learning materials for the lesson (Appendix 7). Ms. Hoa taught how to write transactional letters in the old method and Ms. Tu with genre-based approach.

V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

1. Questionnaires

Table 1: Attitudes towards writing in English before the experiment

Attitudes	11 M	Ratio %	11 P	Ratio %	Percentage difference (%)
Loving the writing course and be able to write letters in English confidently	10	20	12	26	6
Realizing the importance of reading to the writing skill	12	24	10	22	2

Table 2: The regular practices when writing in English before the experiment

Practices	11M	Ratio %	11P	Ratio %	Percentage difference %
Read texts in English	0	0	2	4,4	4.4
Working in groups to brainstorm for ideas	50	100	45	100	0
Writing drafts	0	0	5	11	11
Thinking in Vietnamese then translating into English	50	100	40	88,8	11,2

Table 3: Attitudes towards writing in English after the experiment

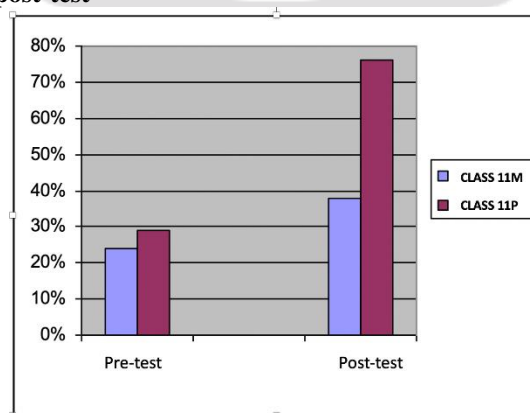
Attitudes	11M	Ratio %	11P	Ratio %	Percentage difference %
Love the writing course and be able to write letters in English confidently	38	76	15	33	43
Realizing the importance of reading to the writing skill	36	72	14	31	41

Table 4: The regular practices when writing in English after the experiment

Practices	11M	Ratio %	11P	Ratio %	Percentage difference %
Reading texts in English	21	42	2	4,4	37,6
Working in groups to brainstorm for ideas	50	100	45	100	0
Writing drafts	27	54	5	11	43
Thinking in Vietnamese then translate into English	45	90	40	88,8	1,2

2. Pre-test and post-test

Table 5: Results of pre-test and post-test



Results of pre-test and post-test

The results chart shows no significant difference in progress for the controlled group 11P, but in the experimental group 11M, progress is notably demonstrated (47%).

3. Class observations

Observing the lessons in class 11M shows that students collaborate well during the analysis phase and enjoy creating mind maps together. However, they face difficulties during the independent writing phase. Some students were unable to complete their writing and need more time to finish.

The observation in class 11P shows that the students work actively and enthusiastically participate in brainstorming activities and contribute vocabulary. They engage quite well in mind map and graphic organizer activities. The classroom atmosphere is lively and quite positive.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The investigation results show that the students in the experimental group 11M have significantly changed their perceptions and attitudes towards learning English in general and writing in particular. They pay more attention to the purpose of different genres as well as the linguistic features of each text when reading. The results of the pre-test and post-test reflect the progress of class 11M: 47% compared to class 11P: 14%. However, grammar and vocabulary remain the weakest points for the students, even though the curriculum places a strong emphasis on learning vocabulary and structures. Additionally, during the implementation of this method, I encountered some difficulties such as insufficient teaching time. With a duration of 45 minutes for a writing lesson, it is too short; in the next writing lesson, students learn a different topic, making it very challenging to fully implement all stages of this method.

Based on the findings, I would like to propose some solutions as follows:

- Reduce the number of topics and types that students have to write about so that they have enough time to master one type and practice it thoroughly;
- In addition to letter writing, it is advisable to include email writing, as this is an activity that students frequently use and is becoming increasingly popular in social life;
- In exams and assessments, there should be text-level writing tasks instead of just sentence-level tasks;
- Students should be encouraged to make friends through letters to exchange correspondence or emails;

Due to the limited duration of the project and the small number of participating students, the results of the project are still limited. In the next school year, I will continue this project with a larger number of participants to once again confirm the feasibility of this method.

