

# 1 Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) and the Teaching of EFL Reading and Writing--or Genre Is Much More Than Text Structure

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the author argues that all major genre theories and pedagogies are characterized as social, that is, that texts from genres are considered to be social actions taken by writers within a specific context. After mentioning two “linguistic” genre schools, the Sydney School and English for Specific Purposes, she turns to the school that takes context most seriously, one that begins with the social and then moves into the text: Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS).

Drawing from the work of several RGS theorists and practitioners, she suggests pedagogical approaches for EFL teachers concerned with incorporating a context-driven genre-approach into their classrooms.

**Key Words:** genre, Rhetorical Genre Studies, The New Rhetoric, reading and writing pedagogies

This text was initially inspired by a response to my plenary address at the Second Language Writing Symposium in Tempe, Arizona (2009), where I argued that as literacy practitioners, we must look beyond text structures when defining and teaching genres if we are to be true to current theories. At that conference, a group of Chinese-speaking teachers approached me with some concerns about my argument. This is the gist of what they said:

*This talk about context, audience, writer stance, and other features of genres may be important in an L1 environment, but in an EFL context with large classes and traditional assessments, we need to concentrate on what is in the text, by teaching text types as genres.*

These teachers went on to explain that particularly with less advanced EFL students, they were successfully concentrating upon a genre approach based on what are generally called “Rhetorical Modes” in the current literature, e.g., comparison-contrast, cause-effect, extended definition, and exemplification.<sup>1</sup> With these practitioners, and later, at the CELC Symposium at the National University of Singapore in May, 2013, I made a similar argument, relying principally, but not exclusively, upon Rhetorical Genre Studies (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010), also called The New Rhetoric (Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2002) and insights from RGS experts (Prior, 2006; Walker, 2012) to support my claims. My argument, in brief,

is that though certain rhetorical modes may appear in texts from a particular genre, very few authentic texts are pure, that is, written in only one mode. More frequently, a single text will include a number of modes, depending upon the purposes of the writer, the context, and the genre, as well as other factors. In addition, concentration upon the text itself, to the detriment of the social nature of genres, does not do justice to genre theories. Instead, the features in the writing “scene” must be seriously considered in a pedagogy.

The purpose of this paper is to reiterate and expand upon my argument: that the term *genre*<sup>2</sup> as defined in the major theoretical “schools” requires a serious consideration of the context in which a text appears. Systemic Functional Linguists from the “Sydney School” (Hagan, 1994), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) theorists, (e.g., Hyland, 2009a & b; Swales, 1990), and especially in Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) practitioners work with much more than elements of a text; and when textual elements are considered, they are viewed as purposeful, interacting with context to achieve a “social action” (Miller, 1994).

How do the various genre schools approach the “much more” to which I refer? The Sydney School theorists and ESP researchers tend to begin their work by inferring the social nature of genre from analyzing texts and their features and therefore are said to take “linguistic

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~jewel001/CollegeWriting/START/Modes.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> For a lengthy exploration of definitions of genre, see Johns, 2008.

“approaches” (Flowerdew, 2002). From textual analysis (e.g., corpus studies), augmented by other methods (e.g., interviews), researchers and theorists then draw conclusions about the contexts in which genres are operating. Jim Martin and David Rose, leaders in the Sydney School, present their conclusions about the social nature of genres in *Genre relations: Mapping culture* (2008) and elsewhere. John Swales, in his groundbreaking ESP work, *Genre analysis* (1990), spoke of the social in terms of “discourse communities” such as academic disciplines, which utilize and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of [their] aims” (p. 26).<sup>3</sup>

Drawing from this insistence upon the interaction of text and context within ESP and the Sydney School, and especially within RGS, Bawarshi and Reiff, in their excellent overview of genre theories and pedagogies (2010) note that what connects the [several] approaches to genre studies is a commitment to the idea that genres reflect and coordinate *social ways of knowing* and acting in the world, and thus provide valuable means of researching how texts act in various contexts (Bawarshi & Reiff, p. 5).

