

A Tweet Is a Genre?: Developing Students' Genre Awareness through the Genre-Translation Project

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How to cite this paper: Sejdiu, A. (2023). A Tweet Is a Genre?: Developing Students' Genre Awareness through the Genre-Translation Project. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 39-52.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2023.112004>

Received: January 11, 2023

Accepted: February 7, 2023

Published: February 10, 2023

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Abstract

Using ground theory research, this study examines the impact of genre awareness while teaching First-Year Writing (FYW) and its effect on students' attitudes towards a genre-translation project. Research findings reveal that in the beginning of the semester, the majority of the students were not able to identify many genres, except those that they were familiar with, e.g. scholarly articles, mainly because there was little discussion of genre and writing in high schools. However, after six weeks of intensive genre awareness teaching, students comprehended genres and successfully translated a text from one genre to another, having in mind audience, context, purpose, and so on. The necessity and usefulness of teaching genre awareness in FYW were predominantly valued among students as this study examined genre as a key factor for understanding and promoting genre awareness.

Keywords

Genre-Awareness, Genre-Translation Project, First-Year Writing (FYW)

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, a major paradigm shift has emerged in First-Year Writing (FYW): an introductory core course used in U.S. colleges. FYW is an important class for freshmen students as it introduces the students with a diverse range of writing that help them think critically when they write.

Numerous teachers are focusing on teaching rhetorical elements in these classes as students need to be more aware of reading and writing as communicative approaches. Similarly, scholars such as Street (1995), Johns (1997, 2002), and Hyland (2003, 2004, 2007) said that students need genre-based classrooms

in order to achieve social purposes in different contexts as genre awareness has gained prominence in writing instruction.

Swales (1990) defined genre as “a distinctive category of discourse of any type” (p. 33) that served as a “response by speakers or writers to the demands of a social context” (Johns, 2002: p. 3). Ever since Miller (1984) proposed that genres function as “typified rhetorical actions” (p. 163) and evolve based on writers’ and readers’ needs, scholars have considered both how genres help to create, reproduce, and revise the systems in which they are used (Bazerman, 2013: pp. 54-55) and how awareness of these functions can support writing development. Building on these scholars’ work, this study focuses on genre-based projects such as genre-translation to achieve better results of genre-awareness in FYW.

At the beginning of my FYW course at James Madison University (JMU), my students showed a general disdain for reading and writing analytically. I decided to find out why they do so by distributing a questionnaire in the first week of class in order to understand their feelings about their understanding of genre. In the fifteen-week writing course, these students (n = 22) engaged in carefully designed genre-based tasks, where they learned what genre stands for, how to differentiate genres, and more. Their main assignment was the genre-translation project. As we started reading and analyzing different articles, speeches, podcasts, on purpose, author, context, audience, and genre, students were able to observe and practice different rhetorical elements and depict genres. The results from the genre-translation project revealed notable parallels between their answers in the survey at the beginning of the semester and their final genre-translation project.

At the start of the semester, students demonstrated a kind of simple, native genre fluency, meaning they could identify and write familiar genres. However, they lacked a more sophisticated understanding of genre that would allow them to explain the concept of genre or identify and write unfamiliar genres. By completing all the minor and major assignments in class, by the end of the semester, these students developed their understanding from native fluency to a more explicit, complex form of genre awareness.

These assignments helped students understand that genre is linked to rhetorical situations, and that the choice of genre is one a writer should carefully decide using a variety of factors and develop their writing in general. These minor and major assignments also helped students understand that the choice of genre depends on the appropriate choice of audience, message (purpose), and context—all pivotal factors in rhetorical situations. Once students understood such factors, they were able to determine the rhetorical situation and how genre and audience connect within each situation; thus, leading to a successful genre translation project. Using Driscoll’s et al. (2019) terms “nuanced” and “simplistic” genre awareness, this article also describes students’ learning of genres throughout the semester while I show their reflection and the progress they made in completing the genre-translation project.

