THE STUDENTS' GENRE AWARENESS AND THEIR READING COMPREHENSION OF DIFFERENT TEXT TYPES

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a study looking at the relationship between genre awareness and reading comprehension. The study explores how 34 randomly selected students of a university in Indonesia understood the characteristics of 10 texts of 5 different genres and comprehended the texts. The students were required to answer 60 questions testing their knowledge about genres and 80 questions for reading comprehension. The results of the study show that a strong indication of the relationship of these two variables. On average the students' genre awareness was low as they could only answer about 23% of the questions. Their reading comprehension indicates a similar result. They could answer only about 37% of the questions on average. This conclusion is also affirmed by the fact that the students whose genre awareness was good also had good reading comprehension, and vice versa. Interestingly, some other factors that apparently influence the students' reading comprehension were also evident. They were background knowledge about the content of the texts and field-related vocabulary.

Keywords: Genre, Genre awareness, Reading comprehension.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of learning genres has received a remarkable attention in the teaching of English in Indonesia in the last ten years. Since the implementation of the 2004 high school curriculum which adopts the competency-based approach, the students are expected to be able to communicate in English in several selected texts of different genres. Accordingly, the students are facilitated with knowledge of generic and lexicogrammar features of several text types through which they learn shared formal characteristics of genres. It is believed that by having genre awareness, the students are able to communicate in English at ease as they understand "the intricate connections between contexts and forms, to perceive potential ideological effects of genres, and to

discern both constraints and choices that genres make possible" (Devitt, 2004). To reach the goal, classroom activities generally include text analysis, modeling, and text construction.

The change of focus of the teaching English at high school has accordingly influenced the teaching of English at the English departments which offer English teaching programs. The students do not only learn English through the micro skills of the four language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing), but also through various genres and their generic characteristics. At the university where this study was conducted, in Reading course units (Reading 1, 2, 3, and Extensive Reading) the students learn reading sub-skills such as identifying the main idea and specific information and rhetorical patterns of a text. At the end of the course, it is expected that the students are able to comprehend several English texts of different genres, especially the academic ones such as articles and books. The students are provided with theories and practice of sub-skills of reading which are intended to enable them to read effectively. Unfortunately, their reading skill is below par. When the students write their final projects or papers, their difficulties in understanding references are reflected in their paraphrases or summaries, and their shallow idea development when they write their papers or final project.

As the ability to comprehend a text is not merely influenced by knowledge about the language itself, but also by knowledge about the genre (Devitt, 2004; Devitt, 2004; Swales, 2009), the students' difficulties may be subject to these two main reasons. Although a great number of studies in various aspects of genres and genre teaching have been conducted, research concerning EFL learners' genre knowledge and skills are scarce. This study was motivated by a question about the extent to which the students' problems and difficulties in reading were resulted from their limited knowledge about genres.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Reading is a psycholinguistic process that starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs. There is an interaction between language and thought in reading. According to Sheng (2000), reading is a process of communication from the writer to the reader involving the recognition of letters, words, phrases, and clauses, and a process of negotiation between the reader and the writer. Knowledge (including knowledge of language), experience, and a particular purpose of reading influences the meaning a reader derives from a text (Rice, 2013). Because of the complexity of reading process, Grabe (1991) argues that in an attempt to understand and explain the fluent reading process, six component skill and knowledge areas should be taken into consideration. They are 1) automatic recognition skills; 2) vocabulary and structural knowledge; 3) formal discourse structure knowledge; 4) content/world knowledge. The reader interacts dynamically with the text when he tries to extract the meaning. In this process, various kinds of knowledge are being used, linguistics knowledge and syntactic knowledge and schematic knowledge. These areas of knowledge are the concern of the process of raising genre awareness.

Genre itself has been a subject of research for a long time in various fields of studies. Genres are defined as social processes that are goal-oriented and have their own structures in which field, mode, and tenor variables are phased together (Martin, 1985; 1997). Mostly genres are highly structured and conventionalized; they are relatively stable in form. A key insight of the genre

theory is that language occurs in a social context and that it is structured according to the purposes it serves in a particular context and according to social relations entailed by that activity. People of a certain culture in recurring situations develop consensual, conventional ways of understanding and responding to genres (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Bazerman, 1997). Quoting Eggins and Martin, Bruce (2008) states: "different genres are different ways of using language to achieve different culturally established tasks, and texts of different genres are texts which are achieving different purposes in the culture". The genres shape the situations themselves and constrain, in helpful ways, the meanings one might make therein (Whitney *et al.*, 2011). Toledo (2005) argues that: we cannot be certain whether or not readers have grasped the message unless we are aware of their knowledge of the contextual dimensions that constrain it at different levels". This implies that one who learns a language should have knowledge about genres in the language in order to obtain the purpose of communication successfully.

