

THE EFFECT OF A GENRE-BASED WRITING COURSE ON ESL STUDENTS' WRITING OF COVER LETTERS

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RESUMO

O estudo de gêneros textuais tem sido de grande importância para o ensino das línguas materna e estrangeira, sobretudo, para o ensino da escrita. Entretanto, avaliações do efeito de pedagogias baseadas em gênero na aprendizagem ainda são escassas (JUSWIK et al, 2006; TARDY,2006; CHENG, 2006). O presente estudo avalia o impacto de um curso baseado em gêneros textuais para o ensino da escrita em inglês para alunos de inglês como segunda língua no contexto universitário norte-americano. O curso adotou a visão australiana de gênero textual (MARTIN, 1989; 1993) e a pedagogia do Movimento do Abstrato para o Concreto (MAC) baseada na teoria da atividade (DAVYDOV, 1988 a,b,c,d; LEONTIEV, 1981). Seis alunos fizeram cartas de apresentação antes e depois do curso. Essas cartas foram avaliadas quantitativamente utilizando uma escala holística de 4 pontos e os escores tratados com o teste não-paramétrico *Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks*. Este teste indicou uma melhora significativa da escrita dos alunos. As cartas também foram analisadas qualitativamente em termos da presença dos movimentos do gênero e de sua realização. Esta análise também revelou que todos os participantes, em um aspecto ou outro, melhoram sua escrita no gênero. A análise qualitativa levanta a hipótese de que três tipos de conhecimento são necessários para se escrever eficazmente um gênero textual: conhecimento empírico, conhecimento teórico e conhecimento lingüístico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: gênero textual - carta de apresentação - avaliação da escrita - movimento do abstrato para o concreto - escola australiana de gênero textual

INTRODUCTION

Genre studies have become highly relevant not only for language studies but also for writing instruction. There are three perspectives on L1/L2 writing instruction: 1) the traditional one, which focuses on the final writing piece and on its accuracy; 2) the process writing which highlights the pre-writing strategies, revisions and conferences assumed to be essential to improve the text and 3) genre-based perspectives which conceive writing as a social embedded activity ruled by rhetorical principles delineated by discourse communities.

Although genre studies have been growing considerably both in Brazil and overseas, and gradually utilized for writing instruction, especially abroad, the literature lacks more research about the effect of genre-based pedagogies on students' writing improvement (CHENG, 2006; JUSWIK et al, 2006; TARDY,2006).

This paper contributes to the area of genre-based writing instruction assessment as it reports the effect of a genre-based writing course on ESL students' performance enrolled in a North-American university. The writing pieces chosen for this article are the cover letters which were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Both analyses indicate that students improved their performance in this genre.

THE STUDY

The genre-based course was designed according to the concept of genre put forward by systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and an activity-theory based pedagogy named The Movement from the Abstract to the Concrete (MAC) (DAVYDOV, 1988 a, b, c, d). SFL concepts of field, tenor and mode and context of culture informed the analyses of the genres taught in the course and composed the model that based the instruction following MAC. The model is an extremely relevant phase of this pedagogy among other five (problem situation, modifying the model, applying the model to solve tasks, monitoring the actions, and evaluating the actions) which consists of a visual representation of the concept being taught – in this case, genre. This representation should evolve from displaying taxonomies (that is

empirical) to being more relational and reflective of the conflicts and contradictions that are part of the concept and are assumed to be grasped by a theoretical mode of thinking. This form of thinking is the main goal of MAC¹. Thus, the course had two purposes: to develop students' theoretical thinking and to improve their writing by means of the concept of genre.

Unfortunately it is not possible to explain further the term theoretical but succinctly it is a form of thinking based on dialectical logic. It privileges the search for abstract (basic) elements, interacting with one another that explain an array of phenomena. In contrast, empirical thinking focuses on superficial observable features of the phenomena, which in the case of genre, are moves. The pedagogy departs from the abstract by focusing on the basic principle of what is being taught and then leads learners to focus on the concrete, specific manifestations of this abstract. Next it directs students to reflect on how the abstract and the concrete constitute a unity of opposites, which are in constant interconnection and change (LOMPSCHER, 1984, p.334).

