Multi- and Uni-Text Treatments of Genre:
A Trainer's Description and Teacher-Trainees' Evaluation

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Abstract

This paper discusses two approaches to teaching literacy: a text-level approach, involving the use of multiple models; and a context-level, genre-based approach, involving a single model. Each approach is described, and its implications on literacy comprehension evaluated. A qualitative assessment of teacher trainees towards the adoption of uni-text approaches follows. The findings suggest that, although teachers acknowledge the superiority of a genre-based approaches for facilitating communicative skills, they have misgivings about its applicability due to unfamiliarity with L2 and with the technical manipulation of the approach, and the antagonistic influence of current testing paradigms.

Introduction

I am a teacher trainer in a TESOL Certificate program in Korea, and my students are current Korean school teachers and private institute instructors who teach ESL. Despite being given several lectures and examples on genre-based approaches (using sources such as Feez, 1998; Hammond, 1990; Callaghan et al., 1993; Hammond and Burns, 1992), I noticed the continued presence in my students' practicum classes of *multi-text* lessons. These lessons would be characterized by the presentation of 7 or 8 full-length texts, with students given only rudimentary practice with any one text before moving on to another and another. Such practice would focus on accuracy-based comprehension of fact-based information embedded in the texts.

In an effort to understand this practice more deeply, I presented a further lecture on the genre-based or *uni-text* approaches to my students, and then conducted an anonymous survey of my students' reactions. What follows in this paper is a description of these multi-text and uni-text approaches, along with the reactions of my students as reported in their survey responses.

A multi-text approach

Some of my teacher-trainees taught their lessons by presenting multiple examples of texts one after the other in a given class. Although the texts were of the same genre and focus (i.e. either a written or oral

text), any one text was not dealt with deeply, in terms of features of register and genre. Instead, accuracy-based exercises formed the sole content of the lesson. Teachers culled their materials for their practicum from textbooks published by the Korean Ministry of Education, and the tests of High School English proficiency. The layout of these textbooks showed a similar pattern to their lesson design. For example, a typical page from a Korean high school textbook (Lee et al., 2001) looks like this:

Figure 1. Typical page of Korean textbook

In the first part of the chapter, students are introduced to the idea of newspapers. Instead of being presented with a newspaper article, however, students read a lengthy report about newspapers, and learn only that these articles contain facts about events, related to different sections as noted in Figure 1 above. To demonstrate comprehension, students have to match the headline with the corresponding section article title. This is an accuracy-based treatment of the subject, since students only choose from a menu of items not necessarily related to their areas of personal interest, and are not interacting with other students in the process of answering.

Figure 2. Further practice

In another exercise for further practice (Figure 2), again taken from Lee et al. (2001), students are led to notice the textual-level of news articles (the wh- features). Notice the modeling of a sentence which places the actor in the theme position ("Mr. Brown discovered…), when news articles usually use the passive form in order to place the object into theme position (i.e. "An ancient Incan city was discovered …"). In English, this is done to highlight the most essential element. Who discovered is not as important as what was discovered. This feature was already present in the headlines (see Figure 1), but was not picked up on by the textbook.

It is also important to notice how many text excerpts are being presented to the students. Figure 1 alludes to 5 different texts (each headline represents one text), and the exercise in Figure 2 shows two more (the Incan city text, and the students' own text). This is a point I referred to above as a multi-text approach that only addresses accuracy (i.e. fact) based levels of text.

A Uni-text approach

Texts can be viewed in at least 2 dimensions: at a textual level, in terms of the idiosyncratic features of the text; and at a contextual level, in terms of conventionalized features common to the genre of which the text is an instantiation. One simplistic way of characterizing these features is in terms of who, what,

where, when, how, and why.

World's Highest Fountain to Be Unveiled in Seoul

By Lee Chi-dong
Staff reporter

As part of its efforts to enhance the image of the nation's capital for the upcoming World Cup, the Seoul city will hold a ceremony tomorrow to unveil the highest fountain in the world.

The Seoul Metropolitan Government said yesterday that it would hold a trial operation of the fountain, wrapping up one year of construction. The fountain will shoot water up to 202 meters, equivalent to the height of a 60-story building.

Located near the World Cup Stadium and the Songsan Grand Bridge in western Seoul, the gigantic fountain, built on a soccer-ball-shaped barge, has 21 surrounding subsidiary fountains, each with a height of 30 meters, along with lighting to provide special effects at night.

