

## Language Proficiency and EAP Students' Writing Quality: Contributions of Explicit and Implicit Genre-Based Instruction

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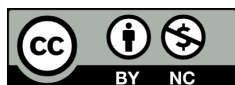
### Abstract

Genre-based pedagogy provides an effective resource for writing instructors and practitioners in order to assist their students to produce particular texts (Bhatia, 2004). Regarding the benefits and the uses of genre-based pedagogy in second and foreign language acquisition, ongoing debates among the researchers of the field have been made in response to pedagogical and implicational practices associated with genre in various educational settings. Due to the importance of providing writing instructions for the students of medicine and the lack of literature in analyzing the impact of different treatments of genre-based instruction especially among students with different language proficiency levels, the present study tried to address this gap by taking a genre-based approach and using writing practice, to examine the impacts of explicit and implicit genre-based instructional techniques on medical students' writing quality with different language proficiency levels. The initial findings of the study suggested that providing genre-based instruction both explicitly and implicitly can intuitively and effectively assist learners in providing more qualified writings. Moreover, the in-depth findings of this study supported the proposal that higher proficient second language writers get more advantage of both treatments of genre-based instruction than lower proficient second language writers especially when explicit genre-based instruction is provided.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, English for specific purposes (ESP) researchers revolutionized the concept of genre, challenged the proposal that different genres are different categorizations of text types, and suggested that genre connects various texts to various social actions (Hyland, 2018). The conception of genres, as various rhetorical ways of interaction within recurring settings, has had a paramount impact on the study and teaching of writing. In this regard, the analytical and pedagogical implications of genre, which considered it as a significant variable in writing acquisition, have been explored by researchers (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010).

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Genre has been defined and used differently in different academic contexts. In various disciplines, researchers defined genre as a way of organizing various types of texts and other cultural events (Hyland, 2009, 2018). According to Hyland (2009), a genre-based approach to writing delves into the structural organization of texts in order to understand how writing works as communication. According to genre-based approaches, texts are written as a response to a particular communicative context. Therefore, the role of writing is seen as a mediator between institutions and cultures in which it occurs. In other words, texts convey the writers' purposes and expectations about how information should be structured (Hyland, 2009).

Regarding the impacts and benefits of genre-based writing instruction in second and foreign language acquisition, there have been ongoing debates among researchers of the field in pedagogical practices associated with genre-based instruction in various educational settings (Khodabandeh et al., 2013). While some researchers (e.g., Hammond & Derewianka, 2001) doubted the effectiveness of explicit genre-based instruction, others (e.g., Freedman, 1993; Bhatia, 2001) emphasized the effectiveness of explicit instruction of genres (e.g., Skillen & Trivett, 2001). Despite the benefits of genre-based instruction in second language writing (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Hyland, 2008), there have been few experimental studies on the impacts of explicit and implicit genre-based instruction on writing quality of the students with different language proficiency levels.

In light of this understanding, the current study made an attempt to analyze and examine the writing quality of high and low proficient students of medicine who were exposed to explicit and implicit genre-based instruction. Therefore, one recurrent type of medical genre (medical case-report) was used. Medical case-reports serve as professional and educational narratives that provide feedback on clinical practice and offer a framework for sharing medical, scientific, or educational purposes (Florek & Dellavalle, 2016).

Due to the importance of providing writing instructions for academic students (Teeter, 2016; Khakpour & Shahsavari, 2019) and the lack of research on analyzing the impacts of explicit and implicit genre-based instruction on high and low proficient students of medicine, the present study attempted to explore the effects of such treatments on writing quality of students with different language proficiency levels. The study, thus, makes a contribution to the body of knowledge on genre-based instruction and helps ESP teachers and students gain awareness of the role of genre in their disciplines, particularly here medical science students. Therefore, the present study attempted to respond two research questions:

1) Which method of genre-based instruction (explicit or implicit) is more effective in developing EAP students' writing quality? 2) Is there any statistically significant difference in high and low proficiency EAP students' writing quality in terms of genre?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Genre-based Approaches to Writing Instruction

During the last decade, researchers in second and foreign language acquisition have given increasing attention to genre and the application of genre-based instruction in language teaching (Shaw, 2016). Genre-based instruction (GBI) offered opportunities for second language teachers to provide students with relevant and especially supportive instruction in enabling the students to follow standardized approaches while composing texts (Hyland, 2018). GBI enables L2 teachers to manage their courses in a way that students will need to write in future occupational, academic or social contexts that they may encounter (Hyland, 2018).

