The Effect of Genre Consciousness-raising Tasks on Iranian EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension Performance

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This study investigated the effect of genre consciousness-raising activities on listening comprehension performance of Iranian EFL learners across language proficiency levels. To this end, some genre consciousness-raising tasks were adapted from Flowerdew (1993) and used as the treatment procedures. Two different listening comprehension tests of news broadcast genre, used as pre- and post-test, were administered to 120 senior university students majoring in English language translation. The results indicated that consciousness-raising tasks significantly affected EFL learners' listening comprehension performance. However, the effect of genre consciousness-raising tasks did not vary across different language proficiency levels. Overall, the findings provide empirical support for the facilitative effect of genre consciousness-raising tasks on listening comprehension performance of EFL learners. The findings may promise implications for EFL listening comprehension syllabuses and provide guidelines to designers to accommodate the insights derived from the genre-based instruction perspective.

Key words: Genre, Consciousness-raising Tasks, Listening Comprehension, EFL Learners, Language Proficiency

INTRODUCTION

Genre-based approaches are being increasingly applied in ESL/EFL pedagogy so that they are identified as one of the major trends in the new millennium, with discourse and genre analysis, schema theory, pragmatics and systemic functional linguistics rekindling an interest in functional-based approaches to language teaching (Rodgers, 2001). Similarly, Hyland (2002) sees genre approaches as having a considerable impact on the way we see language use and on literacy education around the world. Johns (2002) refers to a major paradigm shift over the past 15 years or so towards a more social, contextual approach based on genre theory.

The genre-based approach to teaching second language skills, with communicative purposes as its underlying foundation, originated from the work of Halliday (1985), Swales (1981, 1990), and Bhatia (1991, 1993). The aim is to raise learners' awareness of both the rhetorical organization and the linguistic features closely associated with the genre (Henry & Rosebury, 1998; Hyland, 2006; Cheng, 2008). Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) believe that the concept of genre provides a way of looking at what students have to do linguistically; i.e. what kinds of discourses they have to be able to understand and produce in speech and writing. They add that the genre perspective may also provide students with an understanding of why a discourse is structured the way it is, through a consideration of its social context and its purpose. Finally, they conclude that genre would seem to be a potentially powerful pedagogic tool.

However, as Sengupta, Forey, and Lyons (1999, p. 3) argue, "amidst the enthusiasm over genre as a teaching tool, few studies have evaluated the effects of genre-based pedagogy on students' language and literacy development". In prefacing their evaluation of genre-based writing instruction in an English For Specific/Academic Purposes (EAP/ESP) course, Henry and Roseberry (1998) maintain that "the arguments for and against the genre approach in EAP/ESP have been limited to the theoretical, and few if any attempts have been made to evaluate the approach empirically in an

ESP/EAP context" (p. 148). Moreover, genre studies have predominantly addressed writing instruction (Kay & Dudely-Evans, 1998) and very few empirical studies have ever focused on the effect of genre-based teaching on oral skills including listening comprehension performance of EFL learners with regard to their proficiency levels. Hence, there is a gap in our current empirical literature concerning the genre-based approach and listening comprehension instruction specially in marked educational contexts, including Iran, preoccupied with an overemphasis on micro level skills of listening comprehension and bottom-up techniques of teaching with little or no systematic attempt to raise the learners' awareness of genre integrity and text as a whole unit. Also, the present study gains significance as the authors investigate the application of genre approach to English for general purposes in an EFL context. The findings may promise implications for improving ESL/EFL listening comprehension instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Genre is a social activity in which language is used to establish and maintain relationship in order to achieve specific goals (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Miller, 1984). Essential to achieving these goals is an understanding of the communicative context, including the participants, their culture, history and purposes of communication. In order to create an effective example of a genre, writers or speakers use contextual knowledge to meet the genre expectations of the corresponding readers or hearers.

Genres consist of units of purpose called moves (Swales, 1981, 1990; Bhatia, 1993) which may be obligatory or optional (Hasan, 1989). The inclusion of all the obligatory moves in an acceptable order is essential to achieving the communicative goals of the genre, while the addition of optional moves may enhance the effectiveness of a particular example of a genre. In practical terms, meeting the expectations of the audience means complying with the conventionalized generic structure and using language

which is appropriate to the corresponding discourse community members (Swales, 1990). A genre approach to language teaching, then, aims to use contextual knowledge to provide learners with access to the linguistic resources shared by a particular community which are joined together to achieve specific goals (Hyland, 2003).

