

## **Researching genre learning in second language writing: A review from the perspective of English for specific purposes**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Second language (L2) students' learning of genre for communication in English-medium discourse communities has become an increasingly researched area in the field of English for specific purposes (ESP). This paper outlines current directions of ESP research into the learning of written genres and reviews key empirical studies in three categories: (a) genre learning in different contexts, including writing classrooms, disciplinary communities, and the context that bridges writing classrooms and disciplinary communities, (b) genre knowledge development, in terms of formal, rhetorical, process, and subject-matter knowledge domains, and (c) genre learner characteristics that influence learning processes and knowledge development. This review indicates that the sociorhetorical, textual, and systematic dimensions of genre, as well as the multiple knowledge domains involved, account for the intricacies of genre learning activity. The review also indicates that genre learning could be further explored from the perspectives of sociocultural and critical studies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, second language (L2) writing research has undergone substantial growth in theoretical perspectives, research approaches, and pedagogical practices (Manchon, 2012). Among the diverse theories and pedagogical models, genre theory and genre-based writing instruction have risen to prominence since the 1980s (Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2011; Tardy, 2011). Genre, originally a term in literature, has become “a central and remarkably productive concept in second language writing studies” that informs researchers’ approach to textual and sociorhetorical dimensions of L2 writing as well as the way of teaching and learning L2 writing (Tardy, 2011, p. 2). Among the various schools of genre studies in the applied linguistics field, English for specific purposes (ESP) studies and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) studies (often referred to as the Sydney School) have played a leading role in attending to L2 students and the teaching and learning of L2 writing (Byrnes, 2013; Hyland, 2004; Hyon, 1996; Paltridge, 2013, 2014). In particular, ESP genre studies focus on the role of genre in teaching L2 learners the specialised use of English in academic and occupational settings (Belcher, 2006; Cheng, 2006b; Hyon, 1996), as “arguably the most influential in the teaching of the specialist varieties of English to L2 users” (Cheng, 2006b, p. 77). This paper reviews the ESP research into L2 students’ learning of written genres for communicative purposes in English-medium discourse communities.

The concept of genre in the ESP school, shaped and developed on the basis of Swales’ seminal work (1981, 1986, 1990), refers to types of communicative events that fulfil a set of communicative purposes in a discourse community and that embody prototypical discursal patterns and lexicogrammatical features. ESP researchers and practitioners apply genre as an analytical tool for pedagogical design and material development (Belcher, 2006; Cheng, 2006b; Hyon, 1996; Paltridge, 2013). Genre analysis in ESP studies has been developed from Swales’ (1990, 2004) framework of structural move-

step<sup>1</sup> analysis, the most representative of which is the Create-a-Research-Space (CARS) model of a research article introduction. ESP researchers have developed diverse analytical frameworks of move-step structures and lexicogrammatical features of various genres in academic and occupational settings (Bhatia, 1993, 2004; Swales, 1990, 2004).

In the past decade, ESP research has shifted some attention away from genre analysis and pedagogical proposals to genre learning and has explored how L2 students acquire genre skills for effective communication in English-medium academic or occupational communities (Belcher, 2006, 2013; Cheng, 2006b; Paltridge, 2014; Tardy, 2006, 2009). As Belcher (2006) put it, “ESP became more learning-centred ... focusing not just on what people do with language but how they learn it and encouraging learner investment and participation” (p. 136). Genre learning is a process by which students can have a command of genre knowledge and apply it for achieving specific communicative purposes in different sociorhetorical situations. Genre learning falls into two categories: one is instruction-based, that is, the learning is impacted by certain pedagogical techniques in writing classroom settings; and the other is practice-based genre learning, that is, the naturalistic acquisition of genre knowledge through learners’ participation in academic or professional communities of practice (Freedman, 1993; Tardy, 2006). Genre knowledge, as the object of genre learning activities, refers to the “complex, evolving mental abstractions held by individuals within communities or larger cultures who share social and textual experiences” (Johns, 1997, p. 22). Genre knowledge encompasses a variety of components: communicative purposes, text form and content, reader-writer roles, intertextuality, values and membership of a discourse community (Johns, 1997). Another parameter that shapes genre learning is the learner, a key variable in genre learning trajectories and genre knowledge development (Tardy, 2009). Major individual factors of L2 students in genre learning include their L2

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<sup>1</sup> A move refers to a typical act that functions to achieve a special communicative purpose; a step is a specified action to realize the move (Hyland, 2004).

proficiency, genre knowledge base, cultural backgrounds, education and disciplinary backgrounds, learning strategies, and social interactions (Cheng, 2006b; Tardy, 2006, 2009).