Three genres were taught in the course: announcements, cover letters² and argumentative texts. They were depicted because they were either often read or written by the university students (announcements and argumentative texts) or because they were important for their careers (cover letters). This paper will report the effect of the genre-based writing course on cover letters only.

14 students, originally from Asia or Central America, consented to participate in this study. They were mainly immigrants to the United States, having moved there at the average age of 13. In general they did not have a good command of the English language, especially of writing. Out of the 14, six had their writing analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection:

The writing pieces consisted of the students' pre-tests and post-tests that they took in class. The texts were typed and students' anonymities were preserved. The words pre-test and post-test did not

appear in the tests either. In this way the raters in their scoring were not influenced by either access to the students' names or by the words pre-test and post-test. The texts were randomly assigned to the raters.

Data analysis:

The scores were obtained by employing a 4-point holistic scale, with 4 being the highest score, which was piloted by two experienced ESL writing instructors. For the scoring session, the raters were three different experienced ESL writing instructors who were also native speakers of English. They participated in two training sessions of one and a half hours each, where they learned to use the scale, tried the scale on samples, and discussed the results. The raters were randomly assigned texts. For the purposes of this study, when there was a one-point difference between the scores, they were averaged. When there was a 2-point or more difference between the scores, a third rater scored the text and the three scores were averaged as well.

The inter-rater reliability coefficients were the following: the cover letters, pre-test (0.91); cover letters, post-test (0.83). Only the correlation for cover letter, post-test was not significant at $p= 0.05$. All correlations were calculated through Spearman Rank Order (Rho). The raters were compensated for their service.

To be consistent with the genre perspective adopted, the holistic scoring designed for this study was inspired by MACKEN and SLADE (1993) who assess writing in terms of genre (generic moves) and register variables (field, tenor, and mode). The criteria developed for this study also involved four levels of analysis: genre (the presence of the generic moves of the genre), field (the realization of each generic move, the use of language to elaborate on information), tenor (the writer's enticement of the audience, how this audience is approached), and mode (thematic progression, cohesion, and minor language mistakes that do not affect the comprehensibility of the text). The grading criteria did not employ technical language to make it more comprehensible to the raters.

The Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks nonparametric test was run on the averaged pre-test and post-test scores to determine if the difference in the scores was significant.

The methodology of the qualitative analysis consisted of the

analysis of the presence and quality of the moves based on manuals on how to write cover letters (BEATTY,2004; BESSON,1996; ENELOW & KURSMARK, 2001; HANSEN & HANSEN,2001; and YATE,2003)³. Writing improvement, here, is defined as a statistically significant difference in scores assigned by the raters and by the students' manifestation of the rules of the genre as stipulated by the manuals and as identified by this researcher.

Based on the manuals mentioned above, the following generic moves were identified: heading, inside address, greeting, explanation of why the candidate is contacting the employer, the candidate's exposure of his/her qualifications, candidate's proactive statement, closing, signature, and enclosures. The students' pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed for the presence of all moves, except for signature and enclosures.

Only the three parts of the body of the letter mentioned above were analyzed for quality since they represent the main portion of text in the letter. The letter opens with a paragraph aimed at establishing rapport with the potential employer, and explaining why the candidate is contacting the employer. The candidate may simply state the position for which he/she is applying, mention some of his/her qualifications, or reveal knowledge of the employer. In any case, the candidate should entice the reader and show that he/she can benefit the company (BEATTY, 2004, p.10). The opening is followed by a brief summary of the candidate's qualifications, which should be carefully selected to suit the employer's needs (BESSON, 1996, p. 28). The last part should include a proactive statement mentioning when the applicant will contact the potential employer to schedule an interview.

Although the texts contained grammar mistakes, they were not the focus of analysis. The present analysis aimed to evaluate the quality of students' writing with regard to their knowledge of, and their ability to apply, the rules of the genre. Language problems such as confusing sentences and inappropriate word choice were only considered in the analysis if they interfered with the students' performance. Yet, this aspect of students' writing was evaluated by the raters in the scoring of the texts.