In conclusion, the purpose of this study is to show that students got familia-

rized with non-academic genres (e.g. emails, letters, podcasts, infographics) and academic genres (e.g. articles, editorials, research) while they were able to translate genres, e.g. from an op-ed to a poem. This study helps other scholars in the field who are interested to develop genre-awareness within their FYW by implementing a genre-translation project.

2. Literature Review

The mapping of the existing research on teaching genre awareness is comprehensive and offers a lay of the land as scholars write on genre-based FYW. The debate over the unambiguous teaching of genres has received extensive treatment whether we should or not explicitly teach genres; thus, genre development cannot be taught in isolation from its contexts. Respective scholars echoed that genre awareness is pivotal in FYW (e.g. Freedman & Medway, 1994a, 1994b; Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998; Bhatia, 1993; Cheng, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Flowerdew, 2002; Hyland, 2003, 2004, 2007; Hyon, 2001; Johns, 1997; Johns, 2002, 2008; Martin and Rose, 2008; Pasquarelli, 2006; Tardy, 2009; Moore, 2012; Schick and Miller, 2021). Thus, the concept of teaching genres allows writing teachers to look beyond the content, linguistic forms and processes of writing, so that they can assist students in their attempts to communicate with the reader.

Hyland (2007) defined genre as “how writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations, pointing to the fact that texts are most successful when they employ conventions that other members of the community find familiar and convincing.” In other words, he believes that a genre-based approach will bring research much closer to texts. Additionally, he says that genres are sometimes difficult to recognize as students should be able to draw on their repeated experiences with texts they read. That is why I use Driscoll’s et al (2019) table to show that students are not able to differentiate genres. Hyland (2007) highlighted that this happens because “writing is a practice based on expectations” (p. 544), since students didn’t mention genre at all in their prior writing, or shift their response to discuss the writing process they would use; thus, they’re unable to write in different genres (Driscoll et al., 2019). Finally, being able to realize that a genre is a recipe, a joke, or a love letter, a lesson plan, or a teacher’s feedback and, if needed, respond to it or even construct a similar one, will develop students’ genre awareness (Hyland, 2007; Yayli, 2011).

Besides genre-awareness, this class in the study promoted the following:

Rhetorical knowledge: Students reflected on whether and how their own target audience(s), purposes, and rhetorical situations shaped their translated text (Beaufort, 2007).

Reflective writing: Students cultivated and investigated their metacognitive awareness, engaged with their prior knowledge, and prepared to adapt writing knowledge to future writing contexts (Salomon & Perkins, 1989; Yancey, 1998; Allan & Driscoll, 2014).

In a discussion of genre, it's also pivotal to address the large matter of audience, as without having an intended audience in mind, students have trouble deciding the genre they want to write in. VanKooten's (2016) study showed how considerations of the audience shaped students' actions, thus, once students have audience knowledge and genre awareness, it would influence both the writing process and the final product (Ransdell and Levy, 1994). So, the goal of genre-based FYW classrooms may not be only the development of the awareness of genres, i.e., learning more genres, but also the development of the awareness of genre, i.e., the progress of being aware of rhetorical elements that motivate the known genres.

Developing students' genre-awareness through the genre-translation project isn't common in FYW as students are used to genre as a static notion of a classificatory system of forms rather than genre as a rhetorical means to achieve a purpose; however, it's an assignment that once students know how to do it, they will understand genres clearly. As Bazerman (2013) noted, acquiring facility with particular genres helps one to establish and develop a writerly identity and guides writers in making effective choices (p. 116). Because of that, students' genre awareness can be either nuanced or simplistic (Driscoll et al., 2019). The discussion of nuanced genre awareness and simplistic genre awareness was discussed by other respected scholars as well (e.g. Granville and Dison, 2005; Lindenman, 2015; Nowacek, 2011; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Tardy, 2009). They said that students see genre more as a product rather than as means of actually doing work. One of the reasons that this can happen is that there is a lack of sophisticated awareness of genre, for example seeing genre as a form rather than a function.

Even though there is popularity of genre awareness studies, research on how students analyze and produce genres in writing classrooms is still not depicted in the literature (see Cheng, 2006). Moreover, there's a lack of research done on how genre-based framework actually improves students' writing performances (see, Johns, 1995; Swales, Barks, Ostermann, & Simpson, 2001; Swales & Luebs, 2002; Yakhontova, 2001). Thus, this study examines whether genre-based FYW classrooms will enable students to produce better writing and achieve communication goals through genre-translation projects.