Genre-based instruction assumes that through acquiring genre knowledge in writing, students will learn how to analyze a genre in detail, which is suitable to various requirements of the

discourse community. It is believed that the lexical–grammatical patterns of the texts should be known and mastered by the students, and the teacher's task is to enhance the students' awareness of the target genres (Worden, 2019).

### **Explicit and Implicit Genre-Based Instruction**

Despite the benefits of genre-based instruction in second language writing (Hyland, 2008; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010), the number of studies with the focus on genre-based instructional treatments is low. Hyon (2001) investigated the impact of explicit teaching of genre on students' mastery of rhetorical features. His findings revealed that explicit genre-based instruction facilitates different aspects of learners' second language writing (Hyon, 2001). The findings of the study by Pang (2002) indicated that contextual awareness and textual analysis as two testaments of genre-based instruction enhanced students' employment of move structure in genre.

Abbuhl (2011) analyzed the impacts of explicit and implicit genre-based instruction on university students' writing development and revealed that the participants improved their writings after receiving explicit genre-based instruction. Khodabandeh et al. (2013) investigated the impacts of three treatments of genre-based pedagogy on students' quality of writing argumentative essays. Their findings revealed that explicit teaching was more effective in assisting participants to provide accurate text essays.

Despite the effectiveness of genre-based instruction in different writing classes, few studies have been done so far with the focus on the impacts of explicit or the implicit genre-based instruction on students' writings in different language proficiency levels. Due to the lack of research on the efficacy of genre-based pedagogy (Tardy, 2006), the present study attempted to address this gap in the realm of medical sciences and in relation to proficiency level as a mediating factor.

### **Language Proficiency and Second Language Writing Ability**

Researchers have so far investigated factors affecting second language learners' texts. Factors such as learners' second language proficiency, second language writing strategies and first language writing ability are contributive to the way students structure their texts (Hyland, 2018). Investigation of the impact of L2 proficiency on writing skill has yielded mixed results (Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). Previous research has highlighted that learners' linguistic proficiency does not influence their writing ability and writing development (e.g., Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1982). These studies maintained that learners' linguistic competence is not the determining and important factor influencing students' writing quality. On the other hand, some studies have suggested learners' second language proficiency as an important factor in the quality of writing. Cumming (1989), for example, revealed that students' L2 proficiency was a distinct factor that affected their writing quality. Pennington and So (1993) found that among several factors investigated, students' L2 proficiency was a determining factor to identify good writers.

Raimes (1987) examined ESL student writers at different levels of instruction to describe their writing strategies. The findings of his study revealed that language proficiency had almost no observable effect on composing strategies. Kobayashi and Rinnert's (1990) study argued that high proficient students tended to make more errors in their writing tasks than low proficient students. Moreover, Stevens et al. (2000) analyzed the performance of students on two different tests, namely a standardized achievement test and a language proficiency test. Their findings showed that there was a limited connection between the languages of the two tests. On the other hand, Wellington (2000) found a strong positive relationship between students' performance on an achievement test and their language proficiency level. Vazquez, Vazquez, and Lopez (2014) examined the correspondence between learners' language proficiency and their academic writing

attainment. The findings of the study revealed that the connection between English proficiency and standardized achievement scores was significant.

Although most of previous studies provided insight into the relationship between language proficiency as a factor contributing to the writing skill, few studies have so far investigated the impact of genre-based writing instructional treatments on EAP students with different language proficiency levels. With these limitations in mind, the present study examined Iranian Medical university students with appropriate controls for their educational and cultural backgrounds.