The analysis of the cover letters was based on whether students followed the rules for this genre in a North-American context. Different countries may have different rules to write cover letters; these

differences, though addressed by the course, were disregarded here for the qualitative analysis of the texts. The letters were not edited at all and students' names were kept confidential.

The results of the quantitative analysis:

The scores given by the three raters are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Scores given by the raters

| Students | Pretest | Posttest |
|----------|---------|----------|
| K | 1/1 | 2/1 |
| Cho | 1/2 | 2/3 |
| M | 1/1 | 2/3 |
| H | 1/1 | 2/2 |
| Chl | 1/2 | 2/4/3 |
| X | 2/1 | 3/4 |

The raters' scores were averaged and the final scores are displayed in table 2:

Table 2: Final scores for the pre-tests and post-tests

| Students | Pre-test | Post-test |
|----------|----------|-----------|
| K | 1 | 1.5 |
| Cho | 1.5 | 2.5 |
| M | 1 | 2.5 |
| H | 1.5 | 2 |
| Chl | 1.5 | 3 |
| X | 1.5 | 3.5 |

From this table, it is possible to see that all students improved their scores in cover letter writing. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test indicates that students improved significantly in the genre cover letters (0.031). These numbers indicate exact significance.

The results of the qualitative analysis:

Pre-tests

Table 3 represents the presence of the cover letter moves in the pre-tests.

Table 3: Presence of moves in the pre-tests

| Student/ move | heading | inside address | greeting | P1 | P2 | P3 | closing |
|------------------|---------|-------------------|----------|----|----|----|---------|
| K | | | X | X | X | | |
| Cho | | X | X | X | X | | X |
| M | | | X | X | X | | |
| H | | | | X | X | | |
| Chl | | | X | X | X | | X |
| X | X | | X | X | X | | X |

Part 1= explanation of why the person is contacting the employer.

Part 2= exposure of the candidate's qualifications

Part 3= candidate's proactiveness

Most of the students did not write a heading, an inside address, part 3 and a closing in their letters.

The explanation of why the candidate is contacting the employer was realized by means of introductions (K, Cho, Chl, H) and of the reference to the position for which the students applied (Chl, Cho, H, K, M, X). One student employed an informal greeting (M). In general students were able to list their qualifications, but without any elaboration (Chl, Cho, H, M, X) that would convince the employer to schedule an interview. One student only mentioned the requirements of the advertisement Cho and four (X, M, Chl and H) claimed they would do their best rather than revealing their qualifications more explicitly. H and M adopted an aggressive stance toward their audience and therefore deployed an inappropriate tenor for the genre. K and M employed self-deprecation. Most manuals on how to write effective cover letters suggest that aggressive and self-deprecating tones are not desired by North-American employers. Moreover, introductions are not utilized in this genre.

The following are excerpts of the letters to illustrate the elements mentioned above:

Introductions:

K: "My name is K. I'm now a student of Penn State."

Cho: "This is Cho, one of Penn State students who study at major business and sale."

Reference to the position:

K: "After I read your ads, I am very interested in becoming a lifeguard."

M: "I saw this new from a newspaper, then know you are hiring people representatives go out to sell newspaper."

No elaboration on the qualifications:

H: "instructor of Soccer for the last 2 years would like to work for one of these camps where a instructor of soccer is needed."

X: "It is available to me to work after class, evening, and weekend."

"I have my valid PA driver's license and insurance (...)"

Simply repeating the requirements of the ad:

Cho: "I have my own PA license and insurance to drive a car. And I can work weekends and some evenings."

Claiming rather than proving qualifications:

Chl: "I am a social able and nice person as responsible as well".

"I will try my best to demonstrate my capability."

X: "I would try my best on everything I work on."

Inappropriate tenor:

H: "Hopping [hoping] get hired H". (underlining in the original letter)

M: "Please hire me".

M: "holle" (which probably means hello)

Self-disqualification:

K: "After I read your ads, I am very interested in becoming a lifeguard."

M: "Also sometimes need friends support."

As can be seen from these extracts the students were not aware of the importance of persuasion and the means to construct it through self-promotion in the letter.

