Effects of Process-Genre Approach on Students' Argumentative Genre Performance

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Abstract

Despite the important role English language plays in Ethiopia and its wider coverage in educational institutions, little attention is paid to improving students' English skills in general and writing skills in particular. Amongst the writing skills students are concerned with at university, argumentative genre writing is considered an important but difficult genre to develop. The current study, therefore, aimed at improving English majoring students' argumentative genre skills employing a process-genre-oriented instruction in Woldia University, Ethiopia. To do so, a quasi-experimental design was employed. Tests and self-reflection report were used as data gathering instruments. The results revealed that students, as they were instructed by the process-genre approach, had, with minimal problems, made paramount efforts to improve their argumentative genre from the pretest to the final draft of the posttests with regard to communicative quality, content, referencing, organization, argumentation, and linguistic appropraicy of a well-written argument. However, they had serious difficulties in terms of linguistic accuracy. They were in trouble in controlling grammatical structures, spellings, vocabularies, and punctuations. There also found to be significant relationships among the traits. Participants had also positive feedbacks regarding the implementation of process- genre approach.

Key words: genre, argumentative performance, process-genre

1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, English is given as a subject starting from grade one, and used as a medium of instruction in secondary and preparatory schools, and universities. Though it does not lose its motion, its quality has been a series concern for stakeholders especially for people who are involved in the academic arena. It has been an everyday occurrence to hear complaints from teachers, students, and researchers that the English language proficiency of students at all levels of education in the country is deteriorating time from time. In other words, despite the wider coverage allotted to English in Ethiopian schools, colleges, and universities, its current condition is under serious question requiring a call from all the concerned. Though the problem of English seems to be common to all language skills, students' writing skill is worth mentioning (Geremew, 1999).

In that regard, different stakeholders, researchers, and educators are complaining about the level of students' writing skills in educational institutions as it is losing its expected position. For instance, Solomon (2004) on his part argues that most of the students at secondary school level do not produce a written work which is supposed to meet the writing standard. Bekele (2011) also notes that different employing organizations are seen complaining about the writing skills of recent graduates who are applying for new career. Furthermore, the study by Abiy (2013: 51) confirmed,

"The problem is acute even at postsecondary levels in which students fail to cope with the writing requirements in the courses they take." The researcher's experience has, moreover, been a witness that students' skills in producing an acceptable and well- organized text even at a higher education level is plunging regardless of the attempts made by the government in general and the English language teachers in particular.

The poor writing performance of students is attributed to several factors such as insufficient practice put on genre-oriented teaching (Dawit, 2013), poor writing instruction (Mesfin, 2013), less attention given to writing (Haregewain, 2008), and employment of traditional approach (Bekele, 2011). Thus, the researcher thinks that students' success in writing partly depends on the teaching method employed in the writing courses as this component is crucially associated with eminence teaching.

Regardless of the complicatedness of writing in general, and the students' problems of writing in particular, writing is found to be crucial for various reasons. Harmer (2004) stated that as societies aspire to grow larger through industrialization, the need for citizens to be able to write becomes vital. Moreover, understanding the importance of writing in all aspects of life, Geremew (1999:1) points out:

> "Writing is involved in many of the activities that people engage in, and in highly literate societies it seems difficult to do without writing of one kind or another even if one wishes to... there is no reading without writing as far as language is concerned."

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In the learning of writing in Ethiopian higher education context, students who learn English as a foreign language are required to engage in academic writing of various types such as essays (descriptive, expository, narrative, and argumentative), term- papers, reports, letters. However, from the preliminary discussions held with students, the researcher came to understand that argumentative writing has been found to be most difficult skill to develop. This paper, therefore, was concerned with improving students' argumentative writing by executing process-genre approach.

The process- genre approach helps learners to learn the association between form and purpose on a particular genre while they write on the basis of writing process which is a step-by- step act of writing (Badagr & White 2000; Hyland, 2003b; Kim & Kim, 2005; Yan, 2005; Gao, 2007; Deng et al.2014).

Badger and white (2000) describe process- genre approach in terms of a view of writing and a view of the development of writing. According to them, written texts of a variety types are composed with a view of conveying a particular purpose which comes out of a particular situation. Furthermore, understanding the problems of students in writing classes, Kim & Kim (2005) noted that a balance of process and genre approaches while teaching writing significantly minimizes the problems students face during writing. The introduction of this approach is, therefore, pronounced as good news for both EFL teachers and students in the teaching and learning of EFL writing (Yan, 2005).