This paper reviews major ESP research of genre learning in three categories:

1. studies on genre learning processes in different contexts, including writing classrooms, disciplinary communities, and the context that bridges writing classrooms and disciplinary communities; this category covers the studies of instruction-based and practice-based genre learning;
2. studies on learners' genre knowledge development; and
3. studies on genre learner characteristics.

This categorisation is simply for heuristic purposes. In fact, the three categories are overlapping. For instance, studies of context-specific genre learning also focus on students' development of genre knowledge and learner characteristics, while studies of learners' genre knowledge development and learner characteristics also relate to different learning contexts. It should also be noted that ESP genre research, though a distinct perspective, has embraced influences from other schools of genre studies, for example, the Sydney School and Rhetorical Genre Studies (Belcher, 2006).

## **GENRE LEARNING IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS**

Genre learning, being both instruction-based and practice-based (Tardy, 2006), takes place in different contexts. Instruction-based genre learning usually takes place in writing classroom settings, whereas practice-based genre learning is usually situated in academic or professional communities; in particular, practice-based learning of academic genres is contextualised in learners' disciplinary communities. In recent developments of genre-based pedagogy, some cases of instruction-based genre learning have extended their contexts to disciplinary communities. This section reviews key studies of genre learning in three different contexts: writing classrooms, disciplinary communities, and the context that bridges writing classrooms and disciplinary communities.

### **Learning genre in writing classrooms**

One direction of recent research is investigating the results of genre learning under the influence of diverse pedagogies, including genre-based pedagogy, task-based pedagogy, and the process-oriented approach (e.g., Dovey, 2010; Huang, 2014; Yasuda, 2011; Yayli, 2011). These studies have demonstrated the conduciveness of genre-focused curriculum design to increasing students' genre awareness and command of genre knowledge, but seem to focus less attention on details of students' learning processes, as well as the relationship between the learning processes and instructional context.

The effect of genre-based pedagogy on learning was examined by Yayli (2011) and Huang (2014). Yayli (2011) observed a group of six English as a foreign language (EFL) undergraduate students learning academic and non-academic genres in an English reading and writing course at a Turkish university. The course design featured genre analysis tasks (ESP genre-based pedagogy) and staged teacher and peer scaffolding (informed by the Sydney School pedagogy). Drawing on data from participants' self-reflection on written assignments, pre- and post-instruction interviews, and open-ended questions, the study found that the students displayed awareness of generic features and applied such knowledge to the practice of genres. Similar findings were reported by Huang (2014). The study documented a Taiwanese doctoral student's learning to write for publication in English in a research writing course that adopted ESP genre-based pedagogy. It was found that the student developed knowledge of the research article genre through assimilating explicit genre instruction. Yayli (2011) and Huang (2014) both confirmed that genre-based pedagogy could effectively foster students' genre awareness.

Yasuda (2011) focused on a task-based syllabus design and investigated its effect in a genre-focused writing course at a Japanese university. The writing course adopted a syllabus cycle of task input, pedagogical task, target task, and task follow-up for each teaching unit (Norris, 2009). Students in the course were led to undertake diverse email writing tasks with 'imagined' sociorhetorical contexts and audiences 'beyond the classroom' (Yasuda, 2011, p. 117).

Participants comprised 70 sophomore students from two intact classes attending this writing course. Results from surveys, interviews, and participants' written texts showed that the learners had made obvious progress in L2 linguistic knowledge and sociorhetorical perception of email writing. Yasuda's (2011) study demonstrated the effectiveness of a task-based instructional framework in genre learning, but a question concerning students' response to genre-based tasks still remained: how could students situated in a writing classroom effectively attend to diverse 'imagined' contexts outside the classroom settings, such as "writing an email to make an announcement" and "writing an email to arrange to meet and change arrangements" (Yasuda, 2011, p.116). It seems that the details of students' performing genre-based tasks in learning processes are worth further investigation.