I would like to share these findings with my colleagues and hope to receive sincere feedback. I hope that this research will make a small contribution to improving the writing skills of students in high schools in Dong Nai Province.

VII. REFERENCES

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VIII. APPENDIXES**Appendix 1 - Pre-questionnaire**

This questionnaire is designed to find out your attitude towards writing in English and your writing habits. Please answer all the questions. Your answers will be kept confidential.
Thank you.

A. Attitude towards writing

Please read the following statements very carefully. Then put a (√) in the appropriate column which indicates the extent to which you agree with the statement.

	Strongly agree (5)	Agree (4)	Uncertain (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)
1. I like writing					
2. I think writing is interesting					
3. I think it is easy to write English letters.					
4. I feel confident when I write in English					
5. I need teacher's guidance.					
6. I think grammar is more important than content.					
7. I feel reading is good for writing.					

B. Writing habits

	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Uncertain (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)
8. I read other related texts.					
9. I work in pairs and groups.					
10. I make a plan before I write.					
11. I rely on the ideas given by teacher.					
12. I write drafts.					
13. I think in Vietnamese then I translate into English.					
14. I only think in English.					
15. I proof-read.					

C. Evaluation of the program**1. The writing programme**

	Very much (5)	Much (4)	Not sure (3)	Not much (2)	Not at all (1)
16. How much do you like the writing program?					
17. How useful the writing program helps your writing?					
18. How much has your writing improved?					

2. Writing strategies

(Please tick)

How useful are the following strategies	Very useful (5)	Useful (4)	Not sure (3)	Not useful (2)	Not useful at all (1)
19. Modeling of text types					
20. Exploring text structure					
21. Exploring grammar and vocabulary features					
22. Jigsaw reading					
23. Graphic organizers					
24. Compare texts of the same genre					

Appendix 2 - Post-questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to find out your attitude towards writing in English and your writing habits. Please answer all the questions. Your answers will be kept confidential.
Thank you.

A. Attitude towards writing

Please read the following statements very carefully. Then put a (√) in the appropriate column which indicates the extent to which you agree with the statement.

	Strongly agree (5)	Agree (4)	Uncertain (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)
1. I like writing.					
2. I think writing is interesting.					
3. I think it is easy to write English letters.					
4. I feel confident when I write in English.					
5. I need teacher's guidance.					
6. I think grammar is more important than content.					
7. I feel reading is good for writing.					

B. Writing habits

	Strongly agree (5)	Agree (4)	Uncertain (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)
8. I read other related texts.					
9. I work in pairs and groups.					
10. I make a plan before I write.					
11. I rely on the ideas given by teacher.					
12. I write drafts.					
13. I think in Vietnamese then I translate into English.					
14. I only think in English.					
15. I proof-read.					

C. Evaluation of the program**1. The writing programme**

	Very much (5)	Much (4)	Not sure (3)	Not much (2)	Not at all (1)
16. How much do you like the writing program?					
17. How useful the writing program helps your writing?					
18. How much has your writing improved?					

2. Writing strategies

(Please tick)

How useful are the following strategies	Very useful (5)	Useful (4)	Not sure (3)	Not useful (2)	Not useful at all (1)
19. Modeling of text types					
20. Exploring text structure					
21. Exploring grammar and vocabulary features					
22. Jigsaw reading					
23. Graphic organizers					

24. Compare texts of the same genre					
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Appendix 3 - Tests

PRE-TEST

Class : _____
Name : _____
Date : _____

You have received a nice present from your friend. In about 100 words, write a letter to your friend, thanking him or her for the present. Tell him/ her you like the present very much and explain why.

POST-TEST 1

Class : _____
Name : _____
Date : _____

Your school club has received a donation of \$5,000 from one of the local organizations. The money will be used for buying books for the school library. Write a letter to the organization, acknowledging the receipt of the donation and expressing gratitude.

