

Promoting Genre Knowledge of Writing M.A. Research Proposal: The Case of EFL Students of Applied Linguistics

¹Mohammad Hossein Ghane

²Golnar Mazdayasna*

³Ali Akbar Jabbari

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Abstract

There has been ongoing controversy over the effectiveness of explicit genre instruction, and relatively scant attention has been paid to the explicit genre-based instruction of an academic research paper's whole sections simultaneously, construed as different genres. This study focused on instruction of generic sections of the M.A. research proposal (RP). The participants were 22 graduate students majoring in TEFL at an Iranian state university. Based on the findings of a needs analysis questionnaire administered at the beginning of the semester, students were taught how to write an RP. Employing different models (i.e., Swales, 1990; Pho, 2008; Lore, 2004), the moves and steps of different sections of an RP in conjunction with the related lexico-grammatical features were inductively highlighted. The students' first proposals submitted at the beginning of the semester and final proposals submitted at the end of the semester were compared. Results revealed the explicit genre-based instruction promoted students' genre acquisition as well as some aspects of writing competence. While students appeared to have an uncertain view of an RP in their first proposals as they missed some of the moves, especially *Establish a Niche*, in their final proposals they catered for different moves and the related steps to indicate their relative grasp of an RP pattern for its communicative purpose realization. Correspondingly, in an open-ended questionnaire, students contended their expertise and self-confidence in writing and reading academic texts significantly increased due to the awareness-raising activities. The pedagogical findings of the study are highlighted.

Keywords: Genre-based Instruction, Research Proposal, Awareness Raising Activities, Feedback, Self-confidence

1. Introduction

As a formidable task for EFL students, writing for academic purposes has been at the center of attention over the past three decades. As graduate students are expected to develop academic writing skills to be able to disseminate their discoveries, graduate students in EFL contexts face real writing challenges (Chen & Nassaji, 2015). According to Yasuda (2011), EFL students lack an understanding of the relationship between the variables of a specific genre, that is, purpose, audience, and linguistic features, which prevents them from considering genre as a social action. Consequently, there is an urgent need to make EFL students aware of a genre's rhetorical demands, since "a writer is unable to produce an effective written product without knowledge of the norms and conventions of the environment within which they write" (Mitchell, McMillan, Lobchuk, Nickel, Rabbani, & Li, 2021, p.2).

There are some studies which have addressed the problems EFL graduate and postgraduate students encounter in academic writing (e.g., Cheung, 2010; Cho, 2004; Kwan, 2010; Li, 2006a,

¹ Ph.D. candidate in TEFL, ghane57@yahoo.com; Department of English Language and Literature, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran.

² Associate professor of Applied Linguistics (Corresponding author), gmazdayasna@yazd.ac.ir; Department of English Language and Literature, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran.

³ Associate professor, of Applied Linguistics, jabbari@yazd.ac.ir; Department of English Language and Literature, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran.

2006b, 2007). However, as Alinasab, Gholami, and Mohammadnia (2021) and Starfield and Paltridge (2019) have argued, empirical studies reporting on EFL graduate students' academic writing are limited. It specifically relates to the effect of explicit genre-based instruction on students' academic writing (Huang, 2014; Storch & Tapper, 2009). Therefore, it would stand to reason to address the effect of explicit genre-based instruction on EFL graduate students' academic writing. Writing an RP was chosen as the study focus because graduate students' academic writing challenges begin with writing an RP as a prerequisite for writing their theses. Indeed, an RP's "persuasive" (Connor & Mauranen, 1999, p.48) nature renders writing it challenging for EFL students who are not acquainted with concept of the genre and its linguistic features. A few studies (e.g. Dugartsyrenova, 2020) have been implemented to help undergraduate students craft their RPs; however, to the best of our knowledge, a small number of studies have been conducted in the Iranian context to examine the effect of implementing genre-based instruction on graduate students' academic research writing. Therefore, this study attempted to investigate the extent to which explicit genre-based instruction helped Iranian graduate students develop their RP writing skills.

First of all, a brief literature review on genre-based pedagogy is presented. Subsequently, a framework containing models for teaching different sections of an RP is introduced. Next, data sources and analyses will be described to reveal the students' genre structure development and its communicative purposes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Genre-based Pedagogy

Genre is traditionally referred to as a set of communicative events recognized by a discourse community through the communicative purposes it fulfills (Swales, 1990). This definition underscores the paramount importance of social context in genre perspective (Hyland, 2003). In other words, from a genre viewpoint, text and context are interrelated. For a text to be contextually appropriate, the conventions characterizing a genre must be followed since "without conventions, we would not have genre" (Tardy, 2016, p.8). In brief, knowing a genre entails an awareness of the genre content and context, and the rhetorical along with the lexico-grammatical conventions (Tardy). Genre scholarship has been customarily discussed in terms of three traditions of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and North American New Rhetoric (Hyon, 1996, 2001).