In recent years, as a reaction to the traditional synthetic approach to language teaching, the concept of genre has been applied to language education curriculum and pedagogy (see McCarthy & Carter, 1994), as the alternative "genre-based perspective focuses on language at the level of the whole text while at the same time taking into account the social and cultural context in which it is used'' (Paltridge, 2001, p. 4). Therefore, attempts have been made to place genre more centrally in the development of language curricula and syllabus design, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Swales, 1990). The rationale for this trend comes from the argument that a focus on genre "enables curriculum designers to group together texts that are similar in terms of purpose, organization, and audience" (Paltridge, 2001, p. 4). Paltridge (ibid) goes on to summarize the arguments for adopting a genre-based approach not only in specialist contexts but also in syllabus design for general language programs.

Although genre-based teaching has been criticized for being 'formulaic', there exists a large body of evidence that shows the key role formulaic expressions play in both first and second language learning at the level of discourse, sentence and collocation (e.g., Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Peters, 1983; Sinclair, 1991). If genre pedagogy does not present learners with a wide enough range of linguistic options to realize the different functions found in a genre within a meaningful context, learners may mistakenly perceive the formulas as a template to be followed rather than as a description of acceptable language conventions. Thus, any genre-based approach should provide learners with "a range of samples of a genre or its characteristic elements so that they can acquire a repertoire of linguistic and rhetorical devices from which to choose" (Petric, 2005, p. 224). In addition,

the approach should aim at encouraging learners to develop their learning and analytical skills so that they can identify and use the linguistic formulas effectively (Flowerdew, 1993). An appropriate approach to teaching genres will be an educational rather than a training one, emphasizing the process of acquiring new genres, rather than the product (Flowerdew, 1993).

As Flowerdew, (1993) maintains, rather than inculcating in the learner a fixed conception of the discourse and linguistic encoding of individual genre, the process approach to the teaching of genres, seeks to develop learners' sensitivity to the interplay between the factors affecting genre and how a change in any one of the parameters is likely to manipulate the discourse structure and linguistic encoding. Genre awareness raising, as a newly-established approach to teaching language skills, particularly in EAP context, builds on the general premise that sensitizing learners to genres, genre conventions, and their applications in oral and written language would enhance learners' comprehension and production of texts. More specifically, this approach places genre analysis in a cognitive perspective and attempt to devise pedagogical tasks that may turn teaching of language skills into a more strategic, confidence-building, cooperative and collaborative process.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study examines the effect of genre consciousness-raising tasks on EFL learners' listening comprehension performance and probes whether consciousness-raising tasks may empower EFL learners to perform better on listening comprehension tests. A further concern of the study is to explore whether the effect of genre consciousness-raising tasks on listening comprehension performance of EFL learners varies across different language proficiency levels.

More specifically, we sought answers to the following research questions:

1) Do genre consciousness-raising tasks significantly affect Iranian EFL learners'

listening comprehension performance?

2) Does the effect of genre consciousness-raising tasks vary across language proficiency levels?

Based on these research questions, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

1) Genre consciousness-raising tasks do not significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension performance.
2) The effect of genre consciousness-raising tasks does not vary across language proficiency levels.

METHOD

Participants

An already-used version of TOEFL test was given as a pretest to 159 available senior students at Islamic Azad University of Ghaemshahr and Mazandaran University, Iran. The subjects were screened into two proficiency levels based on their performances on the TOEFL test. Grouping was done based on the dispersion of the TOEFL scores around the mean (x=550). The students whose scores were higher than 550 were assigned to high proficiency group and the students whose scores fell in the range of 450-550 were assigned to low proficiency group. The students whose scores were below 450 were not included in the study. Finally, 120 students (65 females and 55 males) were screened as subjects of this study. 60 students were in high proficiency group (33 females and 27 males) and 60 students were in low proficiency group (32 females and 28 males). Each of these proficiency groups were subdivided into two genre and non-genre groups. Therefore, there were two subgroups of genre (N=30) and non-genre (N=30) in each proficiency level.

Instrumentation

In order to probe the research questions of this study, two sets of listening comprehension tests based on 'news broadcast' genre were constructed and utilized as pre-test and post-test. The listening comprehension tests were in multiple-choice type and each test comprised 30 items. These listening comprehension tests were constructed based on oral texts of news broadcast taken from radio broadcasts (VOA news) of about 3-5 minutes, each followed by some multiple-choice questions.

To construct the tests, initially, some pieces of news broadcast were recorded from VOA and transcribed. Then, a pool of listening comprehension items was developed. There was no control on the topic of the oral texts but most of the texts recorded were related to the social news. The transcriptions of the news were also used to develop instructional materials for treatment in both genre and non-genre groups.