Another pedagogical model, the process-based approach, was examined in Dovey's (2010) design-based research. This study investigated an EAP subject for postgraduate students at an Australian university. The course adopted normal ESP genre-based pedagogy in one semester, and incorporated a process-oriented syllabus in the other semester that featured the instructor's scaffolding of students' sociocognitive process of reading, selecting, and organising information in writing a literature review. A major finding was that the students who learned with the process-based curriculum design had better performance in writing a literature review than their counterparts. Although the process-based approach has long been highlighted in L2 writing pedagogy (Badger & White, 2000; Silva, 1990; Silva & Matsuda, 2002) and genre-based instruction (Flowerdew, 1993<sup>2</sup>), Dovey (2010) has drawn particular attention to its role in EAP courses. Nevertheless, the study seems to lack sufficient evidence about how students went through the sociocognitive processes of information synthesis with teacher scaffolding in their learning processes.

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<sup>2</sup> The process approach to professional genre teaching proposed by Flowerdew (1993) also concerns the individual-oriented activities that help to lead learners to realize genre variations in specific professional contexts.

A few studies have shifted attention from pedagogical design and learning effects to processes of learning a genre, and adopted a learner-focused approach to investigating students' learning activities within different instructional contexts (e.g., Cheng, 2008a; Tardy, 2009). These studies have shown students' interaction with genre-focused instruction, genre analysis tasks, instructional discussions, and other learning resources, hence pointing to the intricacies of genre learning activities in relation to the sociorhetorical nature of genres and diverse sociocultural factors in instructional contexts, an initially-researched area worth continuing research efforts.

Cheng (2008a) described and interpreted an L2 doctorate student's mediation with the notion of genre in performing genre-analysis tasks in an EAP course at a U.S. university. This EAP course targeted writing research articles and adopted an ESP genre-based instructional framework that emphasized genre analysis tasks as well as explicit discussion of generic features. Data were collected from the participant's genre analysis of research articles, text-based interviews following genre analysis tasks, and a literacy narrative of previous learning experiences of L2 writing. A key finding was that the concept of genre functioned as an explicit and supportive learning tool in the student's growing awareness of the rhetorical parameters and formal properties of research articles. Cheng (2008a) certainly contributed learner-focused insights into a typical aspect of genre learning, but the study seems to lack observation of other learning aspects within the ESP instructional context.

Tardy's (2009) case studies involved a relatively full investigation of L2 students' multifaceted learning activities in a genre-focused writing class, including students' genre learning strategies, use of resources, and engagement in pedagogical tasks. Tardy (2009) tracked four L2 graduate students' genre learning experiences in a writing course at a U.S. university. By documenting the four students' learning of job application cover letters (one unit in the course syllabus), Tardy (2009) found that all learners made use of sample texts of the target genre, instructional discussions, and instructor's feedback for building up their formal genre knowledge. Observation of the four focal students' responses to the genre analysis unit

(analysing graduate school application essays and conference abstracts) showed that the learners did not understand the task exigencies, that is, to analyse a target genre in their real-life situations for better understanding of its generic features and the sociorhetorical context that shaped such features, and consequently they were not motivated to undertake the task of genre analysis (Tardy, 2009). This finding indicated that, given the sociorhetorical complexity of genre and the restriction of the instructional context, students may encounter obstacles to perform genre-based tasks in class, which should be considered by ESP researchers and practitioners when designing pedagogical methods. Tardy's (2009) research regarding instruction-based genre learning suggests the dynamics of learning processes that consist of students' multiple activities of mediating with diverse sociocultural factors of instructional context. It is also noteworthy that the dynamics of genre learning processes are underlined by the sociorhetorical and textual parameters of genre, and much remains to be explored regarding the relationship between the uniqueness of genre as a learning target and the characteristics of genre learning in an instructional context.

### **Learning genre in disciplinary communities**

The dynamics of genre learning processes have received greater attention in recent research of practice-based genre learning (e.g., Huang, 2010; Li, 2007; Tardy, 2009). These studies largely adopted a case study design and applied ethnographic methods for documenting single learners' situated learning processes, that is, their genre acquisition through participation in a specific community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

One advantage of practice-based genre learning, compared with that of instruction-based, is that learners can practise with the target genre in its actual sociorhetorical context instead of classroom settings. Tardy (2009) described how two L2 graduate students learned to write laboratory reports in their engineering courses and found that repeated practice of writing laboratory reports enhanced the two students' understanding of the textual properties of the disciplinary genre.