Among the three traditions, ESP school, characterized by explicit instruction of a series of reproducible moves and steps (Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Hyland, 2007; Lee & Swales, 2006; Swales, 1990), has been effective by focusing on students' communicative needs of writing in their target situations (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) in terms of both language and context. As a "visible pedagogy" (Hyland, 2004, p.11), ESP genre-based pedagogies make clarifications on what is to be learned, thereby supporting students to participate effectively in authentic writing situations that incorporate social, political, and cultural needs (Hyland, 2007). According to Hyland (2007), genre pedagogies "promise very real benefits for learners as they pull together language, content, and context, while offering teachers a means of presenting students with explicit and systematic explanations of the ways writing works to communicate" (p.150). The genre approach alerts learners that texts are formed for various purposes and readers, which in tandem influence the macro and micro features of a text (Yasuda, 2011). Correspondingly, teachers can raise students' awareness of genres by providing them with the related textual structures along with clear options of specific linguistic features to assist them in writing their texts appropriately and applying the conventions of the discourse community in which they require to communicate.

A sizeable number of studies have shown the benefits of a genre-based approach in writing instruction. Deng, Chen, and Zhang (2014b) demonstrate that L2 students' reading and writing skills can be improved via genre-based instruction. In another study, Almacioglu and Okan (2018) reveal that it boosts writing performance in L2. Similarly, Thienthong (2016) concludes that GBI promotes students' academic writing proficiency. Other empirical studies also reflect the benefits of GBI concerning writing competence in various genres, such as journal papers (Lo, Liu, & Wang, 2014;

Alinasab, Gholami, & Mohammadnia, 2021), descriptive essays (Khatib & Mirzaii, 2016), argumentative essays (Khodabandeh, Jafarigohar, Soleimani, & Hemmati, 2013), letter writing skills (Rashidi & Mazdayasna, 2016), and e-mail writing (Yasuda, 2011) to name just a few.

For instance, Lo, Liu, and Wang (2014) investigated the effectiveness and usability of, as perceived by the participants, a tutorial writing system based on genre-based writing instruction. Data was collected through questionnaires (N=35) and SEM as well as semi-structured interviews. The results showed the participants perceived that the content was effective in teaching genre because of the presentation of various forms of support and examples.

In another study, Rashidi and Mazdayasna (2016), highlighting the presentation of appropriate moves and lexico-grammatical features, taught 34 undergraduate textile engineering students at an Iranian university how to write 4 types of business letters. After the genre-based instruction, the participants were found to have made great improvement in different aspects of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Raising the participants' genre awareness also contributed to their positive attitudes underlying the production of high-quality texts.

In a more recent study, Alinasab, Gholami, and Mohammadnia (2021) incorporated genre-based revision strategies of *addition*, *deletion*, *reformulation*, *substitution*, *translation*, and *expansion*. They found that the strategies contributed to the graduate students' research article genre literacy in light of move-step frameworks.

Although there is voluminous research on the effects of genre-based instruction on writing, a careful study in the literature reveals that relatively scant pedagogical attention has been paid to the generic structure of an academic research paper's whole sections simultaneously, which are construed as different genres (Bhatia, 1993). Therefore, shaping a framework through employing different models, this study intended to realize the extent to which explicit genre-based instruction raises students' genre awareness on a proposal's generic sections.

2.2. *Explicit vs. Implicit Genre-based Pedagogy*

Along with the advent of genre-oriented writing instruction, debates on the effectiveness of its explicit treatment also emerged. On account of being a social activity, some researchers questioned the usefulness of explicit instruction of genre (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). Freedman (1993), regarding genre as tacit knowledge acquired implicitly, argued that teachers fail to transfer the cultural, political, and social issues of genre in the classroom. According to him, the explicit instruction of genre can even have a detrimental effect on students if teachers are not familiar enough with the conventions of the genre they are teaching. Some other studies (e.g. Dias, Freedman, Medway & Pare, 1999), however, believe in a restricted effect of explicit genre-based instruction, if students are exposed to authentic tasks involving the genre. For instance, Dias (1994) engaged history students with authentic texts rather than linguistic forms which helped them internalize the discipline's tenets.

In contrast, as mentioned earlier, a large volume of research advocates focusing explicitly on generic structures. Hyland (2007) suggests that explicit and systematic instruction of genre is useful to non-native writers of English since due to their various linguistic and educational backgrounds, they may have different conceptualizations about the genre and its social context. In this regard, Tardy (2009), for instance, showed that ESL graduate students learned how to satisfy the rhetorical purposes by exploiting linguistic resources that persuaded them to view specific language use in its context.

Due to the ongoing controversy over explicit genre instruction, it is advisable to conduct a research in the Iranian intact context, where the dominant product-oriented approach to writing is void of any functional approach implementation to explain how a text achieves its communicative purpose. As Tavakoli and Tavakol (2018) assert, "the unreliable and unworthy models of EFL instruction (in Iran) by no means prepare the students to fulfill the expectations of the academic and professional community of which they aspire to become full members" (p. 35). As Naghdipour (2016) points out "one way to tackle this problem is to resort to genre-informed curricula".

Tavakoli and Tavakol (2018) believe that the Iranian EAP context requires “well-contextualized EAP instruction based on continuous feedback from students” (p.35), which prepares them to participate in their professional communities. As a result, the current study explored the effectiveness of explicit genre-based instruction on graduate students’ RP writing abilities and their perceptions in this regard. Therefore, this study addressed the following research questions:

Research Question One: To what extent does explicit genre-based instruction help students improve their genre awareness and writing competence via incorporating RP writing?

Research Question Two: What are students’ attitudes and beliefs regarding the genre-based approach to teaching proposal writing skills?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 22 Iranian graduate students (19 females and 3 males) majoring in TEFL at Yazd state-run university in Iran. Their age range was 23 to 29 years. They were recruited through convenience sampling. The reason for the selection of these students was that they are required to write their RPs and, most importantly, their RPs should be approved by the teaching staff members of the English department before writing their M.A. theses in the fourth semester.

