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Researching genre knowledge across languages and contexts

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1. Introduction

The Symposium on Second Language Writing (SSLW) is an international conference dedicated to the field of second language writing. The 19th SSLW was held in October 2023 at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA. In this report, we describe a colloquium focused on genre knowledge development, which was presented at the symposium.

As Wardle (2017) has noted, "there is no such thing as writing in general. Writing is always in particular" (p. 30). Education and professions are filled with new ways of writing, shaped by their situations, audiences, and purposes. We often refer to these "particular ways of writing" as genres, and learning to use genres is a critical part of learning to write. Learning to write in an additional language involves learning to use genres across contexts, audiences, purposes, AND languages.

Christine Tardy (University of Arizona) noted in introducing the colloquium that a key concept for understanding how genres are learned is genre knowledge – that is, what writers know when they are able to effectively use genres. Scholarship has developed increasingly detailed frameworks for understanding such knowledge. The theoretical framework we adopt here conceptualizes genre knowledge as encompassing two interrelated "layers": knowledge of specific genres and knowledge of genre as a more general concept (Tardy et al., 2020; see also Cheng, 2018). Genre-specific knowledge is more than knowledge of a genre's conventions of form but also includes understanding possibilities and constraints related to the rhetorical context, subject matter, and the processes for producing and sharing texts within the genre (Tardy, 2009). Genre awareness, on the other hand, is a kind of metacognitive knowledge, an awareness of how writing works as it is shaped by and produced within rhetorical contexts. Genre awareness may also include strategies for analyzing these rhetorical contexts and for approaching unfamiliar genres. These two layers support the development of genre knowledge, and both are likely needed for writers to develop a sophisticated ability to write with agency and purpose within community-constrained genres (Tardy et al., 2020). For multilingual writers, aspects of genre-specific knowledge may be tied to a specific language, though genre awareness is likely language-independent and may support writing ACROSS languages, contexts, and genres.

An analogy may be helpful, and here we draw on Gentil's (2011) cooking metaphor. Genre-specific knowledge may be compared to a chef's knowledge of a particular dish. Perhaps, for example, you have developed excellent skills at making spaghetti. However, your broader knowledge of cuisines and of how cooking works (like genre awareness) can help you extend your knowledge of that one dish to making other dishes and even other cuisines. Though not a perfect analogy, it helps demonstrate how writers may draw on their multilingual knowledge and genre awareness to help grow as writers to adapt and build their overall genre knowledge.

Understanding genre knowledge has important implications for teaching and learning. For example, identifying aspects of knowledge that can support writers (in learning specific genres and

adapting their writing to new languages and contexts), can help teachers develop instructional practices that contribute to such knowledge. Yet, there remain empirical challenges to understanding genre knowledge because it is not something we can readily SEE in writers. In this colloquium, researchers shared various methodological approaches for studying genre knowledge specifically among multilingual writers. The colloquium addressed questions like: What methodologies offer insight into this development? What kind of insights? What instructional approaches or strategies might facilitate such development?

2. Papers

2.1 Genre-related episodes: Affordances, challenges, limitations, and implications for second language writing

In the first presentation, Angela Hakim (University of Arizona), provided an overview of genre-related episodes (GREs), described a recent study in which she examined GREs, and discussed the affordances, challenges, limitations, and implications for second language writing (SLW) research and teaching. GREs refer to "any part of a dialogue where the writers talk about the genre they are producing, question their genre use, or correct themselves or others in relation to genre" (Tardy & Gou, 2021, p. 567). Tardy and Gou (2021) conceived of GREs as a tool that could be used to examine the genre-related deliberations made during collaborative writing (CW) tasks. The development of GREs has provided a much-needed tool for genre researchers to focus analysis on genre-related discussion, negotiations, deliberations, consolidation, and adaptations of genre knowledge as writers engage in CW. GREs provide a productive tool for genre researchers, but they do present a few methodological challenges as they may be discontinuous and/or overlap with other GREs. This can make identifying the borders around individual GREs difficult. GREs are also limited to providing insight only into what writers verbalize during collaboration. Still, GREs provide a useful tool for genre researchers.