Practice-based genre learning, though more concerned with learners' self-engagement, is not without expert scaffolding. Another case study reported in Tardy (2009) followed an L2 graduate student at a U. S. university writing his master's thesis over a period of 11 months. Description of the case student showed that his advisor's mentoring and feedback played a key role in his acquisition of formal, rhetorical, and subject-matter knowledge of the thesis genre. A study by Kwan (2009) further demonstrated that academic professionals other than students' advisors could also provide guidance to learners' acquisition of academic genre skills in their community of practice. The study investigated a group of 16 Chinese doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences reading for their thesis writing at a Hong Kong university, with data largely collected from interviews, including text-based interviews with some participants regarding their written drafts of the literature review. It was found that students' evolving selection of reading for their thesis was not only guided by their supervisors and panel members, but also influenced by their interaction with colleagues in their research projects, visiting scholars in their faculties, and even overseas experts in the same discipline. It appears that more diverse sources of scaffolding are available to genre learners in disciplinary practice, compared with their counterparts in instructional settings. This difference between the two genre learning modes may deserve further examination.

Learners' social interaction with academic professionals is but one aspect of their engagement in community of practice, as revealed in an earlier study by Li (2007). Li observed the multidimensional learning activities of an EFL doctoral student at a Chinese university who was engaged in writing English research articles for publication. Four dimensions of the student's disciplinary practice were identified in his approach to genre acquisition: participation in the practices of his local research community, engaging with his research data in the laboratory, mediating with his prior experiences of English academic writing, and interacting with the international discourse community of specialist journals. The findings suggest that practice-based genre learning may involve learners' participation in multiple levels of discourse communities (e.g., local and international research

communities), and hence is a more systematic activity than instruction-based genre learning.

Further complications arise in multiple discourse communities where learners could encounter more than one genre in their systematic learning activity; in other words, they have access to a set of interrelated genres, or genre networks, in their disciplinary practice (Tardy, 2009). As Molle and Prior (2008) point out, academic genres are in multimodal systems and integral to each other in disciplinary communities. By tracking an L2 doctoral student learning to write conference papers over a period of four years at a US university, Tardy (2009) observed that the student had access to a network of research genres, including internal research papers, seminar presentations, journal articles, and preliminary reports. Engagement with genre networks enabled the student to have social interactions in both the local and global research communities and to develop rhetorical awareness of how to promote his research for acceptance by members of his disciplinary community. It can be noted that, different from instruction-based genre learning that focuses on one single target genre or several genres in separation, learners outside writing classrooms may have a command of genre systems through their long-term participation in a community of practice.

While multiple discourse communities and genre systems provide contextual advantages of practice-based genre learning, learning academic genres through disciplinary practice can also be constrained by contextual factors. Huang (2010) examined the challenges and disadvantages that confronted EFL research students when they learned to write research articles. Participants included 11 doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers as well as three professors from different science disciplines and academic institutions in Taiwan. Data were collected from interviews. Research students in the study were found to lack commitment to learning English academic writing and writing for publication, because (a) they were discouraged by journal reviewers' bias against non-native English speakers' language competence in the global specialist research community; and (b) they had no control over their writing for publication due to the dominance of advisers' power in the supervisory relationship in their local

disciplinary community. Huang (2010) highlighted the power relationship in multiple research communities as a potential constraint on L2 students' genre acquisition. It is one of the few studies that have paid attention to the disadvantages of practice-based genre learning. It remains unknown whether other contextual constraints than power relationship could also impact students' genre acquisition. This area deserves more attention by researchers of practice-based genre learning.

The existing research on practice-based genre learning has foregrounded students' situated and systematic learning activity in the actual sociorhetorical context of genre. It thus raises the question if we again compare it to instruction-based genre learning: whether it could be a disadvantage for students to learn genre in classroom settings, in which they may not have access to such situatedness of genre and genre practices.

### **Learning genre across writing classrooms and disciplinary communities**

Given the situatedness of genre and genre practice, some attempts have been made to improve the traditional genre-focused instructional context by extending it to disciplinary communities. Students are guided to relate their learning in classrooms to their participation in disciplinary practice. Studies of genre learning in such extended contexts have shown its advantage for enhancing students' understanding of sociorhetorical parameters of academic genres (e.g., Cheng, 2006a; Johns, 2008; Johns *et al.*, 2006).