The 7.7-billion-won fountain was built to celebrate the World Cup finals, which are to be co-hosted by South Korea and Japan from next May to June.

"It is also meant to express the hope for world peace and prosperity," said a city spokesman. Seoul officials also expect the fountain, as a new landmark, will serve as an added attraction for the city capital.

Figure 3 A genuine newspaper text

In Figure 3 above, for example, a news article taken from the Korea Times (29-10-01, p. 3) shows the following textual and contextual features:

	Textual	Contextual: Text-User	Contextual: Text-Writer
Who	Seoul government city spokesman city officials	reader	news reporter
What	highest fountain other facts and opinions	interest area	daily news article
When	tomorrow next May to June	anytime (permanent document)	today
Where	Seoul; Korea and Japan	anywhere	

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How	*Unfolding event*	*Rhetorical staging*	*Publishing process*
	one year of construction	topic sentence	attend news conference
	trial operation	action	conduct research
	ceremony	description	write draft
	serve as symbol and attraction	history	edit and revise
		purpose	submit to editor
Why	symbol of peace	be informed	provide local info.
	tourist attraction	practice English	Disseminate propaganda
		incidental notice	generate revenue

Table 1. Textual and Contextual features

The textual features concern a set of information found only in this particular text (Table 1); that is, these facts about the fountain are found only in this particular news article. The contextual features in Table 1, however, would be true of many daily news articles written for a similar purpose. They could be summarized in terms of the text-user and text-writer interactions.

Exercises which deal only with the textual features operate at an accuracy-based level. For instance, such questions might include "Where is the fountain located?" or "Describe the features of the fountain." The answers to these questions are convergent (i.e. there is a single correct answer, such as "Seoul"), and do not engage any meaning-based response from the learner because the answers are explicitly available. The students have only to find the words "locate" in the text to derive the answer to the first question, and look for adjectives and associated nouns to answer the second question.

Exercises which deal with the contextual features of the text, however, have the students think through the implicit features of the text. Who is Lee Chi-dong? Why did he write this? Why did the newspaper decide to publish this article and not some other article? The answers to these and other questions would reflect the student-readers level of critical literacy, who according to Varaprasad (1997):

- think seriously about what they are reading;
- do not believe everything they read;
- question everything that does not make sense to them;
- analyse arguments;

- discount arguments based on faulty reasoning;

- have good reasons for believing some things and not believing others

That is, students can become aware of the position the text holds them in and their willingness to criticize that stance in relation to both the text and its writer. In addition, it would reflect their experience with the world, as they show awareness of different social purposes and institutions, and their willingness to engage these issues.

Varaprasad (1997) suggests that students should be placed into a critical literacy perspective right away. She dismisses a so-called "conventional approach" which, in pre-reading stages asks to "find answers to given questions based on the text; give their personal opinion about the topic; predict the continuing text." Instead, she suggests that students initially should be asked to discuss "the reason the author is writing about the topic; the whole range of ways to write a particular text; and the generation of their own list of questions."

While I think Varaprasad is right for dismissing approaches which stay only at this level of textual comprehension, I think her approach is overly optimistic for estimating how quickly students will gain entry-level comprehension of texts. Teachers need to realize the range of L2 proficiency of their students, and adjust their learning objectives accordingly (Lassche, in press). The approach I am suggesting embraces both a textual-level and a contextual-level appreciation of what texts have to offer. That is, initial treatment of textual-level features, which asks questions like "what is the topic of the text", is important for helping students understand texts.