As graduate TEFL students, all of the participants had passed their B.A. degrees in English Literature or English Translation. The medium of instruction is English in these classes. It is worth mentioning that in Iran, the university entrance exam for the MA levels is administered each year based on which students are screened. To choose TEFL at MA level, students have to pass the specialized English entrance exam designed and administered by the Assessment Organization in Iran. Therefore, it is safe to say that our sample of graduate students were homogeneous in terms of their L2 proficiency level.

The graduate students had to pass a two-credit course entitled ‘Seminar’ in the third semester. Based on the felt or subjective needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) of the students, the teacher (the first author) took this opportunity for the first time to increase their awareness regarding writing an RP, since in their previous courses they had not received any instruction in this regard. Furthermore, the results of a needs analysis questionnaire designed by the researcher (second author) and distributed to the students at the beginning of the semester confirmed the fact that they did not have any prior exposure to genre-based writing pedagogy.

3.2. Instruction Design

As mentioned earlier, the aim of conducting this study was to raise graduate students’ awareness regarding the functional goals of different sections of RPs “which are conventionally associated with the same communicative context but have different communicative purposes” (Bhatia, 1993, p.100) and, therefore, construed as different genres. There are several models for highlighting the generic structure of academic texts such as Bhatia (1993), Kwan (2006), Lore (2004), Swales (1990, 2004), and Tseng (2018) among others. However, these models highlight a single segment of academic texts and do not emphasize the generic structuring of full-length academic texts. A few researchers, such as Nwogu (1997) and Posteguillo (1999) have utilized move analysis to teach the whole sections of articles; however, these studies solely indicated the moves and did not scrutinize the steps (Maswana, Kanamaru & Tajino, 2015).

To develop a framework for the genre instruction, the related segments of some applied linguistics research articles (i.e., Introduction, Literature review, Method, and Abstract sections) published in prestigious journals were selected for move analysis, considering that there are “certain commonalities in the move composition of student proposals and that of RAs” and “the fact that RAs are far more readily accessible” (Dugartsyrenova, 2020, p.3). Based on the results of the sequential move and step analysis of the selected texts, a framework was conceptualized utilizing Swales’ (1990) model for teaching the overlapping sections of Introduction and Literature review, as they are similar in generic structure although with some functional differences (Kwan, 2006), Pho’s (2008) model for

teaching the Method, and Lore’s (2004) model for teaching the Abstract sections (Table1). To fit the purposes of this study, steps related to findings of published articles were ignored because the students had to write only an RP. Furthermore, the linguistic features related to each move (Table 2) were highlighted.

Table 1: Models Utilized for Teaching Rp Sections

| | |
|---|---|
| The CARS model for RA introductions, Swales (1990, p.141) | Move 1. Establishing a Territory Step 1. Claiming centrality and/or Step 2. Making topic generalizations and/or Step 3. Reviewing items of previous research Move 2. Establishing a Niche Step 1. A. Counter-claiming or Step 1. B. Indicating a gap or Step 1. C. Question-raising or Step 1. D. Continuing a tradition Move 3. Occupying the Niche Step 1. A. Outlining purposes or Step 1. B. Announcing present research |
| Pho’s (2008,p.8) model for the methods section | Move 1. Describing data collection procedure Step 1. Describing the sample Step 2. Describing research instruments Step 3. Recounting steps in data collection Step 4. Justifying data collection procedure Move 2. Describing data analysis procedure Step1. Recounting data analysis procedure |
| Lore’s (2004, p.283) model for the abstract | Move 1. Introduction Step 1.Establishing a territory Step 2.Establishing a niche Step 3.Occupying a niche Move 2. Methods Move 3. Results Move 4. Discussion Step1-Applications Step 2-Implications |

Table 2: Examples of Genre-Specific Linguistic Features Adopted from A Corpus of Ras

| | | |
|------------------------------------|--------|---|
| Introduction and literature review | Move 1 | Step1-Recently, there has been growing interest.../ ... has been a favorite topic for analysis/A central issue in... Step2- Researchers so often refer to boosting/hedging as the main issue.../ Some scholars agree upon the influence of appropriate vocabulary in a piece of writing... Step3- Derived mainly from the works of Chomsky (1978)...different investigations (Dong, 1996; Reinersten & Wells, 1993).../ Fahim and Ahmadian (2012) concluded.... Similarly, Farhadi et al. (2010) saw... |
| | Move2 | Step1.A- The study has tended to address ..., rather than ... Step1.B- Although..., less.../ very little research has.../However, previous research has failed to consider/has been limited to/has overlooked. Nevertheless, these attempts... are controversial/incomplete Step1.c-One question that arises is: How does... |

| | | |
|----------|-------|--|
| | Move3 | Step1.D- Consequently, these factors need in- depth investigation/ Evidence suggests correlation, therefore, it is advisable to survey different respondents... Step 1.A-The paper begins with... and then proceeds... Step1.B- This study proposes/ describes/examines/is a report on |
| Method | Move1 | Step1-Subjects will be selected from Step2-Data will be collected using questionnaires... Step3- Participants will be randomly selected from ... Step4- This model will be employed because... |
| | Move2 | Step1-Data analysis will be performed by/using... |
| Abstract | Move1 | The same as the moves in Introduction section |
| | Move2 | The same as moves in Method section |
| | Move3 | - |
| | Move4 | Step1- The results of this research can be/will be employed/ used to improve the courses of... This study will serve as valuable guideline... Step 2- This study can shed light on... This study will enhance/ facilitate... |