A noteworthy practice in extended learning contexts is the use of ethnographic methods that encourage students to explore the academic culture and values of their disciplinary community (Johns, 1997, 2008; Paltridge, 2013; Woodrow, 2006). A case in point is illustrated in Johns *et al.* (2006). In an academic writing course at an Australian university, L2 graduate students were guided to get out of the writing classroom to interview their professors. The purpose was to help the students understand the expectations for, and the rhetorical purposes of, the academic genres that they were learning in the writing course. This case study showed that the ethnographic

approach was useful to raise genre learners' awareness of their academic community, as well as the conventions of their community.

Learning contexts that combine EAP classroom settings and disciplinary settings are also termed "interdisciplinary learning communities" (Johns, 2008, p. 246). Johns (2008) showed an example of an interdisciplinary learning community that consisted of an academic writing course and an anthropology course. The writing course instructor collaborated with the anthropology course instructor to design a discipline-specific writing assignment that was an academic essay. Using an ethnographic approach, students were guided to act as researchers to explore the objectives and expectations of the anthropology course, the field data required for writing an academic essay in the course, and the conventions of writing an academic essay in the discipline of anthropology. Both instructors guided students' writing process through instructional discussions, peer reviews, and repeated revisions. Students responded to this ethnographic pedagogical design with motivation and interest; most of them finished their essays to the satisfaction of both instructors. This study demonstrated that this approach was effective in deepening students' understanding of disciplinary practices, specialist knowledge, and writing conventions in interdisciplinary learning communities.

Genre learning in the kinds of extended contexts reviewed above is aligned an EAP development that academic writing courses cooperate with discipline-specific content courses in instruction, task design, and material development (Li, 2006; Strauss, 2012; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). However, it seems that not much attention has been paid to this genre learning mode in existing ESP research. In some cases of instruction-based genre learning, though not explicitly situated in extended learning communities, the course design (such as tasks and assignments) embraced interdisciplinary elements (e.g., Cheng, 2006a). Cheng (2006a) investigated how an L2 doctoral student learned about academic criticism in research articles in an EAP writing course at a U. S. university, drawing on data from the student's analysis of academic criticism in research articles of his discipline, his written texts of research article introductions, and his

annotations on the written texts. A major finding was that the student's familiarity with his disciplinary community and his discipline-specific expertise assisted him in understanding the rhetorical dimensions and formal features of the practice of criticism in research articles from his discipline. It was noted that the design of discipline-specific written assignments in the EAP course might account for the student's integration of his discipline-specific practice and knowledge into his genre learning experience. The course required students to write research article introductions on the basis of a research project from their own discipline. The writing of introductions was also required to target three different rhetorical situations in students' disciplinary practice. In this sense, the writing task was not only an assignment in the EAP class, but also a piece of authentic disciplinary research writing in the students' academic community. The finding indicated that, with course design related to disciplinary practice, learners in an EAP class may have their own personal access to the situatedness of genre beyond classroom settings. This could be a new direction for researching instruction-based genre learning.

## **GENRE KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT**

Another direction in recent ESP research on genre learning is examining the development of learners' genre knowledge. Tardy (2009) developed a framework of disciplinary genre knowledge development that contains four knowledge domains: formal, rhetorical, process, and subject-matter knowledge. Formal knowledge refers to knowledge of the textual substantiation of a genre, including prototypical move-step structures, genre-specific lexicogrammatical features, propositional content, and all the other textual forms of a genre.

Process knowledge refers to knowledge of the conventional practices involved in carrying out a genre. It encompasses learners' understanding of genre generation processes (e.g., reading, researching, and writing processes), genre acceptance (e.g., how readers respond to the genre), and interaction in the discourse community (e.g., the participation in genre networks). Rhetorical knowledge refers to the sociorhetorical dimensions inherent in a

genre, including its communicative purpose, the discourse community, community membership, and social conventions in the community. Subject-matter knowledge is genre users' disciplinary knowledge about the subject matter of their text, which largely concerns meaning construction in genre practice.

While knowledge categorisation forms a heuristic framework for understanding genre knowledge development, the four knowledge domains overlap in practice. Though originally generated from researching disciplinary genre knowledge, Tardy's (2009) framework has been applied in the analysis of occupational genre knowledge development as well (e.g., Zhang, 2013).

In practice, learners' development of different knowledge domains is not necessarily balanced, as shown by Tardy's (2009) case studies of L2 students' instruction-based and practice-based genre learning (reviewed above). It was found that learners largely obtained formal knowledge when they learned in writing classroom settings, whereas they acquired formal, rhetorical, and subject-matter knowledge through their engagement in disciplinary practice. These findings indicated that the development of rhetorical and subject-matter knowledge seemed to rely more on learners' disciplinary practices outside the writing classroom context.