3. Study Design

This study aimed to document the development of rhetorical awareness for 22 freshmen students at James Madison University. Those 22 students were my students while I was teaching the class "Rhetorical Reading and Writing" at the James Madison University. All the students took part in this study voluntarily. This study was conducted by using a sequenced unit: the survey distributed in the first day of class, two minor assignments: reflection in the form of free writing and adapting students' writing process, and lastly the major assignment, the genre-translation project.

This study examines ways to enhance students' writing skills by teaching the genre translation project. The study was exempted by the Institutional Review Board at the university where I conducted the research under #22-2845. This research is guided by the following questions:

- 1) How can we improve students' understanding toward the use of genre awareness in learning to write?
- 2) To what extent can students "translate" a genre from one to another, with respect to audience awareness and higher-level order features after their exposure to genre awareness?

After data collection was completed, I used a grounded theory approach to code the data from the survey I distributed in the first class and analyze the data from the genre-translation project. Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, the ground theory approach is a useful research method as it aims to generate theories from data gathering and analyzing. It's defined the ground theory as the "researcher attempts to derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the view of participants in a study (p. 14); thus, as it looks inherently flexible—it is also a complex methodology (Chun Tie, Birks and Francis, 2019).

Moreover, as Sharan B. Merriam (2002) explained, in a grounded theory approach to qualitative research, "the investigator as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis assumes an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from the data. The end result of this type of qualitative study is a theory that emerges from, or is 'grounded' in, the data" (29). Thus, using such an approach is the only valid, unbiased way to determine truths about a study (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007).

Step 1.

The survey on the first day of class was pivotal for me to understand to what extent do students have genre awareness. Through the survey, I sought to find answers for the following questions.

Step 2.

By the end of week four, I assigned students two minor assignments. Assignment 1: Adapt your Writing Process (Table 1) is from the textbook *So What?* (Schick and Miller, 2021) as we used this textbook for our class. This assignment is supposed to make students think and discuss different genres and their audiences. For example, if you're writing a resume and a research paper, what's the difference in their purpose, audience, structure, and context? By doing this, students could differentiate between genres and other rhetorical elements.

Step 3. (Table 2)

Step 4.

The other assignment I used was in-class free writing. Freewriting helped students to put their ideas onto paper without thinking of later-order matters such as grammar.

Step 5.

Table 1. The survey questions.

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- 1) What are the genres you feel familiar to write in?
 - 2) Identify the following genres (I showed short paragraphs of a research paper, an op-ed, a poem, a fiction, a grocery list, a tweet, a newspaper article).
 - 3) What elements would you need to know of the aforementioned genres in order to replicate the genre successfully?
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Table 2. Adapt your writing process.

For this exercise, consider how you would customize your writing process for different situations. For example: a resume for your dream job, an in-class essay exam, a group research assignment, and a science lab report. How would these situations differentiate your writing? Compare your answers with your classmates.

Lastly, the main project, the genre-translation project, asked students to choose a genre, either they're familiar with or not, that they find interesting because of the content or its genre. The following prompt was given to the students:

- If you are to communicate the same ideas in the text in a different genre, what genre would you choose? You can think about your “translation” purpose by first choosing a new audience that would benefit from learning about the ideas of the original text. Then, choose a genre that can best reach this new audience.

After students “translated” the genre, I asked them to write a reflective argumentative paper. This paper is for students to make a case for how their translation reaches their intended audience effectively. I offered the following prompts:

- Why did you choose the new genre: who is your target audience and how they would benefit from it?
- What opportunities did this genre provide you with? How did you capitalize on these?

To begin the inductive process of analyzing, I read and reread my students' answers in the beginning of the semester—I tried to find out what didn't work for them until now that they don't have genre awareness. I supplemented information from their discussions in class when relevant. For example, in the second week of teaching genre I was writing on the whiteboard different types of genre, and I wrote a tweet—“a tweet?”, a confused student asked. Finally, I analyzed my students' final project—genre translation project. The results will be discussed in the next section.