3.3. Raising Students' Genre Awareness

The procedure employed for imparting knowledge of writing the RP for one semester was as follows: Initially, the teacher raised questions related to the 'Introduction' section of and RP, to activate their background knowledge of academic genre. Some students responded: attracting reader's attention to the importance of the topic, description of the phenomenon, brief reflection of previous studies, and announcing present research; however, only a few pointed to indication of gaps in prior research and, consequently, the teacher raised the students' awareness that it is obligatory to highlight a gap or an understudied area in the literature.

Next, following "a guided inductive approach" (Flowerdew, 2016, p.4), students were shown the Introduction section of an article through the video projector to comment on its structure:

(Title: Acquiring disciplinary literacy: A social-cognitive analysis of text production and learning among Iranian graduate students of education)

Studies of writing both in L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) over the last three decades reveal **distinct, alternative approaches**, namely, linguistic (focused on the syntactic-rhetorical features of a text), psycholinguistic (focused on writer's thinking and composing behaviors), and sociolinguistics (focused on social contexts and readers). **Whereas** the writing studies within the framework of these three approaches **have been valuable in their own respects, they simply constitute segments of the more complex reality of writing. The bigger picture**, as Silva (1990, p. 20) noted, "must, at least, meaningfully account for the contribution of the writer, reader, text, and context, as well as their interaction." According to Raimes (1991), **recognition of complexity is a necessary basis** for principled model building in the study of writing. As such, the design of the present research **intended** to identify specific aspects of the complexity of writing in L2 in the context of a graduate program, identifying key elements, and accounting for the interactions among these salient and major elements.

Students recognized that the first sentence indicated topic importance to study. Correspondingly, students were encouraged to pay closer attention to the terminology used in the first sentence. Some students commented that the phrase *distinct, alternative approach* together with the parentheses attempted to attract the reader's attention to the state of knowledge. Scrutinizing the following sentence, only a few students recognized the contrasting word *whereas* as referring to the perceived weakness in previous research. The teacher explained that in this sentence and the

following, the writer tried to indicate a gap in the related literature, but, preferred not to take a negative position (have *been valuable in their own respect*) and, instead, aimed to place the mentioned prior studies in a *bigger picture* of writing studies context. Then, some students recognized that the sentence *they simply constitute segments of the more complex reality of writing* referred to the prior research deficiency. Students had no difficulty in identifying the reiteration made in line 9: *recognition of complexity is a necessary basis*. In the last sentence, a few students quickly identified the text as a journal article from the past tense use *intended* and noted that the writer intended to describe the purpose of the study.

Additionally, the 'Introduction' section's schematic structure (Table1) was presented along with some associated linguistic features (Table 2), and, subsequently, students re-examined the text in light of the presented move-structure. Furthermore, introduction section of another RA was distributed to the students for highlighting the moves and language use, and their identified moves were checked in the class. From time to time, the teacher raised the students' awareness that "sometimes, we may find it difficult to distinguish two moves simply because syntactic possibilities allow them to be realized in the same sentence, often embedding one move within the other" (Bhatia, 1993, p.89). For instance, the following extract combines the first and second moves:

L2 research that examines learners' conceptions about their own learning has proliferated in recent years, but with a rather broad scope of investigations targeting EFL/ESL learners in general.

According to Norris (2009), students "begin to focus their attention on trying to understand what is said or written, thereby initiating their noticing of what forms are used in what ways" (p.583). In this process, "the students heightened their awareness of the relationship between the writer, purpose, and text" (Huang, 2014, p.178). Finally, the students were each assigned to develop an introduction section on *language learners' intellectual and affective factors* and submit them to the teacher to receive feedback. On the next session, a few students were randomly called in front of the class to illustrate their assignments using a video projector, and the teacher provided some feedback mostly on structure and language. Furthermore, the teacher followed the above-mentioned procedure to impart instruction regarding the other segments of an RP, namely, Literature review, Method, and Abstract sections.

3.4. Data Sources

For quantitative and qualitative data collection, the following sources were used: First and final tasks (RP tasks)

Quantitative data (RPs written by students before [first task] and after the semester [final task]) were collected to examine the progress the students made in their RP writing skills. Indeed, the students had been assigned by the teacher to write one month before the semester began and they consulted their favorite topics with her. To ensure comparability of the RPs written at two different time intervals, the topics were kept constant (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007).

To examine the instruction effect on the students' development of genre knowledge, the researcher (second author) manually counted the moves and steps in their first and final tasks. In this manner, the frequency and percentages for each task were obtained. In cases where a piece of the text seemed attributable to more than one communicative purpose, the researcher categorized it according to its most obvious function. As Bhatia (1993) asserts, there exist "cases which will pose problems and escape identification or clear discrimination, however fine a net one may use" (p.93).

To investigate students' writing competence, all the tasks were rated by the researcher and the teacher, as well as the third author who was not yet informed of the research purpose. The samples' identification and collection date were removed. They were scored based on well-established Jacobs et al.'s (1981) scoring scale with some modifications regarding the criteria. Table3 shows the evaluation scale agreed on.