Even though this approach has been studied in different places in the world, so far, little attention is given to genre-oriented study in Ethiopia. In this regard, Dawit (2014) is found to be the pioneer

to study a set of business genres, and his study has been found to be a worth introduction of the theory in improving students' writing skills of business genres, particularly, job application letter, memorandum, and reply letter. Dawit (2014), therefore, called for further research into the genre based writing in Ethiopian EFL context demonstrating that no earlier researches have fully addressed existing issues in relation to teaching different genres in EFL situation applying a process-genre approach. Hence, this study tried to fill this gap by addressing the following basic research question and hypotheses.

1. What are the effects of process- genre approach on students' argumentative writing performance?
2. What are the interrelationships among the text- quality traits?
3. What are the feedbacks of students regarding the implementation of the process- genre approach?

2. Materials and Methods

The study investigated the effects of process- genre approach on students' argumentative performance. In this case, it adopted a quasi experiment design. The one- group interrupted time series design was particularly employed since it involves ongoing measurement and the group experienced experimental treatment within a period of time. This one-group time series design is useful in educational studies (Gray, 2004). Hence, the study employed quasi-experiment since it tried to find out the effects of process- genre teaching on English majoring university students' argumentative writing performance.

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2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were second year EFL regular students taking the course "Advanced Writing Skills" in Woldia University, Ethiopia. EFL students were targeted the fact that they take at least three writing courses during their three years full time study. This means that they had a better background knowledge of the different pieces of writing required to compose at university level. Thus, data were generated from 34 participants in the second semester of 2018 academic year.

2.2. Research instrument

A Pretest and series of posttests were employed as data collection instruments to assess students' overall performance in terms of composing effective argumentation. The pretest had been administered before the treatment where as the posttests were administered during and after the intervention. But only the final draft of the posttest was rated for comparative purposes. In all cases, different tests with parallel topics had been administered in order to avoid the carry-over effects that arise from similar topics. To put differently, the assumption the researcher held to conduct the different tests in both the pre and posttest phases was the idea that different tests can avoid extraneous variables that may arise from similar tests; moreover, since the focus was on the overall communicative quality of argumentative essays, administering different tests may not affect the results.

In this regard, for the pretest, a topic on whether or not wearing a uniform should be banned in secondary schools was their argument; moreover, for the last draft of the posttest a topic on

whether or not attendance should be mandatory in tertiary education was their written argument respectively.

2.3. Evaluation scheme of the tests

The pre-test and post-test marking scheme was based on Hamp-Lyons and Henning's (1991) writing profile scale which focuses on communicative quality, content, referencing, organisation, argumentation, linguistic accuracy, and linguistic appropriacy. Each of the scoring scale is marked on a nine-band scale, with one is connsidered the lowest score and nine the highest. The students' written argumentative works in the pretest and the posttests were marked by two raters. The first was the researcher; the second had been the researcher's colleague who has nine years experience in teaching English at university. In this case, inter- rater reliability was computed for both the pretest and the final draft of the posttest and was found to be 0.71.

2.4. Analysis

Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The data was analyzed using statistical software which was SPSS Version 20. The process-genre approach was the independent variable whereas the student' argumentative writing performance in their writing tests was the dependent variable. The mean scores between the pre-test and final draft of the post-test were analyzed to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the students' argumentative writing performance before and after the implementation of process- genre approach.

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2.5. Treatment

The implementation of process-genre approach was conducted for five weeks in the Advanced Writing course in a naturally occurring group which consisted of 20 male and 14 female students. The group was taught argumentative writing using the material prepared by the researcher based on the basic tenets of process-genre approach as described by Yan (2005). The descriptions had six stages: Preparation, Modeling and reinforcing, planning, joint constructing, independent constructing, and revising.

At preparation stage, students were introduced to the social context of argumentative genre and the social purpose it achieves. Activating students' schemata to define argumentative genre and its structural features was the main focus.

At the Modelling and reinforcing stage, both the teacher and the learners discussed and explored the rhetorical structures of argumentative genre, and its linguistic features including its grammatical features and choice of vocabulary in relation to its function in the given context.

At Planning stage, students' schemata about the argumentative topic, including brainstorming, discussing, and reading associated material were elicited so as to develop an interest in the topic by relating it to their experience. At joint constructing stage, the teacher and students worked together to begin writing an argumentative text. While doing so, the teacher used the writing processes of brainstorming, drafting, and revising. The final draft provides a model for students to refer to when they work on their individual compositions. Activities at this stage were carried out

in small groups, as working with peers gives learners the experience of integrating knowledge of context, genre, and the process of writing text (Hyland, 2004). At the independent constructing, students were requested to research the context of the given topic and construct argumentative genre independently by using knowledge of genre and writing skills they had learned from previous stages. At the revising stage, students eventually came up with a draft that undergone final revision and editing. They could also carry out self-evaluation and exchange their drafts with their peers for comments.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The findings of the pretest and the final draft of the posttest were firstly analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine whether or not the process- genre approach enhanced students' argumentative writing performance in terms of the seven text quality traits. The mean, standard deviation and mean gain of both tests are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1. The pretest and the posttest argumentative writing scores in terms of the five text quality components