### English for Medical Purposes

Researchers believe that English for medical purposes as a subsection of ESP aimed to provide the professional and academic needs of medical students, particularly in relation to writing (Paltridge, 2004). English for medical purposes provides special kinds of lexical repertoire and language skills that medical students and medical practitioners are likely to require in the workplace (Antic, 2007). English for medical purposes assists students by providing exposure to authentic texts and materials, and affordsthem the specific rhetorical and discourse features in order to facilitate comprehension of the specialized texts which they may encounter in their future workplace (Porcaro, 2013).

From the field of professional medical writing, one type of text, which is used as part of the everyday routine in hospitals and other health-care facilities and one of the genre types, which has recently received a close attention, is the medical case-report (Helan, 2012). Case-reports provide opportunities for medical practitioners and students through which they can communicate the evaluation and diagnosis of different clinical conditions and diseases (Felorek & Dellavalle, 2016). Case-report has always been an important tool for medical education and it presents challenging medical cases to medical students and medical practitioners (Felorek & Dellavalle, 2016). Concerning the importance of medical case-report as a frequent medical written text type for the students of medicine (Nissen & Wynn, 2014; Yasuda, 2011), the present study used this genre in order to provide genre-based written instruction. Thus, the study aims to examine differences in high and low proficiency medical students and variations in the genre-specific texts they have composed.

## 3. METHOD

### Design

This study used a quasi-experimental, counter-balanced design. The method used in the present study has been previously used by (Alavi et al., 2021). The scores from the pre and post essay's scores were used and analyzed in order to understand whether the students improved their writing after receiving interventions. The students' writings were analyzed based on the rhetorical structure model of case report genre adapted by Hung et.al. (2012). The present study adopted Hyland's (2008) teaching-learning cycle model for teaching the selected academic genre. This model consists of four major stages of modeling, joint construction, independent construction, and comparing for this model.

**Table 1: Counter-Balanced Design of Study**

Pretest	Intervention	Posttest
Pretest	Explicit First	Posttest
Pretest	Implicit First	Posttest
Pretest	Implicit Second	Posttest
Pretest	Explicit Second	Posttest
Pretest	Control	Posttest

As it is shown in Table 1, in the first step, the data was collected from the participants using the pre-test. The first instrument used by the researchers was a general language proficiency test and the second instrument was an academic writing test. A pre-test was administered to measure the writing quality of the students before the intervention and then after the intervention, post-tests were administered to measure the impact of each of the interventions on students' writing quality.

### Participants

A group of 150 medical students were selected conveniently from Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences. The students of the present study included both male and female students. The average age of the student participants of the study was 20 years old. The participants of the study did not receive any genre-based instruction before the study after consulting them about this issue.

### Instrumentation

The first instrument was a general language proficiency test. In this study, to determine the students' language proficiency level, the instructor administered a modified version of IELTS Proficiency Test to all the participants. The IELTS exam test, as a reliable mean of grading students at all levels from elementary upwards, provides a consistent record of predictive validity in respect of examination entry (Freimuth, 2009). Due to the effectiveness of IELTS in assessing language learners' proficiency levels, at the beginning of the semester, the test was administered to the participants of the study in order to determine their level of language proficiency. The second instrument was an academic writing test. The three academic writing tests of the present study were as follows: a pre-test and two post-tests at the end of each intervention. In order to find out whether the students improved their academic writing quality, the three academic writing tests were administered.