There are several implications for future research and teaching, which can be drawn from recent studies using GREs. The development and use of GREs is relatively new, and there will certainly be continued refinement and novel applications of GREs. Some of these might focus on the examination of the specific domains of genre knowledge generated during a range of CW tasks, the types of GREs generated during student-, teacher-, mentor-, or mentee-initiated episodes, and the ways in which writers draw on prior genre knowledge and experiences, metacognitive knowledge of genre, genre awareness tools and strategies, and their multilingual genre repertoires while engaged in CW. For SLW teachers, GREs offer an additional source of feedback on students' genre knowledge development, gaps in this knowledge, misunderstandings around the target genre, and areas in need of further instruction. Overall, GREs widen the range of tools within genre researchers' and SLW teachers' toolbox and offer a window into the negotiation and consolidation of genre knowledge that takes place during CW.

2.2 Explore writing across genres and languages: How can screen capture technologies help?

In the second presentation, Wei Xu (University of Arizona) focused on the use of screen capture technologies (SCT) to tap into multilingual students' genre knowledge in completing a Bilingual Genre Redesign task (i.e., students rewrite their text-based literature review into a public genre, in two languages). Shuttling across genres requires a process of recontextualization. For multilingual writers, writing across genres also requires writing across languages, as they may be more familiar with the genres used in the linguistic context where they were brought up. In addition, bringing multilingualism into the recontextualization across genres is more demanding than recontextualization within the same language (Tardy et al., 2020), and such cross-lingual recontextualization requires multilingual writers' multicompetence in writing, which is perceived as a repertoire of linguistically and socially specific genre knowledge (Gentil, 2021).

Informed by Séror and Gentil (2023), Xu demonstrated the procedure of collecting and analyzing SCT data for examining multilingual writers' process of writing across genres and languages. Drawing on her experience of pilot data collection, Xu emphasized three major considerations: pre-training for the student participants, logistics preparation, and ethical concerns. Regarding SCT data analysis, the use of ELAN software was featured and the guidelines for generating initial coding notes were provided. Following the initial coding notes, Xu then presented how to produce a code book based on the theoretical frameworks drawn on and her research questions. The last step, returning to examining the initial coding notes using the code book, indicated that the whole process was non-linear, using a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches. The final reflections of the SCT method included deciding whether to incorporate think-aloud protocols and designing follow-up video-based interviews. In the last part, Xu shared two preliminary findings with the audience: (1) Students' genre knowledge was activated in the bilingual redesign and included a non-linguistic aspect, which was revealed by the SCT data that students constantly negotiated multimodal elements in their first language (L1) version; (2) Extensive metacognitive regulation was observed in students' recontextualization across genres and languages, where their conditional knowledge was largely exploited. Finally, Xu proposed several potential pedagogical implications of using SCT in classroom settings. For example, as SCT may capture strategies of how writers draw on resources of multilingual and multimodal genre repertoires synergistically, some of these strategies can be archived and introduced to future students as good examples for guiding purposes.

2.3 Mind maps: Exploring and promoting genre-specific knowledge in multilingual writers

For the third presentation, Kevin Fedewa (Michigan State University) and WeiHsuan Lo (University of Northern Colorado) discussed the use of mind maps created by 11 second language (L2) Chinese learners (1) as a research instrument to understand learners' genre-specific knowledge as well as to track changes in that knowledge over time, and (2) as a pedagogical tool to facilitate language learning and genre-specific knowledge development. Although mind maps have been used widely as a research and pedagogical tool in education (e.g., Eppler, 2006), their potential to serve this dual role in genre knowledge development research was first explored by Wette (2017), who adopted Tardy's (2009) framework for genre-specific knowledge to analyze mind maps from L2 English graduate students, focusing on two academic genres (i.e., a book review and a literature review) prior to and after instruction. Wette's (2017) study demonstrated that mind maps could (1) reveal advances in learners' knowledge of textual and formal features of the two target genres because of instruction and based on reflections by participants, and (2) aid understanding of rhetorical and content knowledge.