In sum, both the quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that the six students had little ability to use this genre.

Post-tests:

Table 4 displays the students' performance in the post-test cover letters.

Table 4: Students' performance on the post-test cover letters

| Student/ move | heading | inside address | greeting | P1 | P2 | P3 | closing |
|------------------|---------|-------------------|----------|----|----|----|---------|
| K | X | | X | X | X | X | |
| Cho | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| M | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| H | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Chl | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |

All students, except K, included all the moves of the genre.

K was still not aware of how persuasive a cover letter in the United States should be despite the fact the instructor focused extensively on this feature and how it was linked with tenor. Both in parts one and two he misses the opportunity to provide information that could convince the employer to interview him. K improved his writing in this genre because in the post-test he did not start the letter with an introduction; he did not provide unnecessary information, and he tried to match himself to the company's needs. This indicates a new awareness of the genre. However, he relied a lot on the wording of the advertisement rather than on his own writing. His ability to demonstrate his qualifications also improved. Moreover, he terminated the letter more professionally than in the pre-test. However, this improvement was not sufficient to increase his score considerably. K achieved 1 in the pre-test and 1.5 in the post-test.

Cho's post-test letter is better written because he does not use an introduction at the beginning of the letter and is more specific in his description of the qualifications. However, the letter still needs to be more enticing in the first paragraph. His score raised from 1.5 to 2.5.

M improved in some aspects but not in others. She did not use the informal greeting (How are you doing/ hello) or adopt a demanding

tone as she did in the pre-test, but she was not clear about the position she was applying for in her post-test letter. She is aware of the three main moves of the letter in the post-test but realized them poorly due to her lack of English proficiency. Although M and Cho obtained the same final score in the post-test (2.5), the qualitative analysis reveals that Cho's letter is superior to M's.

H's post-test letter does not have the demanding tone of the pre-test and he does not introduce himself in the letter. The presentation of his qualifications is more effective and he is able to be proactive, which he was not in the pre-test. However, H is still not able to perceive that a cover letter must be persuasive, or understand how to construct such a letter with language and the appropriate selection of information. The qualitative analysis of H's letter corroborates his score in the post-test (2).

Chl improved her writing from the pre-test to the post-test because the latter did not have introductions like the former, she praised the company, elaborated better on the qualifications, and was proactive. Chl's letter was one of the best post-test letters; during the course she proved to be one of the best writers in class, and she was able to construct an appealing letter. The outstanding improvement in Chl's writing in this genre is corroborated by an increase in her score: from 1.5 in the pre-test to 3 in the post-test.

X reveals improvement in her ability to write cover letters. Her post-test opening is better constructed because she attempted to show knowledge of the company and to praise it, and in paragraph two she managed to elaborate effectively on her qualifications. She did not use the strategy of claiming to have qualifications but instead attempted to prove that she had them in the post-test letter. She was also proactive. Although X achieved the highest score in the post-test (3.5), the qualitative analysis reveals that Chl's letter is superior to X's. To summarize, according to the qualitative analysis Chl's letter was the best, followed by X's rather than the other way around as the scores show. However, both the scores and the qualitative analysis display K as the student who improved least in this genre.

Although the students did not utilize introductions or informal greetings to start the post-test letter, most students did not perform it well for not understanding the fundamental role persuasion has for this genre. They either copied parts of the ad (K, Cho), or did not state

clearly the position they were applying for (H, Chl). On the other hand some students praised the company (Cho, Chl, X).

K: I am writing this reference to your ad on moday that looking for outgoing sales representative to sell newspaper subscription. I am currently looking for a part-time job at night and weeken. Also, I like to work independently, so this job fix me the best. (the parts underlined are copied from the ad)

Cho: By reading the employing message on the newspaper, I am very interesting at being a part time Kiosk Sales Representatives for the Centre Daily Times. The Centre Daily Times is an equal opportunity Employer with growing business. I am looking for out going sales representative to contribute its business. "(the parts underlined are copied from the ad)

Chl: I am writing in response to your ad on your newspaper. It is very impressive that The Centre Daily Times has become the best selling newspaper in Pennsylvania today. The high-quality printing, good teamwork, comfortable environment for workers, well-developed organization and the unique style of the newspaper have become well known among families in Pennsylvania. These make me become more anxious to be part of your team.