### Procedure

The teaching materials and activities which were used in the classes were prepared in line with the objectives of each group. Each group of the study had its own outline and they all shared the same case report examples. The order of the sessions was according to the four stages of the teaching-learning cycle model (Hyland, 2008). In order to apply explicit genre-based instruction, the teacher provided the models of medical case report genre and they practiced them in their class. Various structural and rhetorical features of case report genre were marked and underlined in order to highlight the rhetorical moves of this specific genre. In order to apply implicit genre-based instruction, the participants were exposed to the same model genres, yet the major moves of the genre were not highlighted for the students and they were not named by the instructor. In the instructional sessions, sample case reports were given to the students. Similar to the genre-based writing cycle (Hyland, 2008) which were practiced with the first and second experimental groups, the subjects of control group received the same treatment except the modeling stage. This group did not receive the researcher's treatments and the students were taught based on the outline designed by the department. The data from the students' writing were analyzed via one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).



## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Results

One-way analysis of variance was run to compare the three groups' means on pretest in order to prove that they were homogenous with regard to their writing quality prior to the administration of the treatment. The results of the Levene's test of homogeneity of variances ( $F(2, 27) = 1.08, p = .353$ ) indicated that the three groups enjoyed homogenous variances on pretest. Based on the results of one-way ANOVA, ( $F(2, 27) = .596, p = .560$ , Partial eta squared = .042 representing a weak effect size), it can be inferred that differences between the three groups' means on pretest were not significant. Thus, it suggests that they were homogenous with respect to their writing quality prior to the main study. The participants took two posttests at two-time intervals during which the treatments of the two experimental groups were shifted, as displayed below.

A one-way ANOVA was run to compare the three groups' means on posttest of writing quality. Since the absolute values of the ratios were lower than 1.96, it can be claimed that the assumption of normality was retained. The findings showed that the first experimental group who received explicit genre-based instruction first and then received implicit genre-based instruction ( $M = 41.80$ ) outperformed the second experimental group in improving their writing quality ( $M = 39.90$ ).

The second research question explored whether the difference between high and low proficiency groups' means on posttest of writing quality was significant. It should be noted that the present sample was divided into two proficiency levels of high and low based on the median score of 5. As illustrated in Table 3, the participants' scores on the IELTS test had mean of 5.27, a median and mode of 5.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics; Posttest by Groups**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Control	10	12.90	3.479	1.100	10.41	15.39	8	19
1stExplicit	10	35.70	4.001	1.265	32.84	38.56	29	41
1stImplicit	10	26.10	7.156	2.263	20.98	31.22	16	37
2ndImplicit	10	40.80	3.706	1.172	39.15	44.45	36	45
2ndExplicit	10	38.90	4.483	1.418	35.69	42.11	31	45
Total	50	31.08	11.558	1.635	27.80	34.36	8	45

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of IELTS**

Valid	30
Missing	0
Mean	5.27
Median	5.00
Mode	5
Std. Deviation	.640

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics; Testing Normality of Posttest by Proficiency Levels**

Proficiency	N		Skewness		Kurtosis		
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Ratio	Statistic	Std. Error	Ratio
Low	30	-.546	.427	-1.27	-1.317	.833	-1.58
High	20	-.875	.512	-1.72	-.720	.992	-.725

**Table 5: Descriptive Statistics; Posttest of Writing by Proficiency Levels**

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	High	20	35.75	10.213	2.284
	Low	30	27.97	11.503	2.100

**Table 6: Independent Samples t-test; Posttest of Writing by Proficiency Levels**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.207	.277	2.449	48	.018	7.783	3.178	1.393	14.174
Equal variances not assumed			2.509	44.073	.016	7.783	3.102	1.531	14.036

An independent-samples t-test was run to compare the high and low proficiency groups' means on posttest of writing quality because the assumption of normality, as displayed in Table 4, was retained. Since the absolute values of the ratios were lower than 1.96, it can be claimed that the assumption of normality was retained.

Based on the results portrayed in Table 5, it can be claimed that the high proficiency group ( $M = 35.75$ ,  $SD = 10.21$ ) had a higher mean than the low proficiency group ( $M = 27.97$ ,  $SD = 11.50$ ) on the posttest of writing.

The results of the independent t-test ( $t(48) = 2.44$ ,  $p = .018$ , Cohen's  $d = .707$  depicting a moderate to large effect size) (Table 6) indicated the high proficiency group significantly outperformed the control group on the posttest of writing. Thus it can be claimed that there is a statistically significant difference in medical students' writing quality in terms of genre across participants with different levels of language proficiencies.