Some scholars (Paltridge, 2002) argue that genre knowledge which includes an understanding of the social and cultural contexts of genres, the language choices within the genres, and a sense of what is and what is not appropriate in certain contexts which reflect the norms and values of a discourse community is important for second language learners. As for reading, Johns (Hyons, 2002), for example, asserts that knowledge about genres which includes awareness of their names, purposes, and language features is essential for effective reading. Similarly, Johns (2008) states that students need to have genre awareness through which they learn the characteristics of a certain text type (genre) to help them interpret and produce that genre. An example of the characteristics mentioned by Coutinho and Miranda (2009) is generic marker. They state that "… the identification of the generic markers (self-referential or interferential) is an essential procedure in the process of reading the texts". Without such process, as they argue, the readers will not get what a writer means.

A number of earlier studies show a significant role of genre knowledge in understanding and producing texts. With regards to the role of texts as instruments of communicative purposes and action as revealed by their study, Francis and Hallam (2000) emphasize the importance of knowing how a discourse community constructs a text, and the difficulty that may a reader has in understanding a certain text without such knowledge. The results of their study indicate that students' reading comprehension is affected by their ability to deal with text genre. Feez (2002) mentions that in Australia genre pedagogy has been successfully applied to help students achieve the expected educational outcomes through the provision of knowledge about texts across a range of social institutions. In this case, teachers provide models and guide students to understand and create texts for different purposes audiences. Hyons (2002) reported a classroom study she conducted to look at the effects of genre instruction on ESL students' reading. The study revealed that genre instruction had heightened the students' attention to formal rhetorical features, increased their awareness of the position of key ideas, enhanced their reading speed, and improved their enjoyment of reading. Drawing on the findings of a study comparing students' reading historical documents and historians, Wine burg (Beaufort and Williams, 2005) points out the disadvantages of teaching students to read through genre lens, as he found out the students failed to see the purpose of the texts. A quite recent study was conducted by Negretti and Kuteeva (2011). Based on the analysis of the data collected from their study examining the process of building genre

awareness within ESP genre-based academic reading and writing instruction, Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) found that all participants developed declarative and procedural knowledge, but only a few gained progress in conditional knowledge of genre in reading and writing. The participants had good understanding about characteristics of genres, but did not understand why certain features were used by writers. In short, knowledge about genre plays an important role in comprehending and producing a genre as well. Hypothetically, facilitating learners with genre knowledge and raising their awareness about the function and the characteristics of genres is imperative in teaching a language.

3. METHOD

This research employed descriptive method. The students' knowledge about genres and their reading ability in reading were measured through tests whose results were quantified and described as such. The population of this research was 280 students of the English Language Study Program (ELTSP) of Universitas Negeri Padang (State University of Padang) who had passed the three reading courses. Thirty eight students were randomly selected as the sample.

The data were collected through a set of tests that covered items testing the students' reading comprehension and their genre knowledge about six different genres- *explanation, exposition, discussion, review,* and *narrative*. Each genre consisted of two texts. For genre awareness, there were six questions for each text; so, there were sixty questions altogether. For reading comprehension, there were eighty questions (8 questions for each text). The tests were conducted in four different times, with a range of two weeks. Genre awareness and reading comprehension tests were divided into three sets; each set consisted of four texts of different genres. They were given in three different times. The students' answers were checked and scored 0-1. The correct answer was given score 1, half correct answer was 0.5, and wrong answer was 0. The total correct answers were summed in order to show a student's reading awareness and reading comprehension. The total number of students who could answer a certain question was also counted in order to show the questions that were easy or difficult for the students. After that, a qualitative analysis was done by looking at the students' ability and problem of each text and test item. Finally, the findings of the three sets of data were compared to see and explain how one was related to another.

4. FINDINGS

The findings are reported in two sections, the students' genre awareness and their reading comprehension. The first set of data was examined to see the students' theoretical knowledge about the major characteristics of a genre. The findings were compared across texts of five different genres. The second one was examined and reported to find out the students' reading comprehension. Thus, the findings seek two answer two research questions, the students' genre awareness and their reading comprehension.

Question One-1.Genre Awareness

There were 12 questions of two texts of each genre to test the students' genre awareness. The questions mainly dealt with the social function, the generic structure, and the use of dominant language features. The result of the analysis shows that the students' knowledge about each genre

was very limited. In fact, they could only answer 2 to 3 questions (23%) correctly. No significant difference found in students' genre knowledge between the five different genres.