Part 2 of the letter improved in the post-test since students elaborated further their qualifications (Cho, H, Chl, X). Nevertheless, two students still employed the strategy claiming rather than proving qualifications (K, H). This feature also shows the students' unawareness of the importance of persuasion.

Cho:

As I am a part time student at Penn State, I have a very flexible schedule that can be compatible to work as part time Kiosk Sales Representatives. Also, I have been a newspaper sale for many years. So I earned a great experiences at this type of job. And I owned a PA driver's license and insurance, in which can help me dealing with any transportation problems. Throughout my life I am a very independent worker. I can work at various locations at nights and weekends, even at special events.

K: "I belive all my work skill will best fix your qualification."

Part 3, which was absent in the pre-test, was incorporated in the post-tests. Since it is constituted by formulaic sentences, all students realized it reasonably well.

K:” I will looking forward to call you on the coming week to schedual a best time for us to meet and discuss about my qualification. Thank you for your consideration.”

X: “Expecting to meet with you to discuss my qualifications for this position. I will call later to confirm my information arrived. Thank you for your time and consideration.”

Overall the students abandoned the self-deprecating tone but still had language problems to perform the moves and did not construct a persuasive letter. This lack of persuasion was caused by the repetition of the wording of the ad, by the lack of further elaboration on some aspects of their qualifications and by claiming rather than proving them. However, two students (Chl and X) managed to be persuasive as they enticed the employer through careful description of their qualifications and of the company and through their excitement with their professions.

Chl: Currently I am a senior whose major Business Management in Pennsylvania State University and will graduate on May 2004. I have earned straight A through these years in all classes that I have taken in college, especially I have won the honor in Business and Speech Communication classes, in which I gain business, saling, management and communication skills. My academic achievement is not limited in the classroom. During summer of 2003, Intelligencer Journal had offered me a internship as sales manager, in where I improve sales and carrer skills. During my college years, I became active in school’s organizations, include Asian Club, Business Club and Saler’s Club, etc. overall, I belive my experiences and skills will contribute the best for your company.

X: Tennis is my favorite sport and career. I have been playing tennis since I was seven years old. 10 years formal training has builded up my professional skill on tennis. I have won 5 championships in the high school and college contests. Coach assistant is my partime job in college. I like to play and teach tennis with students who love this sport as much as I do.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative analysis revealed that all students improved their writing in some aspect or another despite their limited linguistic proficiency. Chl showed the most improvement in her letter and K showed least, a finding corroborated partially by the scores. All moves

of the genre were incorporated in the post-test by all students, except K, who did not include an inside address or a closing in his letter. Both pre-tests and post-tests had the explanation of why the candidate is contacting the employer, but the move was realized differently in the tests. In the pre-test, students mainly used the first paragraph to introduce themselves and to state the position for which they were applying. In the post-test, four students (Chl, Cho, M and X) were able to mention good things about the company and all of them stated the position for which they would like to apply. Nevertheless, all students, except Chl, seemed unaware that a cover letter must be persuasive. The description of each candidate's qualifications in the post-test letters was more developed; however, the students did not include the right information or use it to promote themselves effectively. Proactive statements were omitted by most students in the pre-test letters, but were included in the post-test. I consider this an easy move since it is composed of some formulaic sentences which can easily be memorized.

The students had 10 hours of instruction (spread in eight 75-minute classes) on cover letters when the instructor-researcher attempted to help them improve their proficiency through the register analysis of samples and emphasized frequently the importance of persuasion in the genre and how it was linked with tenor. Moreover, she substantially exemplified the moves of the genre in these samples. Yet, students still needed more extensive language work and, mainly, to become aware of the importance of persuasion in a conceptualization of the genre under focus. In addition, the instructor-researcher should have highlighted specifically the ACP (abstract communicative principle) manifested in cover letters and asked that it be employed in the writing tasks.