Despite this agreement upon the social nature of genre, theoretical views and research differ between “schools” in important ways. Both the Sydney School and ESP are firmly in the “linguistics” camp, for features of texts remain prominent and central to their work, much of which is now based upon extensive corpus studies. However, because it may not be as familiar to readers, I will focus here upon a third “school,” that begins not with text and a linguistic approach but with a text as social action within a context; Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS), earlier spoken of as The New Rhetoric (Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2002).

Though in agreement upon the social nature of genre, RGS is quite different from the “linguistic” theories, the Sydney School and ESP, for several reasons. First, it originated among theorists and teachers of college composition, not linguists, principally in countries (Canada and the United States) where English is the medium of instruction though not always the native tongue of students. Rather than being grounded in linguistics, experts in this “school” are informed by socio-cultural theory, explained in the following way in About.com:

*Sociocultural theory is an emerging view in psychology that looks at the important contribution that society makes to individual development. This theory stresses the interaction between developing*

*people and the culture(s) in which they live.*

It is not surprising, then, that RGS researchers, pedagogues, and students begin by studying the “contexts of use,” the cultures and situations in which texts from a genre are found, and then turn to how individuals and their spoken and written discourses are influenced by these cultures within a specific context. In their student coursebook based upon RGS, *Scenes of writing: Strategies for composing with genres* (2004), Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi suggest that students begin their genre analysis with the “scene of writing” for a chosen text, making general observations about the context, identifying situations and human interactions within the scene, and only then turning to the genres that are typical of the scene, asking questions such as “What written documents typically appear in and are used repeatedly [in this context]?” It is the scene of writing and its typical, often complex, activities and actors that determine what genres are present and how a text is processed, produced and distributed. How the texts are organized and the linguistic choices that are made depend upon these factors. The Scenes of writing authors provide a series of scene-discovery questions that guide students through the process of gaining access to a scene, to carrying out ethnographic observations of the scene’s participants and activities, to exploring and analyzing the genres used within that scene. In addition to collecting samples of the community’s genres, students are urged to interview participants about their uses of the genre as well as take observational notes on the patterns or habits of interaction within a situation. Thus, they come close to] what Freedman (1993, 247) defines as the two necessary criteria for effective writing instruction: the exposure to [authentic] written discourses combined with immersion in the relevant contexts (2010, p. 205).

### Applying RGS in an EFL context

These RGS approaches which begin with the “scene” of writing, the context for a text, can serve a useful antidote to augment or replace pedagogies found in many ESL and EFL contexts in which the “scene” is not seriously considered, where a text is, in actuality, isolated from its context and taught principally as text structure, grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. But we need to consider the students and their own experiences, of course. If practitioners are going to succeed with introducing, even partially, a social, contextual approach to genre, they need to introduce to students texts from a genre that are familiar, that deal with topics that are being discussed in the context where the students live or study.

The example<sup>4</sup> in Appendix A, “Why the future of health

<sup>3</sup> Swales’ later work, *Other floors, other voices: A textography of a small university building* (1998) takes a much more thorough-going approach to the context/text/disciplinary integration.

<sup>4</sup> Several genre indicators (e.g., the photograph, captions, etc.) have been stripped from this authentic text for pedagogical purposes. In my classrooms, I give students the text as it was published and they number the paragraphs of that text. This gives them a much better sense of the actual genre.

care lies in integration,” was selected by the CELC teaching staff at the National University of Singapore as an appropriate starting place because it focuses on a problem familiar to many readers in Singapore, the fragmentation of health care services. Also familiar may be the genre, an opinion editorial, found in newspapers and on-line in most parts of the world and often referred to as an “op-ed piece.”

Of what might a “social” EFL writing and reading pedagogy consist? Although the *Scenes of writing* suggestions are valuable, EFL students and their instructors may find them a bit too general, as mine have. This is why more specific contextual genre analysis topics and questions, found in Appendix B, have been adapted from the work of a rhetorician, Janice Walker at the Illinois State University (2012) based upon the articles by Paul Prior, whose publications on socio-cultural theory and composition (e.g., 2006) are well-respected in the RGS community.