A TOEFL (paper-based test) was utilized in this study as a general language proficiency measure in order to screen students into two language proficiency levels of high and low. This TOEFL test consists of 150 multiple-choice items in three sections: listening comprehension, structure and written expression, vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Obviously, each test included clear details as well as guidelines for completion of the test. Moreover, prior to the administration of the two genre-based listening comprehension tests to the intended participants, they were piloted with 20 participants similar to the target groups in order to study their psychometric characteristics. Further revisions were also carried out according to the results of the item analyses. Both tests enjoyed acceptable concurrent validity as checked against the standard proficiency test with moderate to high reliability indices (.72 and .81).

Procedures

This study was carried out in three phases. First, all subjects in the four

groups were given the pre-test in order to provide a database about their listening comprehension ability prior to the treatment. Second, subjects in the genre groups were treated based on genre consciousness-raising tasks (see Appendix I) for six sessions, each 90 minutes long.

A good number of alternative modes of genre awareness raising activities have been tried in the current literature. In this study, we designed and organized some listening tasks based on the 'news broadcast' genre and presented them to the subjects using Flowerdew's model (Flowerdew, 1993). The rationale behind adopting Flowerdew's model was its compatibility to the process orientation to genre-based pedagogy which seeks to develop learners' sensitivity to factors affecting genre through meaningful and staged activities. Also, we assumed that presentation of news broadcasts would function as a very good transition for students to other oral genres because news are the most common sources of authentic input in Iranian EFL listening/speaking courses. However, in the Iranian context, the news texts are typically presented along the more bottom-up and product approach to comprehension with little or no schemata awareness activities.

More specifically, our genre consciousness raising treatment began with very simple lexical and grammatical tasks to raise learners' awareness of the conventionalized and systematic nature of language of news. Then, we proceeded to tasks designed to empower learners' ability in identifying form-function relationships followed by more explanatory and discovery-based tasks on how and why news are linguistically structured and organized as a separate genre. More group discussions on content, structure, and language of news as well as some informal corpus analyses of real news broadcasts were completed by the students along with teacher's supervision and scaffolding. Finally, learners were pushed to internalize the organizational patterning of news broadcasts through reordering scrambled pieces of news.

The treatment procedures for subjects in non-genre groups included the conventional skills-based approach (see Appendix II) and the same genre for six sessions, each 90 minutes long.

In the third phase of the study, the subjects were given the listening

comprehension posttest after the treatments. In both tests, the audio materials were played only once. After collecting data, the scores were tabulated and subjected to descriptive and inferential analyses in order to explore the research questions formulated earlier.

RESULTS

Initially, the subjects' performances on the three measures employed in this study (i.e. the listening comprehension tests and the TOEFL test) were tabulated and subjected to the conventional descriptive analyses as illustrated in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for all Measures Involved in the Study

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
TOEFL	120	194	454	648	550.92	5.18	56.694	3214.228	-.026	.221	-1.212	.438
PRETEST	120	10	10	20	15.09	.27	2.965	8.790	-.008	.221	-1.079	.438
POSTTEST	120	20	10	30	20.21	.53	5.798	33.612	.077	.221	-1.114	.438
Valid N (listwise)	120											

As indicated earlier, the treatment for subjects in the genre groups included genre consciousness-raising tasks. Subjects in the non-genre groups were treated based on the conventional skills-based instruction of the same genre. At the end of the treatment, all four groups were given the listening comprehension posttest in order to examine their listening comprehension performance and the possible differences among them after the treatment. In order to probe the two null hypotheses corresponding to the research

questions (i.e., the effect of genre-based awareness raising tasks and proficiency levels of subjects on their listening comprehension performances), a Two-way ANOVA was run on research groups' performances on the Post-test listening comprehension measure. The results are illustrated in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2
Summary Table for Two-way ANOVA for Listening Posttest

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: POSTTEST					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3695.492(a)	3	1231.831	469.577	.000
Intercept	49005.208	1	49005.208	18680.921	.000
PROF	2832.408	1	2832.408	1079.722	.000
GENRE	858.675	1	858.675	327.329	.000
PROF * GENRE	4.408	1	4.408	1.680	.197
Error	304.300	116	2.623		
Total	53005.000	120			
Corrected Total	3999.792	119			
A R Squared = .924 (Adjusted R Squared = .922)					