Table 3: Jacob Et Al. (1981)'S Evaluation Scale

| Components | Criteria | score |
|--------------|---------------------------------------|-------|
| Content | Extent, relevance, subject knowledge | 30% |
| Organization | The taught genre moves | 20% |
| Vocabulary | Academic word list(Coxhead,2000) | 20% |
| Language use | Syntax, morphology, grammar | 25% |
| Mechanics | Spelling, capitalization, punctuation | 5% |

Before rating, the three raters discussed the scoring scale by examining several tasks produced by students to establish consistency in their scoring. Inter-rater reliability for the ratings performed at the end was 0.70 for content, 0.92 for organization, 0.88 for vocabulary, 0.96 for language use, and 0.96 for mechanics.

However, according to Ortega (2003), analytic ratings may not prove to be sufficiently suggestive of L2 development. Therefore, the researcher supplemented students' performance evaluation with their writing fluency and use of move-specific expressions. Fluency was calculated with regard to the total number of words written in the tasks. To assess students' use of move-specific linguistic resources, they were qualitatively analyzed.

3.5. Open-ended Questionnaire

For qualitative data collection, based on the teacher's and other experts' previous experience concerning graduate students' writing proposals and theses, and review of the literature, an open-ended questionnaire was developed containing 20 questions. To determine the content validity of the questionnaire, four experienced experts with PhDs in applied linguistics were consulted. Based on their suggestions, five questions with repetitious propositions or ambiguity in meaning were deleted, and a few questions also underwent minor changes. The final version of the questionnaire included 15 questions. The questionnaire explored students' attitudes and beliefs regarding the genre-based instruction course with various themes; for instance, a question asked students about their ideas on the provision of generic structures (How useful did you find the provision of the moves and steps in writing your course assignments?); another asked about their ideas regarding the usefulness of the instruction materials (Were the materials such as the model texts and slides provided by the instructor useful?). Other questions asked students about their attitudes and beliefs on themes such as their level of confidence in RP writing, their comments, suggestions, and potential shortcomings of the course.

4. Results

Research question 1: To what extent does explicit genre-based instruction help students improve their genre awareness and writing competence via incorporating RP writing?

4.1. RP Moves and Steps

The RPs ranged over different topics and varied in structural quality, language aspects, and length. The analysis results showed that most of the first and all the final tasks included a combination of Introduction, Literature review, Method, and Abstract sections. In the first tasks, students appeared to have an uncertain view of an RP because they did not know what to include and how to structure it. In a few cases in the first tasks, Literature review, Method, or Abstract sections were lacking and, in a few cases, these sections appeared either as a single short paragraph or just in the form of plagiarism.

Table 4 shows the changes that students made from their first to final tasks in the frequency and percentages of the steps utility.

Table 4: Frequency and Percentages of Moves and Steps Use in First and Final Tasks

| Introduction | | Literature review | | |
|--------------|------------|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Move1 | First task | Final task | First task | Final task |
| Step 1 | 11 50% | 20 99.9% | 10 45.4% | 16 72.7% |
| Step 2 | 21 95.4% | 22 100% | 10 45.4% | 16 72.7% |
| Step 3 | 10 45.4% | 22 100% | 11 50% | 19 86.3% |
| Move2 | | | | |
| Step1A | 0 0% | 0 0% | 0 0% | 0 0% |
| Step1B | 4 18% | 16 72.7% | 1 4.5% | 18 82% |
| Step1C | 0 0% | 3 13.6% | 1 4.5% | 1 4.5% |
| Step1D | 0 0% | 3 13.5% | 0 0% | 3 13.5% |
| Move3 | | | | |
| Step1A | 5 22.7% | 7 31% | 0 0% | 3 13.6% |
| Step1B | 11 50% | 15 68% | 2 9% | 19 86.3% |
| Move1 | | Method | | |
| Step1 | 14 63.6% | 22 100% | | |
| Step2 | 14 63.6% | 19 86.3% | | |
| Step3 | 7 31.8% | 21 95.4% | | |
| Step4 | 0 0% | 4 18.2% | | |
| Move2 | | | | |
| Step1 | 3 13.6% | 21 95.4% | | |
| Move1 | | Abstract | | |
| Step1 | 9 40.9% | 19 86.3% | | |
| Step2 | 0 0% | 6 27.3% | | |
| Step3 | 7 31.8% | 20 90.9% | | |
| Move2 | 13 59% | 22 100% | | |
| Move3 | - | - | | |
| Move4 | | | | |
| Step1 | 0 0% | 4 18.2% | | |
| Step2 | 0 0% | 6 27.3% | | |

The above table demonstrates that students showed great adherence to the genre moves and steps in most sections of final tasks as opposed to first tasks. It was, specifically, the case in Introduction and Literature review sections, where they referred to the reasons why their research was plausible (move2, establishing a niche).

A similar indication of improvement was noticed in the Method section. It specifically occurred in move1, step 3 (recounting steps in data collection) in which considerations such as sample choice, detailed information on data collection, and researcher's status were addressed, and in move 2, step1 (recounting data analysis procedure) where data analysis methods were dealt with.

In the Abstract section, also, improvement was considerable in move 2 (method) but not in moves 1 and 4. Many students failed to establish a niche (move1) degrading the genre's communicative purpose. Many also failed to cover move 4 (discussion).