### A classroom approach: Pedagogical steps in emphasizing the “social” using “Why the future of health care lies in integration”

How might an EFL lesson be constructed? Here are some suggested classroom-tested steps:

#### **Step 1:** Draw from students’ prior knowledge:

Ask students to name what they have read or written recently (e.g., a blog, a tweet, a novel). Select one or two of the most familiar genres named and tell students to work in groups to determine answers to these questions:

- Where might you find a text from this genre?
- Who might write it? Why? What might be his/her purposes?
- What audiences would be interested?
- What might the audiences do with what they read, hear or see? How might these audiences respond or distribute the text?

#### **Step 2:** Lead a class discussion, drawing from the groups’ findings, and emphasizing the importance of context to understanding how texts are constructed and used.

#### **Step 3:** First reading: “Why the future of health care...”

Ask students to read the assigned text silently, keeping in mind what they have already about the genres with which they were familiar (Step 1).

**Step 4:** In pairs (or individually), ask students to read “Why the future of health care...” and complete as much of the scene-driven genre analysis from Appendix B as possible. Call on different students to present parts of their completed Appendix B analysis. Discuss those

questions that cannot be answered in the grid under Appendix B and what needs to be done to obtain answers (e.g., interview the author; check the website of the publication for comments on the text).

**Step 5:** *Introduce textual analysis through a contextual lens:* Tell the students that the language and structure of a text interact with and are dependent upon the context; that the author selects a genre and textual elements after assessing his/her purposes and intentions for the text’s reception.

**Step 6:** *Third read* (determining the text’s paragraph structure). This next activity, called “Charting a Text,” (LeMaster, 2008), assists students to understand that authentic texts can be organized in a variety of ways, often determined by the genre and the author’s purposes, and, of course, the actors and activities within a context. Ask the students, working in groups or pairs, to “chart” the assigned text (“Why the future...”), determining not only what the text says (the paraphrase) but what it does. [Students at a lower level can be asked to “jigsaw” the text, with each group taking responsibility for a few of the sections. Students might also be asked to complete the “do” sections first, with the “say” sections to be completed later, since the “doing” shows students how the writer has structured the text to enhance its reception by the audience.

*Note:* The first two sections are completed by the teacher, who models the activity.

**Table 1:** Charting the text: Identifying the functions of paragraphs/ Paraphrasing the text

| Paragraph numbers | “Doing”<br>(Functions of the section)  | Saying<br>(A paraphrase)   |
|-------------------|--|--|
| # 1               | Using a story, the author is setting the stage for the discussion of the problem which is the focus of the text. | A middle-aged, diabetic patient is given two sets of medication by two entities. This is confusing for the patient and the doctor. |
| # 2               |  |  |
| # 3               |  |  |
| # 4               | Citing his own experience, the author focuses upon the problem for patients and the surrounding culture.         | The problem in the story, of an “inefficient, frustrating, and very expensive” medical experience, is very common in Singapore.    |
| # 5               |  |  |
| # 6               |  |  |
| # 7               | (Before deciding, review paras 1-3.)   |  |
| # 8               |  |  |
| # 9               | (Before deciding, review paras 6.)   |  |
| #10               |  |  |
| #11               | (Before deciding, review paras 9-10.)  |  |
| #12               |  |  |
| #13               | (Before deciding, review paras 9-10.)  |  |
| #14               |  |  |
| #15               |  |  |

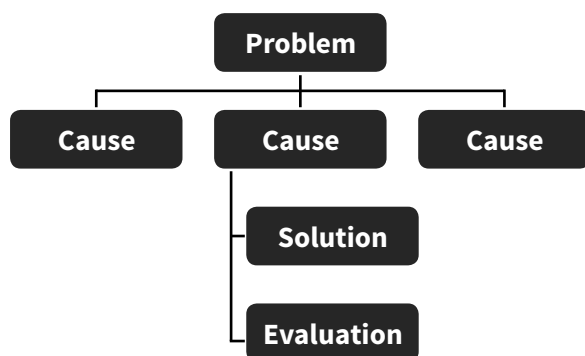
| Paragraph numbers | “Doing”<br>(Functions of the section) | Saying<br>(A paraphrase) |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| #16               |                                       |                          |
| #17               |                                       |                          |
| #18               |                                       |                          |
| #19               |                                       |                          |
| #21               |                                       |                          |
| #22               |                                       |                          |
| #23               |                                       |                          |
| #24               |                                       |                          |
| #25               |                                       |                          |

**Step 6:** Lead a discussion on the “do” structure of the text. Talk about why the author might have organized the text in the way he did. What did he accomplish in terms of persuading his audience? How much of the structure is his idea--or conventional in the genre, an op-ed piece?