It is worth noting that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's  $F = 1.20$ ,  $p = .277$ ). In this respect, the first row of Table 6, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" was reported.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The present study explored impacts of explicit and implicit genre-based writing instruction on medical student' writing quality with different levels of language proficiency. In order to decrease the risk of over-emphasizing product view toward writing, this study utilized teaching and learning cycle model (Hyland, 2008). By doing so, the impact of explicit and implicit genre-based instructional techniques was investigated among the students with different levels of language proficiency.

The first research question explored whether explicit or implicit genre-based instruction were effective in developing the writing quality of the participants. The analyses of the students' data yielded the existence of a significant difference in the impact of both of the treatments of genre-based instruction on the writing quality of the participants. Moreover, there were significant statistical differences among the two experimental groups and the control group on the post-tests of writing quality. Also, findings of the study confirmed that differences between the two experimental groups was not significant. The results of the present study revealed the potential of explicit genre-based writing which is in line with Swami (2008), Abbuhl (2011) and Khodabandeh et.al (2013) who reported the efficacy of explicit teaching methods. However, unlike the findings by Henry and Roseberry (1998) which indicated that it is not possible to gain genre awareness in the absence of explicit instruction (Khodabandeh et.al, 2013), the results of this study confirmed that the students benefited from implicit instruction and in the absence of explicit instruction they improved their writing quality. This finding shows that students can benefit from both types of GBI, yet explicit focus on genre makes the type of text more tangible for the students.

The second research question aimed to scrutinize if the differences between high and low proficiency students in case of writing quality was statistically significant. The analyses of the students' data showed that the high proficiency group had a higher mean than the low proficiency group on the posttest of writing. The findings of the study implied that the performance of high proficiency group significantly exceeded than the performance of the control group on the posttests.

Unlike the study by Kobayashi and Rinnert's (1990) in which higher-proficient students made more structural and rhetorical errors than lower-proficient students, the findings of the present study revealed that higher-proficient students tended to make less errors than lower-proficient students. Moreover, the results of this study is in line with those by Newman, Tremblay, Nichols, Neville, and Ullman (2012) and Vazquez, Vazquez and Lopez (2014) which revealed significant correlations between writing quality and language proficiency. These findings mean that as proficiency level increases, students not only pay focal attention to structural issues in composing effective essays, but they also engage in honing the wide range of skills needed for writing error-free texts.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATION

The findings of the study suggested that providing genre-based instruction both explicitly and also implicitly can intuitively and effectively help learners to learn main generic moves of a genre. Also applying either of these treatments may lead to a better use of the moves and hence more qualified writing. The findings of the study confirmed the proposal that providing either explicit or implicit genre-based instruction for higher proficient students leads to developments in their writing quality. In other words, combining explicit genre-based instruction with the implicit genre-based instruction was likely to result in better outcomes for higher proficient students rather than teaching through using one of these treatments on its own. In sum, it can be concluded that explication of genre-based instruction certainly had vast potential benefits to medical students in using genre moves in their case report essays. The findings of this study also supported the proposal that higher proficient L2 writers get more advantage of genre-based instruction than lower proficient L2 writers especially when genres are taught explicitly.

The present study has some implications that are worth noting. This research study raised a number of issues related to the teaching of writing for EAP instructors that they should take into consideration in their teaching of academic writing. It is suggested that the instructors analyze the teaching of writing from an ESP perspective with the attention on meaning construction at a discursive level. Learning about move structures of the genre may help learners to organize their



texts in terms of knowing what to write. Moreover, ESP instructors can make use of both the explicit and implicit treatments of genre-based instruction in order to help their students to improve their writing qualities and writing developments. Furthermore, this study drew on two proficiency levels as the basis for examining genre-based differences. Further research with more groups would provide a better picture of how proficiency level mediates genre-based texts students compose.

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