4.2. Writing Aspects Scores

Table5 depicts the analysis results concerning the RP scores in terms of the five analytic criteria between the first and final tasks. The students' writing development throughout one semester was analyzed using Wilcoxon signed rank test. The results indicated time had significant effect for all the variables, and students' writing competence improved in all the aspects. In particular, the content and organization scores showed greater improvement in comparison with those of vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Because the organization aspect (moves and steps) was most relevant with the course's goal, that is, to fulfill the genre's communicative purposes, the results apparently suggest that students were encouraged to pay more attention to content aspect as well.

Table 5: Changes in Students' Scores in Two Different Tasks

| | Median | <i>P</i> | <i>Z</i> | Effect size | Minimum | Maximum |
|---------------------|--------|----------|----------|-------------|---------|---------|
| Content | | | | | | |
| First Task | 15 | 0.000 | 4.15 | 0.625 | 5 | 22 |
| Final Task | 20 | | | | 15 | 26 |
| Organisation | | | | | | |
| First Task | 8 | 0.000 | 4.14 | 0.624 | 5 | 15 |
| Final Task | 15 | | | | 10 | 18 |
| Vocabulary | | | | | | |
| First Task | 10 | 0.000 | 3.65 | 0.550 | 9 | 17 |
| Final Task | 15 | | | | 14 | 18 |
| Language use | | | | | | |
| First Task | 18 | 0.002 | 3.06 | 0.461 | 10 | 25 |
| Final Task | 19.5 | | | | 10 | 25 |
| Mechanics | | | | | | |
| First Task | 4 | 0.005 | 2.81 | 0.423 | 3 | 5 |
| Final Task | 5 | | | | 3 | 5 |

4.3. Writing Fluency

Table 6 demonstrates the change in writing fluency in students' RPs between the first and the final tasks. The results of Wilcoxon signed rank tests revealed that the effect of treatment was statistically significant on students' fluency in writing the Introduction, Method, and Abstract sections but not in the Literature review section. However, although students' fluency in writing the Literature review section was not statistically significant, table 6 shows that the discrepancy between the minimum and maximum number of words in the final tasks is much smaller than that in the first tasks. Thus, a conclusion can be reached that those students who had no Literature review section in their first tasks learned how to write one, and those who had written too lengthy ones, probably through plagiarism, made an attempt to bear in mind the structure which was emphasized during class instruction. As a result, the effect of treatment on the Literature review section can also be justified.

Table 6: Changes in Students' Writing Fluency

| | Median | <i>P</i> | <i>Z</i> | Effect size | Minimum | Maximum |
|-----------------------|--------|----------|----------|-------------|---------|---------|
| Introduction | | | | | | |
| First task | 213.5 | 0.002 | 3.036 | 0.457 | 65 | 1082 |
| Final task | 481 | | | | 360 | 660 |
| Literature rev | | | | | | |
| First task | 270 | 0.249 | 1.153 | 0.173 | 0 | 2736 |
| Final task | 558 | | | | 312 | 768 |
| Method | | | | | | |
| First task | 113 | 0.000 | 4.107 | 0.619 | 0 | 2736 |
| Final task | 355.5 | | | | 156 | 1080 |
| Abstract | | | | | | |
| First task | 93 | 0.000 | 4.107 | 0.619 | 0 | 168 |
| Final task | 200.5 | | | | 127 | 370 |

4.4. Qualitative Analysis

Furthermore, the students RP's qualitative analysis demonstrated that students made great attempts in their final tasks to meet the discourse community's expectations. In this respect, they specifically justified their research by referring to the gaps in the previous literature and also provided more details of data collection and data analysis procedures. This tendency led to longer texts. Table 7 provides the linguistic resources that students employed in their Tasks' Introduction sections to *establish a niche*.

Table 7: Linguistic Features Used in The Introduction Sections' Move 2

| First Task | Linguistic features | Final Task | Linguistic features |
|--|--|---|---|
| Step1.A (0%) Counter-claiming | - | Step1.A (0%) Counter-claiming | - |
| Step1.B (13.6%) Indicating a gap | However, little research.. Only a few scholars... Although..., there is still considerable debate... | Step1.B (72.7%) Indicating a gap | Although...a few studies/little discussion/less attention Even though... a few... However, little research/ few studies However, ... not sufficient/insufficient/incomprehensive Few (available) studies Few investigations Researchers have neglected... The distinction between ... has not been identified Despite the fact that...rather less attention has been paid to... |
| Step1.C (0%) Question raising | - | Step1.C (13.6%) Question raising | The question is.. The question raised here is.. Despite... the question still remains... |
| Step1.D (0%) Continuing a tradition | - | Step1.D (13.5%) Continuing a tradition | Consequently, it is essential to conduct... Therefore, it necessitates a study on... |

As table 7 reveals, students learned to use appropriate rhetorical resources to persuade the expert reader of the value of their research. Interestingly, step 1b (indicating a gap) enjoyed the highest frequency, highlighting students' tendency to refer to gaps in the previous research in a conservative way without posing any challenges or questions (Habibi, 2008).

To sum up, both quantitative and qualitative results suggest that students' competence in writing RPs enjoyed significant development with regard to content, organization (genre moves and steps), vocabulary, language use, mechanics, and writing fluency. However, based on Huang's (2014) definition for rhetorical knowledge which "refers to language use that helps writers achieve their intended purpose" (p.177), analysis of the final tasks indicates that their rhetorical knowledge development was still in its infancy; for instance, some Abstract sections were proportionately too lengthy, and some moves throughout the tasks began with linguistic features associated with step1 in move1 of the Introduction section.