POST-TEST 2

Class : _____
Name : _____
Date : _____

Imagine you are the secretary of the English-speaking contest. You have received a letter from a student asking for information about the competition. You write a letter to respond to her request. You should answer to these details:

- Number of participants;
- Venue;
- Date;
- Arrival time;
- Prize
- Contact information

POST-TEST 3

Class : _____
Name : _____
Date : _____

After a year in the job, the director of Thanh Ba Post Office has invited residents in the neighborhood to write letters to him, describing the qualities of the services they have received. Imagine that you have been using some of the services provided by Thanh Ba Post Office. Write a letter to the director of Thanh Ba Post Office. You can give feedback on these things:

- The opening hours;
- The quality of the equipment;
- The security conditions;
- The attitude of the staff;
- The prices of the services;
- The punctuality of delivery

Appendix 4

WRITING MARKING SCHEME

Bands	Criteria
26-30	Ideas: All ideas are relevant and well developed.

	<p>Organization: Organization of ideas is coherent and well- organized. Very smooth flow of ideas with excellent use of cohesive devices.</p> <p>Language: Very frequent use of excellent complex sentences without errors. Evident display of impressive creativity throughout the writing.</p>
21-25	<p>Ideas: Most ideas are relevant and well developed.</p> <p>Organization: Organization of ideas is coherent and well- organized. Smooth flow of ideas with good use of cohesive devices.</p> <p>Language: Frequent use of complex sentences without errors. Good display of impressive creativity throughout the writing.</p>
16-20	<p>Ideas: Some ideas are relevant and well developed.</p> <p>Organization: Organization of ideas is satisfactorily coherent. Flow of ideas is occasionally hindered by inappropriate topic and supportive sentences. Satisfactory use of cohesive devices.</p> <p>Language: Frequent use of complex sentences with rather frequent minor errors and occasional gross errors are evident. Satisfactory display of impressive creativity throughout the writing.</p>
11-15	<p>Ideas: Some ideas lack elaboration and support.</p> <p>Organization: Organization of ideas is generally weak. Flow of ideas is impeded with one or two weak paragraphs. Fair use of cohesive devices.</p> <p>Language: Frequent use of compound sentences. Complex sentences are few with frequent minor errors and occasional gross errors.</p>
6-10	<p>Ideas: Many ideas lack elaboration and support.</p> <p>Organization: Organization of ideas is evidently weak. Flow of ideas is erratic and awkward. Most paragraphs are poor with frequent inappropriate topics.</p> <p>Language: Most compound and simple sentences are used. Complex sentences are hardly used with frequent gross errors.</p>
0-5	<p>Ideas: Ideas are rarely adequate, and lack of logic.</p> <p>Organization: Coherence is absent in the text.</p> <p>Language: Numerous errors impede fluency of communication</p>

Appendix 5

CLASS OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Items for observation	Comments
1. How does the teacher help students to develop a sense of audience?	
2. Are the tasks proposed by the teacher help students see the relation of context and text?	
3. Are students encouraged to work in groups and pairs?	
4. Does the teacher provide students with strategies to explore the text type? a. sequencing stages, b. constructing flowcharts, c. evaluating models of text, d. comparing examples of the text types, e. building vocabulary.	
5. Does the teacher provide strategies for generating ideas through....? a. using focused questions b. using graphic organizer. c. using pictures d. using mind maps e. others	
6. How do the students respond to exploring genre activities?	
7. How do the students respond to generating ideas activities?	
8. The interaction between the teacher and the students	
9. How do students work in pairs and groups?	
10. How do students get involved in the activities?	