4. Results and Discussion: The Genre-Translation Project and the On-Going Writing Experience

The concept of genre is pivotal in academic writing. Students write every day—text messages to friends, comments on social media congratulating someone on their new position, tweets on Twitter, grocery list, sending emails, literature reviews for their classes, thesis for their undergraduate program, and so on. Yet, students

face difficulties when they're asked what a specific genre a text is.

4.1. Question 1: How Can We Improve Students' Understanding toward the Use of Genre Awareness in Learning to Write?

This section began with students' opening survey responses, as students indicated that they were familiar with genres such as "Fiction", "Non-fiction", "Academic". These are genres, and some of them even fall under the same genre family, suggesting that students have a limited concept of genre as students indicated that they're the only genres they have written in while in high school. However, two of my students said "horror movie", "thriller movie", as part of writing genres. I assumed that their answers were confused by movie genres, i.e., they don't have that much experience in writing as both horror and thriller are genres of novels. The next question was to identify genres that I listed in the survey. I included many genres from love letters, Facebook statuses, tweets, to narratives, literature reviews, op-ed articles. I distributed this survey in class as I wanted to see if they have any questions. It was pretty simple for my students to know what a research paper looks like and identify it—the same with fiction or nonfiction. However, it was more difficult for them to first understand that a status or a tweet is a genre. These answers suggest that students have limited concepts of genre.

The third question asked them about the elements they need to know in order to find out the genre they're trying to write. Students had a natural understanding of the elements of a resume or a love letter; however, they needed more time to process the difference between an op-ed and a research paper. This suggests that students struggle on identifying genres to a nuance with which they understand genre as tied to specific intended audience, context, purpose, and their own deep understanding of genre.

Driscoll et al. (2019) used the term "nuanced genre awareness" when students "have an understanding of how genre's conventions help to achieve the texts' purpose and meet audience expectation" (p. 80), and simplistic genre awareness "as a focus of conventions (e.g., the five-paragraph essay)" (p. 80). The student's answer suggests that students take FYW with the idea that they will keep writing five-paragraph essays, focus on lower-order matters such as structure and grammar rather than higher-order matters such as audience, context, and genre.

Minor project: "Adapt Your Writing"

Because of such answers, I assigned an in-class minor assignment: Adapt Your Writing. Before doing so, I wanted to clarify what genres are, so as a class we had a discussion to come up with a definition that we can easily understand. "It's very hard to pin genre down for a definition," said William. "Okay, let's break it down, shall we?". "Is genre a written text?". Some of them nodded with confusion while some said no. "So, genre is a form of writing, right? Yet, it's not a written text itself," I explained. "Who determines genre?" and "How do we know that that form of writing is genre?", I continued talking as I was making a bullet point list on the whiteboard. "Ah-ha," they nodded happily. "It's the audience,"

they said. For my students, it was difficult to come up with a genre definition as they didn't practice writing across different genres before. We came up with a definition to remember throughout these six weeks until their genre translation project was due: Genre is a form of writing determined by the audience's needs. In addition, *Nesi and Gardner (2012)* said that genres are abstractions—so they are not the written texts themselves, but conventional ways of doing this, realized through the written texts (p. 24). For example, we write an email, usually in a formal format, to deliver information in a way that it helps the audience (the person we're sending the email to) why we wrote the email. Thus, as a class, we understood that for us to know what genre to use, we first need to establish what information is important to our audience.

After we had a clear understanding of the genre, we continued with the adaptation of your writing assignment. I asked students to customize their writing for different situations. As some students were contrasting the structures of a resume with an in-class essay exam, or a group research project with a science lab report, I asked students different questions, such as: "How much time do you need to research before writing any of the genres you're contrasting?". This assignment together with the survey answers my first research question as students have a simplistic understanding of genres. However, the teacher should prompt them with activities, such as adapting your writing, in order for them to have a nuanced understanding of genres.