In contrast, Cheng (2011) reported that, in addition to formal knowledge, rhetorical knowledge could also be developed through learning in an instructional context. This case study described how four L2 graduate students came to understand the rhetorical parameters of the research article genre in EAP writing courses at two US universities. Analysis of the students' genre analysis tasks revealed that the learners examined linguistic features of research articles and used these features to explore the underlying rhetorical parameters of writer-reader interactions, intertextuality, and discipline-specific practice. Cheng (2011) concluded that the language features of research articles served as 'pathways' to these students' understanding of rhetorical knowledge (p. 69). This finding not only confirmed the possibility of building up rhetorical knowledge in an instructional context, but also highlighted the interaction between formal and rhetorical knowledge development. The

interrelationship between multiple genre knowledge domains, as reflected by Cheng (2011), seems not to have been paid sufficient attention in existing research.

Still regarding rhetorical knowledge, an earlier study conducted by Dressen (2008) pointed to its highly practice-based nature, that is, its relation to knowledge of discipline-specific ways of “perceiving, interpreting and behaving” (p. 235). This case study documented an EFL geology student’s learning to write field work reports over a six year period at a French university, including textual data from his third-year undergraduate studies, his first-year master’s studies, and third-year doctorate studies. This longitudinal study showed that the student gradually understood the geologist’s professional practice of ‘perceiving, interpreting and behaving’ in his writing of field work reports through his long-term engagement in the geology research community. Dressen (2008) therefore suggested that genre-based L2 writing courses should make connections to disciplinary specialist knowledge to empower learners with non-textual generic conventions. However, this raises the question of how genre learners in a writing classroom can access and acquire such highly discipline-specific and practice-based rhetorical knowledge.

There seems to be less attention given to process knowledge and subject-matter knowledge in existing research on genre knowledge development. Kwan (2008) has contributed some initial insights into the intricate process knowledge of reading, researching, and writing that is involved in the thesis genre. The study examined a group of 16 L2 doctoral students who were engaged in literature reading for their doctoral studies and thesis writing at a Hong Kong university. The 16 participants were in different stages of their doctoral programs, from the initial stage of conducting pilot studies, to the main research stage of data collection and analysis, to the final stage of thesis completion and submission, to the post-submission stage. Data were mainly collected from interviews. Participants’ stories revealed that their reading focus was shaped by needs emerging from research procedures, such as pilot studies, data collection, and data analysis, and that they dynamically adapted in response to these needs. Their reading was also driven by their need to identify research gaps from

previous studies. These findings highlighted the interplay between reading, researching, and writing involved in thesis writing and indicated the complexity of process knowledge in the thesis genre. Kwan suggested that thesis writing courses adopt 'a nexus approach' to show students "how reading, writing and research develop in reality and ... how they constrain each other" (p. 52). Though only the thesis genre was under investigation, Kwan's study is a significant attempt to explore process knowledge, which deserves more attention in future research.

Another researched area in learners' genre knowledge development is the application and transfer of genre knowledge in specific situations (e.g., Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011; Zhang, 2013). Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) adopted the concept of metacognition to examine learners' metacognitive genre awareness, including: declarative genre awareness (what is genre knowledge), procedural genre awareness (how to apply genre knowledge), and conditional genre awareness (when and why to apply genre knowledge) (Schraw & Dennison, 1994). Participants were eight EFL undergraduate students who learned to write research articles in an academic reading and writing course at a Swedish university. Data included participants' reflections on genre-analysis tasks in the course, a survey on the course, and students' comparative analyses of research articles in their own fields. Data analysis showed that the students developed declarative and procedural metacognitive genre awareness (though of different degrees) through learning within the ESP genre-based pedagogy, but that their conditional metacognitive genre awareness remained less developed. Though the study was restricted by its scope and sampling strategy, its finding reminds us of learners' potential difficulties in applying and transferring genre knowledge that they have obtained in class to sociorhetorical contexts outside classrooms.