Partially adopting Wette's (2017) research methods and instruments, Fedewa and Lo reported on a case study of L2 Mandarin learners in a once-a-week, year-long, project-based, extracurricular Chinese language program. The study focused on one three-week project in which students created an online advertisement. Additional major changes from the Wette study were that (1) learners were encouraged to type in their L2 (Mandarin) but allowed to use their L1 (English), (2) the participants were younger (primarily in high school) and at basic levels of L2 proficiency compared with Wette's graduate students, and (3) Fedewa and Lo used learners' self-evaluation of their ability to create the target genre to triangulate findings from the mind maps. After providing details of the participants and instruments, Fedewa and Lo shared challenges that were encountered during analysis and coding of the mind map nodes such as (1) the overlapping nature of the four concepts in Tardy's (2009) framework, and (2) the multiple possible interpretations of students' texts. These difficulties stress the importance of multiple coders and iterative rounds of coding.

Preliminary results from the study were then presented. Like Wette (2017), the L2 Mandarin learners reported (in self-evaluations) and demonstrated (through mind map quality) improved understanding of online advertisements as a genre. Additionally, data showed a general increase in the number of nodes and tokens (regardless of language) from mind maps that were created during and after instruction compared with pre-instruction mind maps. The proportion of Chinese words

being used to complete the mind maps also increased for most students, with one exception: a student who chose to write their final mind map completely in English. For future research applications, mind maps – if triangulated with other data sources and collected over larger stretches of time – may be an additional tool to track and promote multilingual learners' genre knowledge development across a larger number of genres.

3. Discussion and conclusion

Matt Kessler (University of South Florida) was the discussant for the colloquium. In the first part of his discussion, Kessler briefly summarized the three studies presented by Hakim, Xu, and Fedewa and Lo, and made connections among these studies in two ways. First, Kessler explained that although each presenter examined popular phenomena involving students' genre knowledge development, the methods leveraged in each study were particularly innovative. That is, Hakim's study adopted the analytical framework of GREs; Xu's study adopted the use of SCT; and Fedewa and Lo's study adopted the use of mind maps. Each framework or data elicitation tool has been used to some extent – particularly in other domains of L2 writing research – yet, they have rarely been used for the purposes of understanding genre knowledge development. Thus, these methods can be seen as spurring methodological innovation. Second, Kessler connected all three presentations by highlighting the shared challenges discussed by each presenter. These pertained to CONCEPTUALIZATION, DURATION, and MEASUREMENT. Specifically, Kessler noted the challenges of conceptualizing genre knowledge and genre awareness (see Tardy et al., 2020); understanding what an appropriate study duration is for adequately assessing learners' development; and finally, how/whether researchers can measure genre knowledge and awareness, respectively.

In the second part of his discussion, future research directions were addressed. Notably, these future research directions were proposed as a means of building on the work of Hakim, Xu, and Fedewa and Lo, and with an eye towards addressing the aforementioned challenges of conceptualization, duration, and measurement. In terms of qualitative methods, Kessler proposed three types of future studies, including those that (1) track learners and their development beyond one academic semester, (2) examine the extent to which learners' L1s interact with and transfer bi-directionally with their L2s (see Sommer-Farias, 2024), and also (3) leverage untapped data elicitation tools such as SCT and multimodal visualizations (e.g., Kessler & Tuckley, 2023). In terms of quantitative designs, Kessler again proposed three types of studies. These included studies that (1) compare the relative effectiveness of different pedagogies and activities on influencing learners' genre knowledge, (2) develop and validate questionnaires that tap into different constructs of genre knowledge and/or awareness (e.g., Pun & Cheung, 2023), and (3) studies that leverage those questionnaires and performance data (e.g., written output) to understand which dimensions of genre knowledge are greater predictors of students' writing performance.

Conflict of interest. The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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