The ACP, represented in the form of a model, and inspired on Eggins' figure (1994, p.79), is a basic founding principle of communication grounded on the relationship between the context of situation (field, tenor and mode) and the context of culture. This model was the orientation of the course and utilized to develop theoretical thinking among students. In the dialectical logic basic means abstract. Thus, the ACP was the abstract element of the course that had to be comprehended by the students in real concrete situations, in this case, cover letters.

Some possible explanations for the average performance of the

students can be raised: a) goal setting, b) linguistic deficiency, and c) the absences of a theoretical model of genre and of its use as a mediational tool to write. Students might simply have conceived the writing assignment as an exercise without taking it seriously or written less to avoid using a language they did not fully have command. It can also be the case that, since students were not instructed to draw a model of how ACP of this genre was realized and to use it as a tool in their writing assignment, they overlooked this relevant type of knowledge while doing the tests. In other words, the course aimed to develop the conceptualization of genre in terms of SFL categories but did not emphasize enough its realization in specific genres. The students ended up having an understanding of field, tenor and mode, and of the moves but how the register variables interacted in cover letters was not explored fully in the classes. Moreover, the students, who frequently were asked to write visual representations of their understanding of the genres taught, privileged representing the moves rather than focusing on founding aspects of the genre involving register variables. The former type of knowledge I call empirical and the latter, theoretical. Theoretical knowledge of genre means that students should employ the ACP, realized in this particular example of genre, to write in the genre. In the particular case of cover letters, the theoretical knowledge of the genre is represented as follows:

Discourse community
 (ruling, determining)
 Tenor (to be persuasive)
 (ruling, determining)
 Field (content of each move of the letter)

Hence, I hypothesize that three types of knowledge are necessary to write effectively in a genre - empirical knowledge of genre, theoretical knowledge of genre, and language proficiency - and that the theoretical knowledge may impact on writing improvement if it is nurtured by MAC principles of modeling and applying the model (see FERREIRA, 2005 for more explanations on the MAC pedagogy). Students should draw visualizations of this knowledge and consciously use it as a mediational tool (VYGOTSKY, 1987) to write.

In order to verify a student's level of theoretical knowledge and

its application to writing a more thorough investigation of the writing process is needed. For instance, the fact that a student does not construct a persuasive letter because he/she copied parts of the advertisement and did not elaborate on the necessary information can indicate several things: the student did not want to take the risk to write more because it was difficult, so he/she copied parts of the ad even though he/she knew this would affect the evaluation of the letter; he/she was aware that he/she had to be persuasive but did not know how, or did not have sufficient language proficiency, or even did not want to; he/she interpreted the goal of this activity as simply to perform the task rather than to write as if the cover letter constituted a real need. In fact, the notion of writing process itself should be expanded. Rather than just consisting of the use of cognitive strategies to write, as recommended by the process writing approach, it involves the students' goal definition of the writing assignment and the use of theoretical models of the genre as external mediational tools to write.

Although both SFL, alone, and its combination with MAC (which elsewhere I have called concept-based approach to writing) aim to promote literacy, the second intends also to develop theoretical thinking. Following Vygotsky's (1978) principle of learning leading to development, the course targeted to promote cognitive development through this form of thinking in a writing instruction setting. While SFL provides abstract categories that permit the conceptualization of the relationship between language and context, MAC provides the pedagogical steps to amplify this conceptualization in the form of theoretical thinking. As hypothesized before, it remains to be further investigated if theoretical thinking improves writing instruction and if so, how. In other words, further research is needed to assess the potentiality of this combination for literacy improvement.

Another clarification should also be made regarding other types of knowledge needed to learn and write in a genre. Tardy (2006) presents four: 1) formal, 2) rhetorical, 3) procedural, and 4) subject-matter. Formal knowledge can be equated to what I call here empirical knowledge while the rhetorical differs from my theoretical term. The rhetorical type refers to "the familiarity with a given context" (TARDY, 2006, p.87) while the theoretical type also encompasses the interaction of basic elements (ACP) and its realization in a specific genre. Moreover, my proposal relies on SFL categories and on a dialectical logic that bases

the MAC approach, while the author's exposition does not have this theoretical affiliation. Procedural and subject-matter do not have corresponding terms in my terminology. The first refers to the procedures of collecting samples of genre (JOHNS,2006) and the second, the knowledge of the area in which the genre is being written (TARDY, 2006).