Still regarding learners' ability to apply genre knowledge in practice, Zhang (2013) examined business students' genre knowledge development by investigating business professionals' response to their generic writing. Analysis of five Chinese EFL students' writing in three business genre categories and eight international business



professionals' comments on their written texts revealed that the students had built up high-level genre knowledge of all the four knowledge domains for the communication in their business discourse community, but a gap was still noted between the students' genre knowledge and the business professionals' genre expertise in practice. The findings suggested potential differences between genre knowledge obtained in classroom settings and knowledge expected in occupational settings. The study thus raises the question of what ESP classes could do to better equip students with genre expertise for effective communication in occupational and academic discourse communities.

### **GENRE LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS**

Learners' individual factors are regarded as one of the parameters "for understanding the variability in genre learning" (Tardy, 2009, p. 274). A major individual factor observed in both instruction-based and practice-based genre learning is learners' self-identity (e.g., Phan, 2009; Tardy, 2009). The social action of using a genre for achieving a communicative purpose requires a specific identity that genre users assume in their discourse community. However, for genre learners, there could be a discrepancy between the expected identity and their real-life identities, as Tardy (2009) concluded from her multiple case studies of genre learning (reviewed above). For example, it was observed that one student tried to assume the identity of a discipline expert when writing conference papers, and that this identity was in conflict with his novice status in his discipline as a doctoral student. Another student was confronted with tension between the assertive manner required for writing cover letters in an American professional community and the humble manner associated with his personal identity as a Japanese person. Such tension reflects a gap between L2 students' own cultural backgrounds and the Anglophone culture in English-medium discourse communities.

A similar finding was reported by Phan (2009), a case study that documented the struggles and challenges confronting an L2 student when he learned to write a master's thesis at an Australian university. Phan (2009) found a disparity between the discursive identity envisioned by writing a thesis in the Australian university and the

student's real-life identity as an international student of Chinese-Indonesian origins. The student committed himself to constructing a meaningful identity for thesis writing that accorded with his cultural background but which at the same time did not impact negatively on his initiation into the academic community of the university. The findings suggested the value of observing genre learning from cultural and ideological perspectives. Identity issues in genre learning deserve continuing research efforts, as the "tensions that writers experience between their discursive identities and more personal self-identities – and the ways in which they choose to resolve these tensions – are central to understanding individual writing development" (Tardy, 2009, p. 276).

Another learner characteristic, individual differences in personal experiences, has been highlighted in studies of instruction-based genre learning (Cheng, 2008b; Kuteeva, 2013; Tardy, 2009). Cheng (2008b) observed an L2 doctoral student who learned to write research articles in a genre-based EAP course at a US university. A key finding was that the student drew on her rhetorical knowledge of academic writing shaped by her previous learning experiences and utilised her familiarity with disciplinary practices to analyse details of rhetorical parameters of research articles in genre analysis tasks. Cheng compared this student with another student in the same course, who had no prior knowledge of academic genre and paid more attention to the macro-level move-step structure of research articles in genre analysis tasks, an obviously different learning trajectory. The study concluded that learners' differences in personal experiences could lead to their 'individualized' engagement with genre learning. Tardy's (2009) case study of four students learning to write job application cover letters, reviewed earlier, also showed that students' diverse reactions to genre-based writing assignments were attributed to their different personal needs in relation to the target genre.

The role of learners' personal experiences in shaping their genre learning trajectories has also been examined in Kuteeva's (2013) cross-discipline research. The study investigated 42 master's students from four disciplines in humanities who attended a genre-based academic writing course at a Swedish university. Data included

participants' texts of genre analysis of research articles and dissertations in their disciplines and their statements of aims and expectations for learning English academic writing. It was observed that participants' approach to genre learning fell into two categories: one was a descriptive approach in which they simply focused on the formal features of sample generic texts; the other was an analytical approach in which the learners not only analysed the formal features, but also explored the rhetorical reasoning behind the formal features. Further data analysis showed that this distinction between learning performances was caused by the students' individual differences in their previous academic literacy learning experience, the ensuing needs for learning new academic genres, and their perceptions of discipline-specific epistemologies. Kuteeva (2013), Cheng (2008b), and Tardy (2009) all emphasized individual differences in a genre-focused writing class. A question thus arises as to whether students learning genre together in a course have, beyond their personal differences, any commonalities that ESP researchers and practitioners may need to consider for course design.