Appendix 6**Lesson plan using genre-based approach****UNIT 4: WRITING A THANK YOU LETTER****Objectives:**

- Students will be aware of the social context and relate it to the genre.
- They will gain the knowledge of the text structure and language features of a thank you letter.
- They will be able to construct the text with the assistance of groups and peers.
- They will be able to apply the knowledge to produce their own writing

STAGES	TEACHER'S ACTIVITY	STUDENTS' ACTIVITY
BUILDING THE FIELD Build the knowledge of a thank you letter.	<p>Activity 1. Match the pictures of actions with pictures of responses. The aims of the activity is to make students understand that giving thanks is necessary when other people help you or do something good to you.</p> <p>Activity 2. Focused questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What should we do in return? 2. How can we give thanks to other people? <p>Activity 3. Jigsaw reading Deliver a jumbled letter. This activity helps students aware the structure</p>	<p>Work in groups, match the pictures.</p> <p>Expected answers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - give thanks/ gratitude - write emails/ write letters <p>Work in groups, read and rearrange the order of the passages to make a complete letter. Explain why they rearrange the letter that way</p>
MODELING THE TEXT TYPE	<p>Deliver a complete letter to students.</p> <p>Activity 4. Complete the graphic organizer The purpose of this activity is to identify the purpose and the use of the text.</p> <p>Activity 5. Analyze the text for text structure and language feature.</p> <p>Activity 6. Compare a successful text with one which has not achieved its purpose.</p>	<p>Read the letter and discuss these issues: Situation: Audience Purpose: Tone:</p> <p>Work in groups, work out which letter is a successful one and explain why.</p>
JOINT CONSTRUCTION	<p>Activity 7 Teacher writes a thank you letter with the class on.</p>	
DEPENDENT WRITING	<p>Activity 8 Write another letter</p>	Work individually

Appendix 7 - handouts – learning materials**1. Sample - Thank You Letter for Exploring Genre**

Dear Dr. Brown:

I appreciated the opportunity I had to interview with you last week at UIS. I was very impressed with your perspective of the graduate program in Public Health, and I thank you for taking time to discuss your department's curriculum and experiential learning opportunities with me.

As I will be graduating in May 2009 with a bachelor’s degree in Biology, I feel that my education will help me to excel in the field of public health. However, I feel that my internship and volunteer experience in the public policy sphere give me a unique perspective on public health, and make me an ideal candidate for this graduate program.

Thank you again for your time meeting me and providing valuable advice. I look forward to the next step in the application process and future opportunities that may arise. Please feel free to contact me if you need any additional information at 217-555-5555.

Sincerely,
Alan smith

2. Sample Letters for Comparison

Letter 1

California Investments, Inc.
25 Sacramento Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear Mr. Alexander,

Thank you for taking the time to discuss the insurance broker position at California Investments, Inc., with me. After meeting with you and observing the company's operations, I am further convinced that my background and skills coincide well with your needs. I really appreciate that you took so much time to acquaint me with the company. It is no wonder that California Investments retains its employees for so long. I feel I could learn a great deal from you and would certainly enjoy working with you. In addition to my qualifications and experience, I will bring excellent work habits and judgment to this position. With the countless demands on your time, I am sure that you require people who can be trusted to carry out their responsibilities with minimal supervision. I look forward to hearing from you concerning your hiring decision. Again, thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
John Oakley

Letter 2

Dr. Steven Page
Rolling Hills School Health Clinic
5 Main Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear Dr. Page:

Thank you so much for taking the time to interview me today for the social worker position.

I felt a wonderful rapport not only with you, but with the whole Rolling Hills School Health Clinic staff. I am more convinced than ever that I will fit in beautifully as a member of the team and contribute my skills and talents for the benefit of schoolchildren in the Rolling Hills district. I can make myself available for any further discussions of my qualifications that may be needed. Again, Dr. Page, I very much appreciate you and your staff taking so much time to talk with me about this exciting opportunity.

Sincerely,
John Oakley

3. Graphic Organizer

Situation	
Text type	
Purpose	
Audience	
Tone	
Points to consider -Content -Criteria -Language -Tense	

Greetings	
Thank	
Reasons	
Closing	