Dealing with implicit features, then, facilitates a fluency-based approach to textual comprehension: students have to imagine what these features are, and determine on the basis of the context what a reasonable interpretation of the features might be, "reasonable" meaning here corresponding to what is conventionalized in the genre (Bakhtin, 1986). Following from Feez (1998), dealing with context-level features makes the teacher's objective of creating an understanding of news articles explicit to the learner – a "visible pedagogy" so to speak.
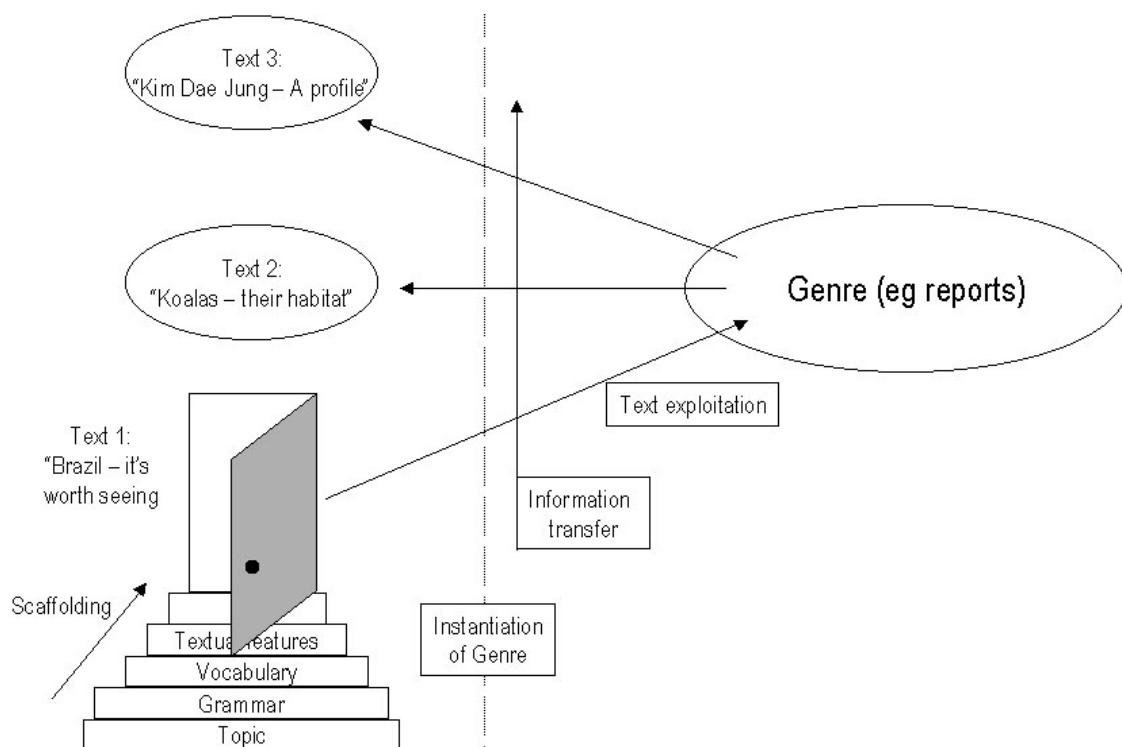
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Figure 4 Uni-text approach

As Figure 4 shows, each text is an instantiation of a conventionalized form called "genre". Any one text can act as a door to "get into" the genre. Thus, usually texts are dealt with through comprehension questions that focus on idiosyncratic features of text (i.e. in the case attached, looking at vocabulary of particular places in Brazil, particular facts related to that topic (i.e. how many people live there?). By drawing explicit attention to these context-level features, teachers facilitate students' understanding of all texts within this genre. That is, the information is transferable from the one model text to other texts within the same genre.

In Figure 4 above, three information reports which provide ways of organising perceptions of the world are shown. They give information about a class of things by describing physical attributes, properties, activities, behaviour, uses, dangers, and so on. In the above example, for the three reports, the first describes the tourist attractions in Brazil; the second, the environment in which koalas live, and the third takes a more personal look at the president of Korea. All of these are examples or instances of report texts.

The process used to help students gain entry into the texts follows the sequence suggested Hammond

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(1990):

    1. Building knowledge of the field

    2. Presentation of model text

    3. Joint construction of text

    4. Independent construction

My teacher-trainees were also given a chance to examine and discuss Callaghan et al.'s (1993) more elaborate model, which involves many more stages. The four-stage model was adhered to because of the simplicity of the sequence. Crucial to this type of literacy approach is the notion of scaffolding (Lassche, in press). In my course, scaffolding was defined as the structure which allows workers to build or work on a house (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Genuine scaffolding

The builders use this structure to stand on as they build or work on a building of some kind. In pedagogical terms, this means that teachers facilitate initial awareness of genre features and structures to the students which allows them together with their peers to build and develop knowledge of similar texts (after Feez, 1998). Ellis (1997: 242) also provides a more technical description of this process:

"[Students collaborate] with others, who serve as conduits through which cultural knowledge, including language, is acquired. Initially, learners require the scaffolding

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provided in interaction with others to understand and to perform a new skill but subsequently, they are able to access this skill unaided."