The students had little better knowledge about Exposition than the four other genres; most of the students knew the generic structure of this genre. The questions about the possible audience of the texts, the name of the genre, and the way the writers convince the audience were relatively easy for the students. In fact, they could answer the questions about the *thesis* and the language features such as the use of *modality* in an exposition text. This should help them in understanding the writer's position and judge his arguments.

Discussion, to some extent, has some similarities with Exposition. However, the students' knowledge about this text was far below the exposition. The only questions that most of the students could answer were about the purpose and the intended audience of the texts. They might use the diction of the texts as the clue. They did not know the generic structure and the dominant language features of the texts. The most difficult one was about the reason behind the frequent use of reporting verbs and modality in the texts.

As for the texts of Explanation genre, most of the students could not answer the questions testing their understanding about the generic structure and the dominant language features, especially the devices to show logical sequence of the natural process of the texts. This suggested that they hardly knew this genre.

With regards to Review genre, all questions were difficult for the students to answer. The most difficult ones were the questions testing their knowledge about the language devices used by the writer to show his view about the film and the writers' point of view. Nonetheless, some of them knew the name of the genre.

Similarly, for Narrative, the students had very limited knowledge about the genre. They did not know the way to locate the setting of the complication of the stories, meaning that they did not the language devices which could be used to indicate the setting of a narrative story. Most of them answered that the setting was at the beginning, as what they probably learned in traditional narrative like legend. A few students could tell where the complication was, but most could not explain how to identify it.

The answers toward the questions of genre characteristics indicate that theoretically the students did not have good understanding about genres; their genre awareness was low. Given such limited knowledge about the genres, they might have difficulties in understanding the texts. The result of the reading comprehension test that will be described below confirms this assumption.

Question-2. Reading Comprehension

There were 16 reading comprehension questions of each genre. The average number of the questions that could be answered correctly by the students was 5.75. This means the students could answer about 37% of the questions.

For the texts of Explanation genre, the questions dealing with details and specific information that demanded understanding the causal relationship between an item with another in the text, and relationship between ideas presented in different paragraphs were difficult for the students. They failed to see that a technical term introduced in the third paragraph was a condition explained in the

second paragraph. They also seemed to be unable to understand the statement 'earthquake almost never kill people …'and its relation to next sentence beginning with a cohesive device 'instead'.

The second text about carbondioxide was more difficult than the first one. The problem was most likely due to the students' failure in understanding the causal relationship between ideas in subsequent sentences in a paragraph. For instance, the first sentence of a paragraph explains the fact that carbondioxide is absorbed by plants and living things. The next sentence, started with conjunction 'but' presents another fact that 'carbondioxide from the moment of death, the organic subject begins to lose C14 and the proportion of C14 and C12 decreases'. The problem of understanding those sentences made it very difficult for them to answer the question 'why your boots contain proportionately less C14 than your body'. Next, the students' ability to answer the reading comprehension questions for the texts of Exposition genre was better than the other texts. The most difficult question was the one that required the students to recognize the way the writer presents his thesis; the writer presents his arguments inductively. The next difficult one required the ability to find specific information that was stated explicitly. The students' failure seemed to be resulted from word and sentence pattern recognition problem.

As for Discussion texts, the students had difficulties in answering the questions requiring them to draw a conclusion from details given and to decide the writer's position on the issue that he is discussing. Probably, the students' difficulty was due to the problem of understanding a causal relationship of ideas in a complex sentence. For the second text, the most difficult ones for the students were those concerning their understanding about the details and the writer's position on the issue being discussed. Similarly, the most difficult questions of the second text for the students were concerned with determining an implicit argument and the writer's position on the issue from the details.For the two texts of Review, question about inference was the most difficult one. It required understanding details in order to answer the question 'why' the writer calls it as 'a good-bad' movie (Titanic). It was also very difficult for the student to answer the question about the writer's point of view about the movie and to guess the meaning of a term 'shoestring budget' based on the context. Similarly, for the text 'Harry Potter' the most difficult questions for the students were those concerning making inferences from details and guessing meaning from context.

Last, for Narrative, the most difficult question was the one that dealt with making inference from the details and guessing meaning from context. The students' inability to answer inference questions about generally indicates that they failed to identify the clues in the text from which they could make inferences. This failure may be caused by their limited knowledge about the language devices used by the writer to arrange the events and depict the setting as indicated by their answers toward the questions about genre awareness. Further, they seemed not to apply the strategies for guessing meaning from the context.