Minor project: "Free Writing"

Another minor assignment that helped students understand genre is free writing. I used freewriting considerably at the beginning of the semester as it was a tool for students to put their ideas on their final project in the paper, without thinking of lower-order matters. This assignment asked students to freely write in a form of writing that they are good at. For example, some of them wrote short stories, emails, or even texting. After 10 minutes, they got together with a partner to discuss the content, its organization, its language, and so on. This activity would help students in their writing process and genre awareness as they would determine the purpose, audience, and context of that specific text. Such activity showed that a genre-based approach enabled learners to better texture their writing and to achieve communicative goals.

4.2. Question 2: To What Extent Can Students "Translate" a Genre from One to Another, with Respect to Audience Awareness and Higher-Order Features after Their Exposure to Genre Awareness?

After three weeks of classes discussing, reading, analyzing, and completing assignments on genre awareness, students had to start working on their major assignment: the genre-translation project. First of all, students had to choose a source genre they wanted to examine and then translate. Since we've been discussing both non-academic genres as emails, letters, podcasts, infographics, and academic genres as articles, research articles, or scientific papers, I asked stu-

dents to choose a source genre that they believe can be translated with the same meaning to another genre.

The findings (see **Table 3**) show that the majority of the students ($n = 18$) chose a source genre, i.e. research paper, poem, book chapter, essay, or a narrative. I was able to determine if that genre was familiar to them based on the survey they did in the beginning of the semester. I coded each students' data individually, meaning that their answers from the survey are now connected to their chosen source genre and the genre they're translating it into.

This shows that in the beginning of the semester, students still had "simplistic genre awareness" (Driscoll et al.'s term) and used genres that can also fall under one genre family. However, some students ($n = 4$) choose a genre they were not familiar with, e.g. op-ed article, motivational speech, and podcast. These four students didn't identify those genres in the beginning of the semester in the survey. This suggests that students went from a natural, simplistic understanding of genre to a nuanced genre-awareness within three weeks of classes, meaning that they only needed to be prompted with minor assignments to develop their genre-awareness. This is not to say that only these four students did so, as the other students ($n = 18$) had reasons why they chose a genre they were familiar with since the beginning of the semester.

The results show that four students challenged their perception of genre since the beginning of the semester. Consequently, they had to translate those genres into other ones, while thinking of another intended audience, purpose, and context (see **Table 4**).

The findings of **Table 2** show that students developed a more nuanced understanding of genres as they "translated" into less familiar source genres before, for example from a scholarly article into a poem, from a speech into an infographic, from a book chapter into a poem, from a song to a persuasive article, and so on. These results suggest that within four weeks students made progress from novice writers into experts as they included key elements like audience awareness and correlated improvement in writing performance across six weeks. Yet, there

Table 3. Results of genre-translation and argumentative comments (source genre).

	Source Genre	Students	Students' reflections on their decision of the genre
"Simplistic genre awareness" (Driscoll et al., 2019 term)	Research Paper	10	"The poem itself showed the world context and personal experience of an African American female's life. Creating a translation for this poem was more than just an education lesson, it was an impactful experience." "I decided to translate a podcast into an article as I got to use my own voice and perspectives more"
	Poem	2	
	Book chapter	2	
	Essay	2	
	Narrative	2	
"Nuanced genre awareness" (Driscoll et al., 2019 term)	Op-ed article	1	
	Motivational Speech (2)	2	
	Podcast (1)	1	
Total	22 students		

Table 4. Results of the genre-translation project and argumentative comments (translated genre).

	Translated Genre	Students	Students' reflections on their decision of the genre
“Simplistic genre awareness” (Driscoll et al., 2019 term)	Research Paper	4	“My main reason for translating an informative article to another article, by changing the audience, was that it now applies to most teenagers rather than using academic terms”.
	Poem	2	“In my translation, I reworked the rhetorical appeals, vocabulary tone, sentence structure, and syntax, to effectively reach my audience”
“Nuanced genre awareness” (Driscoll et al., 2019 term)	Podcast	3	“This infographic was extremely helpful to students and provided all the criteria to understand a famous speech that would have taken several minutes to read, and now it takes 2 minutes to summarize it”
	Narrative	1	“I use pathos as a way to derive emotions while writing the poem”
	Motivational Speech	2	“Choosing to turn it into a persuasive piece allowed me to really push my point to its extent. It gave me the opportunity to expand the original text a bit and dive deeper into how incredible the album is, which also is more beneficial to my audience, because it gives them a chance to be more persuaded than if they just read the review”.
	Infographic	4	
	Instagram Carousels	2	
	Persuasive article	1	
	Speech	1	
Total	22 students		