As could be seen in this paper, the relationship between theoretical knowledge and writing improvement represents a promising research topic since it can shed light on students' writing process and learning of genres and, above all, on the very conceptualization of genre itself.

Another issue that should be considered is the socio-discursive activity of which the genre cover letter is part. When individuals go to the job market they interact with employers or their representatives via several oral and written genres (resumés, cover letters, recommendation letters, salary proposals, job interviews, thank you notes, and phone contacts to verify the possibility of the interview). In a competitive market such as the North-American one the cover letter constitutes the pivotal genre that an individual should learn to introduce him/herself. If the letter is appealing, the applicant will have his/her other documents appreciated by the employer and, consequently, will probably be interviewed. The discourse community, inserted in a time-is-money competitive individualistic society, creates rules which illustrate a conception of persuasion as self-promotion⁴. These rules are employed to write genres (such as cover letters) which will save them time in the screening process. Thus, it is fundamental that the founding basic role persuasion plays be comprehended, for example, through pedagogical actions such as proposed by MAC. These actions also include the experiencing of the social activity of the genre as part of the socialization process to write in it⁵ (as the New Rhetoric endorses).

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to report the effect of a genre-based writing course, which combined innovatively an activity-theory based pedagogy (MAC) with the Australian school of genre, on the writing performance of ESL students in a North-American university. Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed the positive effect

of the course on the students' writing. Yet, the qualitative analysis uncovers an intriguing issue: the fact that students knew the moves and performed them in their writing did not lead to a successful cover letter. Students still needed to be aware of the founding combination of field, tenor and mode in this genre, expressed by the relevance of persuasion determining the content of each move. This kind of knowledge, called theoretical in this paper, seems to be as relevant as the linguistic and empirical ones for writing improvement. In addition, the dialectical logic, which bases my typology, may contribute to further understanding of genre. Thus, further research needs to be conducted in order to test this hypothesis and to further explore the potential contributions of MAC principles to the understanding of genre and to writing instruction.

ABSTRACT

Genre-based studies have been strongly contributing to the teaching of writing in L1 and L2. However, the literature lacks more studies on the effect of genre-based pedagogies on students' writing improvement (JUSWIK et al, 2006; TARDY,2006; CHENG, 2006). The present study reports the impact of a genre-based writing course on ESL students at tertiary level in a North-American context. The course has two theoretical frameworks: the Australian school of genre (MARTIN, 1989; 1993) and the activity-theory based pedagogy known as the Movement from the Abstract to the Concrete (DAVYDOV, 1988 a,b,c,d; LEONTIEV, 1981). Six students wrote cover letters before and after the course. They were analyzed quantitatively by running the non-parametric test *Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks* on the scores obtained through a 4-point holistic scale. The test revealed that the students improved significantly their writing. The qualitative analysis was carried out in terms of the presence and the quality of the moves of the genre. It showed that all students in one aspect or another improved their writing. Based on this qualitatively analysis, this paper also raises the hypothesis that three types of knowledge is needed to write effectively in a genre: empirical, theoretical and linguistic.

KEY WORDS: genre- cover letters- writing assessment – the movement from the abstract to the concrete – the Australian school

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¹ For more information on the MAC pedagogy and on dialectical thinking see Ferreira (2005).

² Job application letters . See the discussion section for more details about the socio-discursive activity of this genre.

³ This study was part of a larger research project which aimed to investigate writing improvement in some genres, cognitive development, and students' meaning making activity in the course. For this reason, this researcher opted to rely on manuals written by the discourse community rather than on analyzing the genre itself, which would be extremely time-consuming for the purposes of the study.

⁴ There are other conceptions of persuasion. For example in South Asian countries it is understood as self-deprecation and adversary glorification (BHATIA, 1993).

⁵ Some students reacted negatively to this conception of persuasion and to the proactiveness of the letter claiming that these features went against their cultural framework. This constitutes an interesting topic for investigation and also a relevant aspect that should be considered by the socialization process to write in the genre.