**Step 7:** Explain the writing task for students (Completing a “Situating Problem/Solution Summary.”)

**Step 8:** Completing a problem/solution graphic. One of the most common modes in academic and professional writing (in English) is the problem/solution. According to Carter (2007), a problem/solution structure can be found embedded into a number of genres, e.g., case studies, project reports, proposals, and business plans. Op-ed pieces can also be reformulated, particularly for purposes of summary, into problem-solution structures. Give students the graphic found in Table 2; using the charting table, ask them to fill in the sections of the graphic organizer in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Graphic organizer for problem-solution summaries



**Step 9:** Completing a summary, using a template: After students have filled out the graphic organizer, they are ready (if intermediate) to complete a summary template<sup>5</sup> which incorporates both the contextual analysis completed (Appendix C and the summary grid).

**Table 3:** A Contextual Summary Template (Problem/Solution)

In his \_\_\_\_\_ (genre) entitled \_\_\_\_\_ published in the \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ (author's name), \_\_\_\_\_ (the author's title or profession) presents a problem which is of concern to \_\_\_\_\_ (audience): \_\_\_\_\_ (the problem). The cause(s) for the problem are \_\_\_\_\_. The suggested solution is \_\_\_\_\_ (solution), supported by evidence including \_\_\_\_\_. The author believes that his solution is appropriate because \_\_\_\_\_.

**Step 10:** Reflecting on the lesson. Particularly if analyzing contextual factors in this way is new to the students, it would be beneficial to ask them to devote a few minutes to consider the work they have just completed. The instructor might ask them to respond to questions, orally or in writing, such as the following:

- What were the purposes for completing Appendix A? What were you to consider?
- If you were going to summarize, in one sentence, the relationships between writer, text, and context, what would you say?
- When your instructor speaks of genres as social actions, what does s/he mean?
- Consider something you have read or written outside of the classroom, what elements of the context in which it is found (writer, audience, scene, genre) might be most important to the success of the text? Why?

## Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that as practitioners, we must make sure that our students take the social nature of genre seriously and, I would argue, those who assess our students should take the interactions between texts and contexts very seriously, as well. Though I have not discussed the nature of the RGS approaches that represent the scenes of writing at length, I have devoted considerable space to pedagogical implications of the necessary social approach to genre. I am well aware of the more traditional assessment practices which are common in many parts of the world, practices that emphasize correctness and structures rather than the social nature of texts. However, in the English-speaking world, the nature of the social, as evidenced in Appendix

<sup>5</sup> If students are more advanced, they may be asked to complete a summary without a template; however, I find that using a template, at least initially, is useful for practicing academic English.



B, is fully, if not more important, than any other aspect of communication. It is my hope that those who read this short article will delve much more deeply into the nature of genre and attempt some, or all, of the activities suggested here. I have found them to be motivating and enriching for EFL/ESL and other students.

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## Appendix A: "Why the future of health care lies in integration" [by Loke Wai Chiong in the Straits Times (April 10, 2013)<sup>6</sup>.