Research question 2: What are the students' attitudes and beliefs regarding the genre-based approach to proposal writing instruction?

The students' responses to the open-ended evaluation questionnaire, administered at the end of the semester, shed more light on the task analysis results. An overwhelming number of students (96%) responded that the course was tailored to fulfill their immediate and delayed needs and boosted their genre knowledge of writing RPs. Correspondingly, they reported that they had never been exposed to any genre-based instruction in their previous courses. The following extract captures this idea:

The procedure going on in this class was the very thing we had been deprived of. It was as opposed to memorizing some books and then taking exams that we can do independently.

The above extract reflects the Iranian educational context where instruction is exam-oriented, and students' perceived needs are not taken into consideration before the course begins. Some students (84%) also maintained that genre instruction helped them write effectively and efficiently. For example, one student wrote:

Now that I got familiar with the moves and steps in a proposal, I can write my proposal in a shorter period of time with a better result. Now I know what type of sentences should be used first and what type of sentences should be used at the end of each section, which increases the quality of my writing.

The above extract implicitly refers to genre knowledge as a tool for bridging the gap to express the rhetorical purposes of a RP. In other words, it seems reasonable to assume that through awareness of the organization of a genre, students can cut down on their workload and work time; instead of struggling with cognitive resources, they can focus their attention on the discourse community demands. Likewise, another student responded:

It increases my work quality because I can follow a set framework and judge my work based on an array of criteria.

Implicit in this student's expression is a sense of competence and perception of herself as self-reliant in light of possessing a barometer to judge her own writing. Correspondingly, another student commented on her confidence:

Indeed, the instructor's explicit teaching made me more confident in writing my proposal and thesis, even a standard article.

This can be interpreted with respect to the socio-cognitive schema, which can be instantiated for similar genre production (Hyland, 2007). Likewise, another student's response was more in line with what the teacher and the researcher had attempted to accomplish in the class: "a reproducible procedure" serving as a springboard for students to increase their genre awareness:

Before being exposed to the instruction, I did not think there was a procedure reproducible in writing different parts of a research proposal. The lectures about the moves and steps helped me discover the systematic procedure involved in writing this genre. Now I am more confident and less confused when writing.

Furthermore, another student positively reported that the course increased not only their awareness of writing their own RPs but would also equip them with the knowledge to have "a critical engagement" in academic texts (Hyland, 2007, p.152):

The materials, coupled with the teacher's feedback, provided me with the competence to write a research proposal and the insights on how to assess whether a given genre is well produced.

Regarding the teacher's feedback, a great majority of the students (91%) pointed out that it proved fruitful because their awareness was raised regarding their weak points:

Furthermore, those feedbacks and discussions shed light on our weaknesses and provided us with a solution.

Nevertheless, some students (40%) complained that they should have been exposed to academic writing instruction in their previous semesters.

5. Discussion

This study highlighted how Iranian graduate students can benefit from explicit genre-based instruction to promote their academic genre knowledge abiding by the conventions and expectations of the related discourse community. The findings of the needs analysis questionnaire administered in the first session revealed students' immediate and delayed need to learn how to write an RP. It was corroborated by their first tasks, which revealed their lack of awareness of academic writing purpose. It reflects Dong's (1998) view that "many graduate students do not begin to learn how to approach this task until they are in the process of writing a thesis/dissertation" (p.369) in which they are challenged both linguistically and rhetorically, apart from by content knowledge. As language performance is highly linked with knowledge of its formal aspects, this study attempted to expose the students to a structural and lexical framework to trigger their active involvement in the construction

of their academic language awareness. Given the time restriction, the study addressed the essential parts of a research proposal: Introduction, Literature review, Method, and Abstract sections.

The quantitative results indicated that the students made advances in their awareness of genre structure, as well as in some aspects of their writing competence. The findings revealed that compared with the first tasks, students utilized more related linguistic features in the final tasks and catered for different moves and the related steps to indicate their relative grasp of an RP pattern for its communicative purpose realization. It was specifically the case in the Introduction and Literature review sections in which they laudably presented the reason why their research was plausible, and in the Method section in which they provided more detailed information on how they would collect and analyze data, which in turn rendered their texts more justifiable and appealing to the discourse community members. It supports Cheng (2008), Flowerdew (2016), Mustafa (1995), and Tardy (2009) who reported enhancement in learners' academic writing ability due to explicit focus on generic features leading to their awareness-raising regarding the interaction between text, audience, and purpose. Furthermore, the findings of this study are in corroboration of some studies (e.g., Henry & Roseberry, 1998; Huang, 2014; Yasuds, 2011), which suggest that genre instruction enables learners to make gains in writing as well. A comparison of the scores graduate students obtained in the first and final tasks scores revealed that students' improvement was notable in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, mechanics, and fluency. However, fluency did not exhibit improvement in the Literature review section. The analysis showed that although students' fluency in the Literature review section did not demonstrate dramatic change, all students provided this section in their final tasks, as opposed to the first tasks, with much more homogeneity concerning the number of words.