As Table 2 indicates, there are significant main effects for both PROF and GENRE factors: the effects of both factors are significant at .01 level. Despite the main effects of both factors, there is not any significant interaction; the p-value is .197. Clearly, the GENRE factor has the same effects upon high and low proficiency groups. As Table 2 illustrates, there is a significant difference between genre and non-genre groups. Based on the results, the first null hypothesis predicting no significant effect of genre consciousness-raising tasks on EFL learners' listening comprehension performance was rejected. The consciousness-raising tasks significantly improved the learners' listening comprehension. There is also a significant difference between high and low proficiency groups. However, the interaction between genre consciousness-raising tasks and proficiency levels of the subjects was not significant. So, the second null hypothesis is

supported, i.e. the effect of genre consciousness-raising activities does not vary across the two language proficiency levels. In order to locate the exact differences between pairs of groups, a Post Hoc Scheffe test was run, the results of which are summarized in Table 3 below. As Table 3 depicts, there are significant differences among all four groups ($p<.05$).

TABLE 3
Post Hoc Scheffe Test for Post-test

Multiple Comparisons
Dependent Variable: POSTTEST
Scheffe

(I) 4	(J) 4	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
high genre group	high non-genre group	5.73(*)	.418	.000	4.55	6.92
	low genre group	10.10(*)	.418	.000	8.91	11.29
	low non-genre group	15.07(*)	.418	.000	13.88	16.25
high non-genre group	high genre group	-5.73(*)	.418	.000	-6.92	-4.55
	low genre group	4.37(*)	.418	.000	3.18	5.55
	low non-genre group	9.33(*)	.418	.000	8.15	10.52
low genre group	high genre group	-10.10(*)	.418	.000	-11.29	-8.91
	high non-genre group	-4.37(*)	.418	.000	-5.55	-3.18
	low non-genre group	4.97(*)	.418	.000	3.78	6.15
low non-genre group	high genre group	-15.07(*)	.418	.000	-16.25	-13.88
	high non-genre group	-9.33(*)	.418	.000	-10.52	-8.15
	low genre group	-4.97(*)	.418	.000	-6.15	-3.78

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The significant differences among all four groups are illustrated more clearly in Table 4 where the groups are divided into homogeneous subsets; thus, showing the differences among the means of the four groups. Here, all four groups are significantly different from each other. The two main factors, i.e. Genre awareness- raising and proficiency, influenced the students' listening comprehension positively. The genre and high proficiency groups performed higher than their non-genre and low proficiency counterparts.

TABLE 4
Homogeneous Subsets for Posttest

4	N	Subset for alpha = .05			
		1	2	3	4
low non-genre group	30	12.87			
low genre group	30		17.83		
high non-genre group	30			22.20	
high genre group	30				27.93
Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.					
a Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 30.000.					

POSTTEST / Scheffe appear as sub-headings above the subset columns.

DISCUSSION

Regarding the effect of genre consciousness-raising tasks on the listening comprehension ability of the EFL learners, the results of data analyses revealed that both genre consciousness-raising tasks and proficiency levels have significant effects on EFL learners' listening comprehension performance, but there was no meaningful interaction between the two factors. The findings show that genre consciousness-raising tasks enhanced listening comprehension performances of low and high proficiency groups. Also, the findings revealed a significant difference between high and low

proficiency groups. However, the interaction between genre consciousness-raising tasks and proficiency levels of the subjects was not statistically significant.

To compare the research findings with those of previous empirical literature, the results of the present study are in agreement with the study done by Henry and Roseberry (1998). In both studies, genre analysis techniques and genre-based teaching proved helpful to EFL learners. Similarly, Weber (2001) focused on genre consciousness-raising tasks and concluded that these tasks turned language learning activities into confidence-building, cooperative and collaborative activities.

The findings of the present study are in congruity with Johns (1999) in which students analyzed genre forms as well as their shaping social forces in preparation for approaching a variety of texts. She noted that genre-based approach was particularly successful. As it is true about the present study, Hyon (2001) found genre-based approach helpful in improving reading confidence and speed, but the findings of this study contradicts the last part of Hyon's study (Hyon, 2001) in which the author pointed out that the effect of genre-based pedagogy was limited to increasing vocabulary knowledge and content comprehension.

The results of the present study are in line with Hyland (2007). Hyland reports that repeated experiences with a specific genre and recognizing similarities in the frequently used genres help learners read, understand, and perhaps write them more easily. As proposed by Firkins, Forey, and Sengupta (2007), genre-based pedagogy views language as an open dynamic system, and suggests that knowledge about language should be taught explicitly. Genres, here, are seen as the starting point for modeling, deconstructing, and understanding language.