### Why the future of health care lies in integration

Wednesday, Apr 10, 2013

The Straits Times

By Loke Wai Chiong

- 1) A middle-aged diabetic woman experiences a gnawing tummy ache and sees her regular general practitioner (GP). He prescribes antacids and warns her to watch for worsening pain.
- 2) Hours later, her condition worsens and she is hospitalised. Delirious with pain, she cannot relate her medical history to hospital doctors or provide details of her earlier visit to the GP. A gamut of tests - some already run by her GP - are carried out. It turns out she has appendicitis, and she undergoes surgery.
- 3) Upon her discharge, the hospital starts her on a totally different set of medication. All this while, her GP is unaware of what has happened to his patient. Both are confused when she turns up months later with bags of new drugs.
- 4) In my years as a practising doctor, I have seen too many of such cases. It is puzzling how the treatment of a patient often ends up being so inefficient, frustrating and very expensive - despite rapid advances in medical science.
- 5) When it comes to responding to health-care challenges such as ageing populations and spiralling costs, the knee-jerk reaction of many governments has been to invest in infrastructure.
- 6) However, building more or bigger hospitals is not the solution. Rather, the answer may well lie in addressing the current fragmented state of health systems.
- 7) Such fragmentation results in poor coordination among different care providers and an over-reliance on costly specialist care.
- 8) It can also sometimes lead to unnecessary and duplicative tests that put patients through emotional and financial strain, and delays in timely diagnosis and treatment.
- 9) The definition of integration varies among systems, but at its heart, the idea is to be able to offer coordinated care across the whole patient journey.
- 10) Integration can be driven by payers such as insurers and governments, or be provider-led. An example of the former is De Friesland Zorgverzekeraar. The Dutch insurer coordinated health-care providers within a region to shape networks of care. One network may include services ranging from emergency and intensive care to oncology and chronic care.
- 11) Exemplifying provider-led integration are the United States hospital systems. Many have integrated through merging primary and ambulatory care capabilities, home health and skilled nursing facilities, rehabilitation and other capabilities into one delivery chain.
- 12) These industry players are investing in integration because they believe benefits can be reaped. A growing body of evidence suggests that the quality of health care can be improved and costs lowered if health-care provision is well-integrated.
- 13) One successful model of integration can be found in Coxa Hospital in Finland. The hospital, which specialises in joint replacement surgery, developed a partnership with primary-care physicians. They integrated the entire patient experience from referral, through initial visit and pre-operation, to operation, rehabilitation and follow-up consultations.

<sup>6</sup> The paragraphs have been numbered for pedagogical purposes.

14) The result: 90 per cent of its patients receive rehabilitative care in primary care closer to the home.

15) Besides excellent surgical outcomes and very low complication rates, Coxa received the highest national rankings in Finland for patient and staff satisfaction. Such positive outcomes are possible because of better coordination among health-care providers, which allows for earlier detection and better treatment options. In other words, patients receive the right care at the right place and time, and by the right provider.

16) Despite the growing number of success stories, most health-care systems around the world are still struggling with integration.

17) Technical challenges remain, such as developing registries and sharing records digitally. Developing accountability for outcomes is also tough, as is developing financing models to determine how payment is reimbursed to different providers.

18) The human element is another major challenge. Health professionals with differing approaches and risk appetites must overcome a history of working in silos, while patients' beliefs and attitudes have to change.

19) In an integrated health network, doctors at the GP or community level may be identified as the ones who should provide appropriate care. Patients must therefore understand that the most advanced and expensive treatment in the newest hospital may not be the best or even necessary. This is especially so in the early or more stable phases of chronic disease. In fact, hospital stays can be costly and expose patients to the unnecessary risk of hospital-acquired infections.

20) In Singapore's recent Budget announcement, the Ministry of Health announced plans to build six new public general hospitals and 12 to 14 additional polyclinics by 2030. These are on top of previously announced plans to triple community hospital beds and double long-term care capacity by 2020.

21) It is vital to ensure that these new institutions in Singapore operate within the context of integrating services within our Regional Health Systems (RHS). In place since 2009, RHS such as the Eastern Health Alliance and the Alexandra Health System have been actively joining the dots in their respective regions. They are forming partnerships among GPs, community hospitals, nursing homes and other stakeholders to care for their patients within respective designated zones.

22) The path to integration will not be easy, given the existing divide between public and private sectors; GPs and specialists; and hospitals and community-based care in Singapore.

23) It might be useful at the national level to consider how we can facilitate stronger partnerships among health-care providers. For example, there can be more funding and incentives to encourage providers to become integrated.

24) Singapore's population is ageing rapidly, and the onset of chronic diseases is rising. A coordinated and sustainable health-care system, rather than more hospitals and more clinics per se, can help the country prepare for a spike in patient load.