Text quality traits	Pretest (n: 34)		Posttest (n: 34)		Mean gain
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Communicative quality	5.12	.640	6.15	.702	1.03
Content	4.71	.579	5.47	.662	0.76
Reference	4.71	.629	5.76	.654	1.05
Organization	4.68	.535	5.65	.544	0.97
Argumentation	4.79	.479	6.03	.521	1.24
Linguistic accuracy	5.12	.591	4.85	.702	-0.27
Linguistic appropriacy	5.03	.521	5.65	.734	0.62

As indicated in the table above, compared to the pretest, the posttest scores of students' argumentative writing showed an increase in all of the text quality traits with the exception of 'linguistic accuracy'. The mean difference and mean gain, and standard deviation of each of the components listed above are discussed hereunder.

For communicative quality, the mean score of the posttest was 6.15 where as the mean score of the pretest was 5.12. The mean gain (1.03) was high as there was an increase in the posttest scores. In terms of content, the mean score of the posttest was 5.47 and the mean score of the pretest was 4.71. The mean gain, in this case, has been found to be 0.76. In referencing component, the mean score of the posttest was 5.76 where as the mean score of the pretest was 4.71. The mean gain observed was 1.05. For organization, moreover, the mean score of the posttest was 5.65. However, the mean score for the pretest was 4.68. The difference has been found to be 0.97. The highest mean gain was observed in argumentation component as the mean score of the posttest was found to be 6.03, increasing by 1.24 from the mean score of the pretest, which was 4.79. None the less, a very disappointing score was found in the linguistic accuracy aspect of a text quality as the mean score of the posttest was found to be 4.85 compared to the pretest which was 5.12. The mean gain, in this regard, has been noticed – 0.27, showing desperate results regarding grammar, spelling,

punctuation, and vocabulary. The largest spread of scores in the pretest was found in communicative quality (.640); however, in the posttest the largest standard deviation was noticed in the linguistic appropraicy component (.734). In contrast, the least spread of scores in the pretest was found in the linguistic approapriacy (.521), where as argumentation was found to have the least standard deviation (.521) in the posttest, indicating low spread of scores.

Hence, from the descriptive statistics, we can see that students' argumentative essays have shown improvements in most of the test- quality traits. However, it is notified that students were unable to improve the linguistic aspect of their argumentation. They were found to make errors in terms of vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

3.2. Paired sample t- tests

To investigate the differences between the pretest and the posttest for each text quality trait, paired sample t- tests were computed (see table 2 below).

Table 2. Paired sample t-test statistics for argumentative genre in terms of text-quality traits.

Text quality trait	Measurement	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig. (P-value)
Communicative quality	Pretest -posttest	-1.029	.577	-10.410	33	.000
Content	Pretest- posttest	-.765	.654	-6.817	33	.000
Referencing	Pretest- posttest	-1.059	.814	-7.582	33	.000
Organization	Pretest -posttest	-.971	.577	-9.816	33	.000
Argument	Pretest -posttest	-1.235	.654	-11.012	33	.000
Linguistic accuracy	Pretest- posttest	.265	.790	1.953	33	.059
Linguistic Appropriacy	Pretest- posttest	-.618	.697	-5.167	33	.000

As can be seen in table 2 above, the students' performance in communicative quality aspect of written argumentation showed significant difference in the posttest compared to the pretest. The result showed that there was a statistically significant difference t(33)=-10.410,p=.000, revealing that students were able to notify the social functions or purposes of developing an argument, which a writer should consider before composing the argumentative genre. The mean and standard deviation were found to be, M= -1.029; the standard deviation was observed as the least dispersion of scores (SD=.577).

The analysis of content component in the paired sample t-test indicated that students' written arguments have been found to be better in the posttest. As indicated in table 2, there was a statistically significant difference t (33) = -6.817, p=.000. The mean was also found to be M= -.765, indicating that students performed better in the content aspect of a text quality after they

experienced process-genre based instruction, though moderate spread of scores was observed (SD=.654).

The students' performance in referencing has also showed significant difference in the posttest compared to the pretest. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference, t (33) = -7.582, p=.000. The mean score for the pretest has also been found to be M= -1.059, viewing that students' referencing skills in composing an argumentative genre have been enhanced. Largest spread of scores was also displayed (SD=.814).