In the later stage 4, students are encouraged to use this knowledge to create texts of their own choosing and interest areas. In this process, students gradually develop from a position of dependence, of teacher-led exploration of text, towards a position of independence, as producers of their own texts:

"[Students] have to go through a process, and often a lengthy process, of learning how to learn, and they can only do this with the assistance and guidance of the teacher."

(Nunan, 1999: 11)

Learners' entry into a given text could be scaffolded by an initial focus on items that may be unfamiliar. From texts presented in fig. 4, this might include textual features (distinguishing facts from opinions), idiosyncratic lexical items (place names of Brazil, the "eucalyptus tree" of the koala, the political parties of Korea) and grammar, and even the topic itself (example text-level questions #1, 2 and 3 appear in Table 2 below). This step could be a brainstorming stage, where students' knowledge of a given topic (such as Brazil) is elicited without evaluation, and displayed on the board, using a "word network" for example.

	1Q: What are some places you can find in the text?
	A: (List) Sao Paulo, Manaus, Rio, etc.
Text level questions	2Q: What are some activities you can do in Rio?
	A: You can go swimming at the beach. There are many nightclubs. You can go shopping too.
	3Q: Why do people go there?
	A: Many people go there on vacation. Many people also go there for business.

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	4Q: Are there any "feeling" words in the Brazil text?
	A: (List) fun, expensive, exciting, enjoy, wonder, etc.
	5Q: Why do you think the author wrote the Brazil text?
	A: To make people want to travel there.
	5Q: What kind of information do you see at the beginning of the text? In the
Context level	middle? At the end?
questions	*A: Beginning – intro of Brazil, outline of 3 sections (physical beauty, tourist*
	attractions, activities); Middle – more detailed descriptions of each section;
	Ending – positive summary of descriptions, encouragement to visit Brazil
	6Q: Do you think that some information might be missing?
	[Students might be encouraged to search the internet for more information to
	answer this question.]
	A: There are problems with crime and poverty.

Table 2. Example questions

As discussed above, these textual features would change from text to text and topic to topic, and as such could be scaffolded in the classroom in each case. The contextual features, however, relating to genre and register, would be similar or "conventionalized" across all three texts. Each text would serve as a model from which these contextual features could be exploited. This information would be expected to transfer in the form of growing knowledge about report-like texts. Questions that related to the organization of information, or the rhetorical stages in genre-based literature (see Eggins, 1994), would be pointed out here. Question # 5 in Table 2 is an example of this.

As this knowledge deepened, texts could be exploited further and compared in order to discuss, for example, variances among the "report" conventions: Why, for example, the "Brazil" and "Kim Dae Jung" texts tended to highlight more positive features about their subject, while the "koala" text seems very objective in its presentation of facts and figures? Question # 6 in Table 2 below is an example of this. Questions of this type guide the student to realize the process of selective attention information that is involved with the creation of texts. That is, writers choose to include certain information while leaving out other equally valid details. This is the critical understanding, or critical literacy approach, of text construction and de-construction mentioned earlier.

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Genre-based, uni-text approaches: A reaction to the pedagogy

I handed out a survey to my students which asked them to anonymously respond to the following two questions:

> 1. In what ways do you think a genre-based, uni-text approach is helpful for your teaching context?

> 2. Why do you think a multi-text approach is helpful?

Several papers written from a similar case study perspective include Humphrey (1990), in an Australian literacy class with NESB children, and Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) in an international teach-training workshop on genre-based approaches held in Singapore. Both of these papers refer to the experiences of either native speakers or EFL teachers with near-native proficiency with the language. In my course, however, I presented a very brief overview of the systemic functional model of language to my mid- to high-intermediate teacher-trainees, and found that, despite the language differences, many concerns overlapped.

Where Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) found that genre-based approaches are "particularly suitable for learners at beginner or intermediate levels of proficiency in a second language, in that it gives them confidence", one student suggested that a uni-text approach helps lower-level students to discriminate among the different features of the genre. Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) also note that their teachers were concerned that "it could become boring and stereotyped if overdone or done incorrectly" – a concern echoed by some of my students as well. One of my students noted that "50 minutes is too long to apply to just one text [so] students are apt to be bored about one thing. They like to deal with various learning materials." Interestingly, Kay and Dudley-Evans' (1998) teachers recommend "immersing students in a wide variety of texts within a particular genre", a practice that I have found has led to the multi-text, textual-level, accuracy-based style I described above.