#### Appendix B: Analytical terms and questions (RGS), adapted from Walker

| Contextual Genre Analysis | Explanation  | Notes |
|---------------------------|--|-------|
| Ecology                   | What is the broader context for this text? What's going on?  |       |
| Production                | Is the text written? Spoken? On-line? How has that affected the production of the text?  |       |
| Representation            | What or who initiated the text? What were the writer's purposes? In what genre is it written/spoken? What are the conventions of this genre? |       |

| Contextual Genre Analysis | Explanation   | Notes |
|---------------------------|---|-------|
| Activity                  | What practices and sources were involved in producing the text? What was the process? |       |
| Distribution              | To what audiences was the text addressed? Where was it distributed?                   |       |

#### Appendix C: Completed Analysis for "Why the future of health care lies in integration"

Note: This analysis is completed after the students have read the text for the first time. Further readings will be necessary to answer some of the questions.

| Contextual Genre Analysis  | Findings  | Pedagogical notes  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Ecology:</b> What is the broader context?   | Current health coverage in Singapore is "fragmented" in that there are various health care providers and other, related thorny issues (para 220).   | Class discussion around this question: "Do you, your family, or friends find that getting health care in Singapore presents problems? What are they?"  |
| <b>Production:</b> Is the text written, spoken, on-line.   | This is a written text that appears in both the <i>Straits Times</i> ( <i>in print</i> ) but also on-line. The original (which the students see) contains pictures as well as a revealing sub-title.  | Students are given the original text from the newspaper to study in terms of how pictures and other features result from production of this type of text. They discuss why these features may be included.   |
| <b>Representation:</b> What were the writer's purposes? In what genre is it written? What are the conventions of this genre? | <p><b>Author:</b> A practicing doctor, involved in the Singapore health care system. <a href="http://www.kpmg.com/global/en/industry/healthcare/center-of-excellence/pages/wai-chiong-loke.aspx">http://www.kpmg.com/global/en/industry/healthcare/center-of-excellence/pages/wai-chiong-loke.aspx</a></p> <p><b>Purposes:</b> To present a problem faced by the medical services and patients in Singapore and offer a solution.</p> <p><b>Genre:</b> An op-ed (opinion editorial) from a local newspaper. An op-ed piece is written by a named author who establishes his/her credibility and generally presents a problem to be solved. The title tends to present the author's claim/solution although this is generally explained at the end of the text, as well.</p> | <p>Students can research the author's background to further determine his credibility.</p> <p>Because the lesson is based upon a problem/solution summary task, this is the macro-structure into which the discussion is fit. However, it could also be viewed as argument text with a claim and evidence provided.</p> <p>One of the most important pedagogical implications of a named "genre" is that readers often have prior knowledge of the conventions. Having prior knowledge of the repeated nature of these conventions helps student readers to access the text.</p> |

| Contextual Genre Analysis  | Findings  | Pedagogical notes   |
|--|---|---|
| <b>Activity:</b> Who initiated the text? What practices and sources were involved in producing the text? What was the process? | <p><b>Process<sup>7</sup>:</b> Some of these questions, which integrate “process” approaches with genre theory, cannot be answered without interviewing the author or the publisher.</p> <p><b>Sources used:</b> Effective argumentation requires appropriate use of evidence, often credible sources. Though the author does not cite sources formally (formal citation is seldom employed in op-ed pieces), he demonstrates his knowledge of successful integrated systems in at least three developed countries.</p> | <p>One of the major tenets of genre theory is that there are many contextual factors that influences the author’s writing processes and the final text. Students often find out more about the author from the Internet, or they email the author about his/her writing processes and reasons for writing. Some authors respond to the students’ questions, something which is exciting for them.</p> <p>Sources used: Effective argumentation requires appropriate use of evidence, often credible sources. By scanning the op-ed piece (e.g., paragraphs 10-15), the students determine that the author is familiar with specific examples from other countries that support his claim.</p> |

## About the author:

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<sup>7</sup> I have already discussed the importance of considering processes in the contexts of genre (2003).