What may account for students' progression was the explicit and systematic teaching of the genre's moves and its relevant linguistic features (Hyland, 2007) through engaging students "in authentic reading and writing tasks involving the targeted genre" (Freeman, 1993, p.244) in line with the students' needs to join the discourse community. It reflects Bai, Wang, and Nie's (2021) view that when teaching materials are goal-oriented not exceeding students' writing capabilities, and students are allowed to choose their favorite topics for writing on, their motivation for investing more efforts in their activities will raise.

Most importantly, the teacher's feedback on the students' writing assignments proved fruitful. As Ferris (2003) argues, feedback on writing constitutes the most crucial factor for developing students' writing ability. Another critical event underpinning this course's strength was that the teacher had discussions with the students regarding their writing problems in each session. Correspondingly, the discussions revolved around generic structures and research skills specific to each student's RP. In line with Boheim et.al (2021), this important dialogic discourse enhanced the students' motivation to engage in raising questions and increased their genre knowledge.

Admittedly, however, the students' genre knowledge construction was limited due to the writing course's short duration. It concurs with Tardy (2005), Wingate (2012), and Worden (2018), who suggest that genre knowledge is a complex one and naturally requires a much longer time for students to understand its different aspects. Despite the shortcomings of the course, however, it provided the students with a preliminary and necessary basis upon which they can build their specialized knowledge of the genre conventions in their prospective specialization (Hyland, 2007; Mustafa, 1995). In other words, they can move from "genre acquisition" towards "genre awareness" (Russell & Fisher, 2009) to be able to cope with the academic challenges that lie ahead of them. Moreover, the students became familiar with the constituent parameters in the specific genre: writer, reader, and purpose (Cheng, 2008) and will, later on, obtain more profound insights into their different aspects.

Furthermore, students were administered an open-ended evaluation questionnaire at the end of the semester. Almost all students responded positively regarding the method of instruction in the course. They admitted that their ability and confidence in writing RPs increased which is consistent with Yasuda (2011), who argues that genre-based instruction can improve L2 writers' competence

and confidence in writing. It also concurs with Hyland (2007), who asserts that “for many L2 learners this awareness of regularity and structure is not only facilitating but also reassuring” (p.152) as it serves as a roadmap for L2 learners to locate themselves on the route to learning academic writing.

Based on the findings of this study, several considerations are drawn and discussed. First, the findings of this study can be an evidence to the opponents (e.g., Freeman & Richrdson, 1997) who are suspicious of ESP genre pedagogy’s feasibility due to decontextualized learning in the classroom (Huang, 2014). The students’ progress in employing the moves to abide by the discourse community’s expectations reveals that designing a course pertinent to their needs employing authentic tasks will benefit them.

The second consideration is related to the question raised by Tardy (2006) that whether students learn the genre or they just write for the course requirements (cited in Huang, 2014). Similarly, Johns (2008) believes that our novice students do not integrate purposeful acts such as being accepted at a conference; instead, they respond to the tasks assigned by their instructors only to pass examinations. Nevertheless, as the course was designed to fulfill the students’ perceived need to write RPs, they displayed real inclination to improve their genre knowledge to satisfy the English department requirements. It is in line with Dudley-Evans and John (1998), who state that “the focused nature of the teaching, its relevance and cost-effectiveness ensure that its aims are widely accepted by learners” (p.10). It also reflects Riazi’s (1997) view that “academic contexts have a powerful influence on how students define and approach writing tasks” (p.106).

The third consideration is that the findings of this study can be explicated concerning Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory, where the importance of scaffolding and peer interaction is recognized. In other words, through modeling the texts and explicit instruction provided by the teacher along with interaction among the students in identifying and discussing the rhetorical functions of the moves in the texts, the students finally managed to produce their proposals independently.

The fourth consideration is that the course helped students understand the definition of plagiarism more clearly. Although their final tasks contained some instances of plagiarism, they occurred with far less frequency than in the first tasks. Moreover, they appeared to have unintentionally committed plagiarism imagining that they would eschew plagiarism by simply referring to the same borrowed sentences. Therefore, students need to be briefed on what plagiarism exactly is and reminded of its consequences.

Finally, several limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. First, the findings are limited to merely 22 graduate students at an Iranian state university, limiting the study’s generalizability to other EFL contexts. Second, this study’s instruction was short-term; more research on long-term explicit instruction is needed to verify its effect on students’ rhetorical knowledge improvement. Finally, due to students’ utter unawareness of generic structures, the concept of “flexibility” was ignored in favor of “stability” to make the genre easier for them to learn. To be more specific, given the students’ low level of academic writing proficiency, if the genre structure’s flexibility were emphasized, they would, perhaps, feel insecure and demotivated to confidently and eagerly participate in the genre structures. Consequently, more research is required to discover how stability and flexibility can be balanced (Worden, 2018) in such contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study provided empirical evidence on the effectiveness of explicit genre treatment by engaging graduate students in reading and writing academic texts. The study revealed that students relatively developed their rhetorical knowledge of an RP as a genre together with some aspects of their writing competence. Correspondingly, as students get familiarized with proposals as a stepping stone genre in their academic writing requirements and build a schema for it, they will be able to revise and adapt it to meet the requirements of new genres such as writing theses and articles (Johns, 2008). Furthermore, the students in this study appreciated the explicit genre teaching and contended their expertise and self-confidence in writing and reading academic texts significantly increased. Based on

the findings, curriculum designers in EFL contexts should design additional research oriented courses as an attempt to acquaint students with genre conceptualisation and features enabling them to produce academic texts of quality.

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