4. DISCUSSION

Due to the limited scope of this study, the interpretation of the relationship between students' genre knowledge and their reading comprehension mandates caution. The results of this study show an indication of a tendency of knowledge about genre and the ability to comprehend a text relationship. The students' inability to understand a writer's point of view of an exposition and a

discussion text, for instance, is apparently related to their difficulty in understanding the generic structure of the corresponding genres. This means that genre awareness does help students understand a text. The findings of this study align with what Veel (1997) and Coffin (1997) advocate about the role of genre awareness. They mention some examples through which they implicitly state that genre awareness helps learners in reading comprehension because they can manipulate the knowledge in several aspects of reading such as understanding the general ideas from the structure of a text, locating certain information they want to find, and understanding how one point is related with another.

Another discernible point is the relationship between the students' difficulties in answering questions about some language features of a genre and their problems in answering some comprehension questions. For example, many of them had problems in understanding a piece of information in a text of Explanation as they were not able to understand the cohesive devices employed by the writer. This finding is in line with a study conducted by Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) which revealed the fact that only a few of their study participants developed knowledge about pragmatic aspects such as language and rhetorical choices. Butt (2000) also discusses extensively how speakers (i.e. here including writers) manipulate language to make meaning and convey it to their readers. This is what readers have to learn through understanding genres.

Generally, though not statistically measured, the relationship between genre awareness and reading comprehension in this study is somewhat perceptible. There is a tendency that those who had good genre awareness also had good reading comprehension, and vice versa.

In spite of that, some other substantial factors contributing to one's ability in comprehending a text are also noticeable in the results of this study. The students' background knowledge about the content domain of certain genres influences their comprehension. This is very obvious in the text that uses inductive arguments. Inductive reasoning requires the reader to "extrapolate from experience" to what s/he has not experienced (Govier, 2010). For "cognitive genres" as Explanation especially, they had bigger problems than the other ones (Bruce, 2008). As a distinguished feature, the texts contained a number of technical terms that the students rarely found in their daily readings. In addition, texts of Narrative and Review had a great number of words dealing with activities related to culture which the students were not familiar with. Coady and Huckin in DeCarrio (2001) state: "there is general agreement among vocabulary specialists that lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence … ." Eggins (2004) also suggests that "lexico-grammatical variation is influenced by field in terms of degree of technicality from technical specialized to commonsense (everyday)." Students learning English, unfortunately, have limited second-language vocabulary, which then affects their reading comprehension (Calderŏn et al. in (Rice, 2013)). For that reason, reading instructions should give attention to the development of students' vocabulary (Porcaro, 2013; Stoller et al., 2013). This implies that using reading materials of different fields through which the students build up their vocabulary is useful.

To sum up, this study shows that genre awareness plays an important role in reading comprehension. Besides, other factors such as background knowledge about the content of a text, range of technical terms, and reading strategies are intertwined with the knowledge about genre and appear to influence the students' ability to comprehend a text.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Notwithstanding individual differences among students, the results of this research suggest that genre knowledge helps students read a text and comprehending an English text for EFL learners is a complex process. That knowledge about genre helped students read a text was confirmed by the fact that the students who had limited knowledge of a certain genre of a text faced difficulties in comprehending the text, and vice versa. Superficial knowledge about text structure and language features of a particular text only, however, seems not to mean much if students do not know how and why the rhetorical choices are made by a writer. In addition, background knowledge about the topic of a text, language aspects, and reading strategies are influential.

Thus, in order to help students transform their procedural knowledge about genres into effective reading, teachers need to help them through a process consisting of three main activities suggested by Paltridge in Millar (2011) - genre and context awareness activities, genre and discourse awareness activities, and genre and language awareness activities. Teachers also should also make students notice the differences between texts of the same genres and those of different genres through text comparison activities. Besides, when discussing a text, teachers should give explicit explanation about metacognitive reading strategies and should model how to apply the strategies and scaffold students to practice them.

I recognize that the sample was limited and that the results of this study raised many questions. Are students' problems in reading caused by their limited understanding of genres of texts or language of the texts? Are the students' reading difficulties caused by their limited reading strategies? How much does students' ability to identify and characterize rhetorical, textual, and language features of a text contribute to their reading comprehension? What is students' perception on the teaching them the characteristics of genres explicitly? Will students' reading comprehension be better if the materials of reading courses are graded based on language complexity or students' familiarity of genres? Will it be better if a reading course provides a special space of time for vocabulary building? The results of research to answer these questions may lead to understanding EFL students' problems and difficulties in reading English and give new directions about how English reading courses for EFL learners should be designed.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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