As regards practice-based genre learning, one salient learner characteristic is students' exercise of personal agency in learning activity (e.g., Li, 2007; Tardy, 2009). Li (2007) found that personal agency could be a driving force in learners' engagement in a community of practice. As reviewed earlier, the study documented a Chinese student's multidimensional engagement in his disciplinary practice for writing English research articles. It was noticed that the learner exercised his personal agency to obtain and evaluate data from laboratory research, interact with his research team, draw on his previous academic writing experiences, and interact with the global specialist research community. Tardy's (2009) case study of an L2 doctoral student's engagement in disciplinary genre networks also found that the student's interaction with multiple genres was driven by his strong motivation for success in composing conference papers. The study showed that the student took the initiative himself to relate the conference paper writing to other academic genres, including internal research papers, seminar presentations, specialist journal articles, and his preliminary report. The student also proactively interacted with his research team, academic professionals

in his discipline, and even the conference reviewers of his papers. Learners' exercising of personal agency suggests that practice-based genre learning is more of a self-regulated and self-directed process than instruction-based genre learning. It could be valuable for future research to examine the role of genre learners' personal power in instructional contexts.

Genre learners engaged in a community of practice have also been found to embrace a critical awareness when they accessed generic conventions (e.g., Casanave, 2010; Phan, 2009). Phan's (2009) study of an L2 student writing a master's thesis at an Australian university (reviewed above) revealed the student's critical awareness of the culture, values, and conventions of his English-medium academic community. His unique means of identity construction, by developing an identity on the basis of his cultural background without impacting his initiation into the academic community of the university, showed a pragmatic approach to critically assimilating genre conventions.

In a similar vein, Casanave (2010) observed L2 students' critical awareness in a longitudinal case study that followed three Japanese doctoral students writing their theses in TESOL and applied linguistics at an American university campus in Japan, with the researcher as their advisor. The findings showed that students initiated changes in research methodology, theoretical framework, and data presentation in thesis writing, though they were confined within the traditional standards of thesis writing by the university. With support from advisors, these students adopted qualitative case study design, postmodernism theories, and a narrative style of data reporting, and foregrounded their presence as a writer or even as a research participant in their texts. This way of thesis writing conflicted with the conventional specialist practice in the students' disciplinary fields. This empirical evidence for learners' critical adoption of genre conventions when trying to enter English-medium academic communities (Casanave, 2010; Phan, 2009) is worthy of more attention from researchers and practitioners of critical pragmatism of EAP; that is, the learning of English academic writing should serve students' own purposes for communication and it is learners' own decision whether to critique and challenge the

academic norms or not (Belcher, 2006; Benesch, 2001; Clark, 1992; Pennycook, 1997; Swales, 2001).

## **CONCLUSION**

Genre learning, like other phenomena in L2 writing development, is “intrinsically multifaceted” and “mediated by a wide range of varied personal and situational variables” (Manchon, 2012, p. 5). Existing ESP research into genre learning has contributed valuable insights into ‘varied personal and situational variables’, including different genre learning contexts, multiple learning activities within these contexts, learner characteristics that influence learning activities, and learners’ genre knowledge development. Genre learning research has extended its scope from genre and genre pedagogy studies to sociocultural, cognitive, cultural, and critical studies. Directions for future enquiry into ‘intrinsically multifaceted’ genre learning are suggested below:

1. Genre learning activity features students’ multidimensional interaction within instructional contexts or discourse communities. Nevertheless, multiple contextual factors, such as pedagogical task design, instructional modes, and power relationships can have varied effects on learners’ approach to genre features and genre networks. Future research may further examine components of specific genre learning contexts and try to distinguish facilitative components from restrictive ones.
2. As learners’ genre knowledge development appears to involve the increasing integration of four knowledge domains (Tardy, 2009), much remains to be explored regarding the process and subject-matter knowledge of genre in learning processes and the interaction between the four knowledge domains in development, concerning different learning modes and contexts. Learners’ ability to transfer and apply genre knowledge in specific sociorhetorical situations is worth more attention by closely observing their learning activities.
3. L2 students’ culture, ideologies, and values are often different from those of Anglophone discourse communities. This points

to a need for continuing to explore genre learning from the perspective of critical studies, which may provide evidence for improving and developing critical pedagogy in ESP genre-based classes. Researchers of instruction-based genre learning could also investigate whether there could be any commonalities between students in the same genre-focused courses that ESP pedagogy may need to attend to. Given the multifaceted nature of learners' interaction within their learning contexts, more sociocultural research could be conducted to explore learners' roles in addressing advantages and disadvantages of their learning contexts for genre acquisition.

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