The problems that Humphrey (1990) noted with regard to the use of metalanguage to describe ideas of genre (i.e. theme and rheme etc.) were not an issue raised in my class or in Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998). This was probably due to an express intention of mine to not encumber my teacher trainees with a lot of terminology. This is a practice that Humphrey also admits to, a problem she resolved by compromising: using traditional terms ("verbs" versus "material/mental/verbal process" etc.) where possible. In so doing, however, I may have given a too superficial treatment of the issues. For example,

one student wrote that a uni-text approach is not useful because, to develop communicative fluency, "students should deal with many texts rapidly."

Two other issues raised by students against the uni-text approach that were not addressed by the above two papers were (1) the applicability of such an approach to a test-driven syllabus; (2) the reality of large (45+ students), multi-level classrooms. As noted by another student, a multi-text approach values the properties of scanning and skimming, a characteristic of a speed-as-fluency approach to literacy as endorsed by another of my students above. The provision of many texts helps to "broaden vocabulary power and … syntax during a class." The procedure is based on the belief that being exposed to as many texts as possible, students will be able to derive implicitly the language features that will help them pass a given test, such as the TOEIC and the TOEFL.

This suggests that some teacher trainees saw texts as being puzzles, from which students were to find shape-specific, discrete bits of language as quickly as possible. The fact that students "can be provided accurate information and expressions in a short time" is seen as a positive feature of multi-text approaches, again due to the exam connection. The notion of texts serving particular purposes for specific contexts has probably not yet been realized by my teacher trainees, or ignored due to a defensive adherence to present classroom conditions. Fluency not only involves speed, but also real-time processing of appropriate responses – the pragmatic and strategic competences noted by Bachman (1990).

The university-entrance tests that Korean students face generally treat language in a context-free, accuracy-based manner, similar to what was shown in Figure 2 above. Many high school teachers feel that ignoring this reality is doing a disservice to their students' future university prospects. The teachers from private institutions feel the same way for their students who are company employees and who face TOEIC tests.

The second issue also was raised by a number of students. They suggested that presenting a single text in class may isolate many students, due to the text being "too easy" for their more advanced students, or a topic that does not correspond to their own particular interest areas. Showing many texts has the potential for providing at least one text of interest to particular students. Having many texts gives students a better chance at succeeding to understand the next one, if the first proved inaccessible.

Despite these misgivings, many teachers saw the benefits of a genre-based approach for "developing language ability [for] the real world." Less proficient learners are seen as benefiting greatly for "discriminating among describing, informing, instructing, explaining, etc.", although some trainees contend that the approach is more suited to advanced learners. This may be due to a differential appreciation of the process of text exploitation. The higher the student proficiency, the further the exploration into the model text.

Because the approach explicitly highlights the contextual framework in which texts appear, "we can select and teach vocabulary and grammar which commonly appear." This graduated approach to genre comprehension provides a "sequential and intensive" organization to teaching, which helps to "fix firmly in their [students'] memory" the particular genre features. By virtue of its contextual characteristics, the uni-text approach is also seen as producing a more "authentic application" of linguistic elements to classroom use of texts.

Finally, the scaffolded nature of the uni-text approach is seen by some teachers as helpful for alleviating the stress and anxiety usually associated with EFL. Because of the graduated nature of scaffolding toward eventual "independence", students have "lower anxiety" about their performance: "English is easy to study", as one student put it.

Implications

While my students can appreciate the communicative benefits of the uni-text and genre-based methodologies, a clear theme in their teaching philosophy is evident: the prevalence of test-driven syllabuses. While this is not a condition in Australian schools or international settings involving people from a variety of administrative contexts, to Korean teachers the entrance test is a constant limitation on their creativity and influence over what they teach and how they teach it.

All too often I have seen my Korean educational colleagues go to places like North America, Australia and international certification programs like the one in Singapore, only to return and resort to the same kinds of practices they used before they left. Some would say perhaps "old habits die hard", but in this case I think that it is representative more of a systemic problem: the over-riding concern and pressure to show face validity of practice, where validity is held to be the degree of correspondence between what is taught and what is measured by the entrance exams and other tests of a similar nature.

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