The organization component also showed improvements in the posttest. The results illustrated that there was a significant difference in the students' scores of the posttest compared to the pretest, t= (33) -9.816, p=.000. The mean has also been M=-.971, notifying that the incorporation of process-genre approach had positive effects on the organization aspect of a written argumentation. Very low dispersion of scores was also noticed (SD=.577).

In terms of argumentation, which was one of the text quality traits, it has been pointed out from the result that there was a significant difference between the pretest and the posttest. Students' performance has showed improvement in the posttest as there was statistically significant increase, t =(33) -11.012, p = .000. The mean was also found to be M=-1.235, signifying that improvements were made in the posttest in terms of this component. Moderates spread of scores was also detected (SD=.654).

Among the text quality traits, however, linguistic accuracy has been found to be insignificant. The paired sample t-test results indicated that there was no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest (P >.05). Thus, the results showed that students did not improve the linguistic accuracy aspect of their argumentative genre, t (33) = 1.953, p=. 059. The mean was also found to be M=.265, indicating daunting result in the posttest. However, larger spread of scores was observed (SD=.790).

With regard to linguistic appropriacy, it was found out that there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest and the posttest. Students seemed to produce an argumentative genre with its linguistic appropriacy after they were exposed to a process- genre-oriented instruction t (33)= -5.167, p=(.000), M=-.618, SD= .697.

In sum, the results from the paired sample t-test indicated that students, before they were introduced with the process- genre approach, they were not in a position to come up with a well-organized and acceptable written argument. However, after the incorporation of this eclectic approach, students came up with better writing performance, with minimal problems with regard to linguistic accuracy.

3.3. Correlations
To investigate the relationships among the dependent variables, correlation coefficients were computed with each text quality trait (See table 3 below).
Table 3. Correlations among the text-quality traits

Text quality trait		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Communicative Quality	34						
2	Content	.222	34					
3	Referencing	.272	.429*	34				
4	Organization	.379*	.396*	.649**	34			
5	Argument	.467**	.093	.053	.238	34		
6	Linguistic accuracy	.161	.073	.017	.007	.120	34	
7	Linguistic appropriacy	.177	.230	-.149	.106	.416*	.157	34

*p<0.05, **<.0.01

As can be seen in table 3, the strongest relationship was found between organization and referencing (r=.649).This indicated that the more students worked on using appropriate illustrations, the better they were in a position to organize their argumentative texts as well. The weakest significant correlation was found between organization and communicative quality of an argumentative work (r=.379), indicating that as students were aware of the purpose of their arguments, they were trying to consider its structure as well. Organization was found to be correlated with all the first three text quality traits (communicative quality, content, and referencing), meaning that students who were conscious of the communicative quality of their arguments were inclined to organize their arguments using appropriate contents and illustrations. Moreover, referencing has been found to be correlated with content (r=.429), implying that learners who illustrated their arguments were also able to use relevant contents suitable for most readers. The component argument was also strongly correlated with communicative quality (r=.467) and Linguistic appripriacy (r=.416). This showed that learners who focused on communicative quality of a text tried to manipulate the linguistic systems appropriately. On the contrary, linguistic accuracy did not have any significant correlation with any of the text quality traits.

3.4. Students' reflections
Students were requested to give feedbacks regarding the implementation of process-genre approach and its impacts on their argumentative genre writing. The words of the participants notified that students, as they were instructed by the process-genre based instruction, were in a position to be aware of:
- The purpose of developing an argumentative genre;
- The elements they should consider when they develop an argumentative genre;
- The structural organization of the elements of this important genre;
- The contents they have to think about in asserting their arguments;
- The illustrations they make use of in offering examples suitable to the reader;
- The necessary supportive ideas they use to sustain their arguments;
- The use of counter arguments in refuting opposing viewpoints;

Moreover, from the reflections, students honestly declared that as they got busy considering all the elements of a well-written argumentative genre, they were in trouble in controlling their grammar, spelling, vocabulary and punctuation.

4. Conclusions and implications

In this study, students' scores were found to be low for the argumentative genre before the incorporation of the process genre approach. However, after, their scores found to be better in terms of the six text-quality traits: communicative quality, content, referencing, organization, argumentation, and linguistic appropraicy. The study also confirmed that no significant differences observed with regard to the linguistic accuracy aspect of a written argument. It is noted, in this case, that this component had been a tough task for students as they went on considering the six components while they developed their argumentative genre. It was also found out that students' awareness on the different aspects of argumentative genre has been enhanced resulting from the synthesized approach. Thus, process- genre approach is crucial in enhancing students' argumentative writing skills. Not only could they perform better but they were in a position to become aware of the social purpose and structure of a written argument.

In conclusion, writing, when suitable approaches are used, would be improved. The findings of this study, in this case, would be useful for English teachers that the implementation of process-genre approach has been proved to produce positive results in students' argumentative genre writing.

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