CONCLUSION

Our findings revealed that genre consciousness-raising tasks significantly

improved EFL learners' listening comprehension performance. Also, the effect of genre consciousness-raising tasks was consistent for both low and high proficiency groups. The learners' performances indicated that the tasks were effective learning tools because they could use specific textual and contextual features of the news broadcast genre that they had learnt as a result of having completed the genre consciousness-raising tasks. This study attempted to reveal how, through a carefully devised and conducted study, an EFL listening comprehension syllabus may accommodate the insights derived from the genre-based instruction perspective. The genre-based tasks proved as a felicitous way to the requirements of instructed language learning with a balanced focus on meaning and form. Accordingly, it is hoped that the procedures carried out in this study to design and implement genre-based pedagogy may offer a useful example for other researchers and syllabus designers to probe how genre approach can enhance the effectiveness of instruction of general English language skills as well as their assessment. Finally, syllabus designers are expected to include genres and consciousness-raising tasks, according to the needs, interests as well as language proficiency of the learners, in the textbooks in order to give students the opportunity to practice and use the genre knowledge actively in their own language learning and use.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I

Genre Consciousness-raising Tasks used for the genre groups

First Session

1. Look at the texts below; analyze the structural formulas which are commonly used in these texts. (Texts 2, 4, 7)

2. Check whether you can identify any lexical items, which seemed to correlate with the structural formula, for example, a structural formula is "indirect speech" in which the reporting verb "say" is commonly used.

3. Provide alternative encoding for structural slots. For example, instead of reporting verb "say" other reporting verbs can also be used, like "tell, point out, declare, etc"

Second session,

Find utterances in the text, which show the following features ;(texts 15, 17, 20)
"News" writing tends to be:

1. Impersonal, to make it appear objective (to distance the reporter from the story) hence:
(a) Written in the third person,
(b) Use of indirect or direct speech which is attributed to someone other than the reporter,
(c) Some use of passive verbs but usually only when someone who is being quoted wants to distance himself from an issue and to show their objectivity about an issue,

2. About something that has taken place so mostly written in the past tense.

3. Simple, in fact close to the way we talk, relatively short sentences and words and some use of clichés which the whole audience understands.

4. Punchy, it must grab the readers' attention so often uses:

      (a) Short rather than long words

      (b) Active verbs

      (c) Relatively short sentences

      (d) Concrete rather than abstract vocabulary

      (e) Sometimes emotive and colorful vocabulary

      (f) Some use (but not overuse) of adjectives

5. But also relatively formal

      (a) No use of contractions

      (b) Sentences written in full (no elision) or elliptical sentences

Third Session

1. The **5Ws** and the **H**

Journalists are concerned with the **5Ws** and the **H** (who did what, when, where, why and how). Any good news article will provide answers to all of these. Practice finding the **5Ws** and the **H** in the transcripts of "news broadcast".(texts 27, 28)

2. The Inverted Pyramid style of writing

      (a) To illustrate the effect of this style choose a transcript of "news broadcast" and list the main facts in the order the reporter presents them. (Texts 33, 17)

      (b) Now rewrite the list in chronological order.

      (c) Compare the two lists. Discuss the differences.

3. Intros

The intro or the introduction is the first sentence of a news story. The basic requirements of the intro are that it should:

      (a) Grab the readers' attention

      (b) Concentrate on the main news point (the 'what')

      (c) Be short_ no longer than 25 words

      (d) Use active (Dog kills rat) not passive (Rat was killed)

(e) Be specific and clear

(f) Use simple language

Find utterances in the transcript, which have those features, listed above. (Texts 35, 27, 4)

Fourth Session

Group Work,

Discuss in group: (texts 36, 2)

(a) *Content* (the topical focuses of the genre)

(b) *Structure* (genre's global organizational patterns)

(c) *Language style* (linguistic features that covey the writer's stance towards the text content or audience)

Individual activity: (texts 7, 28)

Analyze the text individually and try to discover its prototypical features and the sorts of variation it is subject to.

Fifth Session

You are provided with a corpus embracing instances of "news broadcast" transcripts.

Political news	,	Sport news	,	Medicine news
(Text 36)		(Text 18)		(Text 12)

1. Try to look for features which are common between them.

2. Try to look for features which are specific to a certain type of "news broadcast".

Sixth Session

1. Re-order the jumbled transcripts. Try to follow the organizational patterns of "news"

2. Create a piece of "news broadcast" text in the target language by

examining carefully the specific features of similar texts in the "News broadcast". You can choose one of the recent newsworthy events which is interesting for you.

Appendix II

Activities used for non-genre group

- Pre-teaching of new vocabulary

- Extensive listening ⟶ questions about general context:

- Intensive listening ⟶ detailed questions;

- Examination of vocabulary and/or exponents of grammar;

- Use of play and repeat/play and predict/recall words.