were four students that decided to still translate from a “simplistic genre” to another “simplistic genre”. Four of the ten students who had chosen to translate a research paper as a source genre to another genre decided to still translate into a research paper. However, they changed the audience in the translated genre. One of the students mentioned that once he read a research paper that he barely understood as the language was very academic. When his professor explained it, it was way easier to understand, but he didn't have the vocabulary to understand the research article. Hence, he decided to translate in the same genre, but using plain English so the audience is not only people in the academia but also students like himself.

What I found very compelling was the ability to translate from a poem into a narrative in the form of an autoethnography. This student was unfamiliar with the genre of narratives in the survey. She decided to translate the poem “To Sleep” from John Keats. She also managed to change the title into “Slipping Away”. Keats' poem along the lines:

“O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
Shutting, with careful fingers and benign,
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,
Enshaded in forgetful divine.”

She wanted to translate this poem because the poem was written a long time ago and Keats doesn't use standard English; hence, it's harder for people to understand it. Moreover, she changes the context, from Keats' suffering from insomnia into a teenager who is struggling in their freshmen year. She translates:

After finishing up my face routine and brushing my teeth, I walk quietly back to my room. The click of the light switch as I shut off the light feels almost synchronized with my mind: the moment darkness falls over the world, my mind becomes hostile.

This example suggested that the way that knowledge about writing is tied to genre knowledge. What I'm trying to convey is that when the students produce good writing after learning about genres, there is a higher chance that they have "nuanced" genre awareness. Driscoll et al. (2019) also said that for students to have genre awareness they should have writing knowledge itself.

Minor project: "Reflective Argumentative Paper"

After their genre-translation project, students had to write a reflective argumentative paper. The comments are shown in both **Table 3** and **Table 4** as they discuss their decision to translate from one genre to another. In the same vein, when students explained the audience, context, purpose, and genre, I noticed that the majority of the students responded that before this they never thought of the audience. In my experience, this can be because a lot of students think of their teacher as their main audience. However, this project enabled them to think outside of the box and customize their text to a specific audience. Their reflections suggest that students had to first research the audience and purpose of the original text in order to "translate" the same purpose with a different audience to another genre.

This study shows that a FYW focused on genre awareness and rhetorical elements helped students develop their genre awareness. As students completed minor assignments such as adapting their writing, freewriting, defining genre, and lastly translating another genre to another, they developed their understanding of genre from a natural understanding to a nuanced understanding of genres, which answers my second research question.

5. Conclusion

The problem posed at the beginning of this study was how can teachers of FYW apply a genre-based classroom in order to develop students' genre awareness? To answer this question, I assigned a genre-translation project together with other minor assignments such as adapting writing, free writing, in order to develop students' natural understanding of genres.

By using the grounded theory approach to see the development of students' awareness in genre, I can conclude that this study was successful. As the grounded theory is a more flexible methodology it allowed me to add assignments throughout the semester in order to better understand if my students were developing the genre-awareness.

The main findings of this study show that students have a natural understanding of genres in the beginning of the semester, mainly the ones that they already were familiar with, such as a five-paragraph essay or research article; however, they needed to be prompted with other discussions or assignments such as freewriting and adapt your writing in order to develop a more sophisticated concept of genre which will help them understand and differentiate non-academic genres such as a grocery list, a tweet, an op-ed, and so on. The genre-translation project proved to be an intervention for students to under-

stand better how genres work and how we can “translate” them, having in mind audience, purpose, and context.

While I am not claiming that the genre awareness students gained from this FYW class were necessarily different from what they might have learned in another FYW class, the profound shifts in genre awareness that students experienced in this class were striking.

In conclusion, by teaching a genre-based classroom, students get to know in-depth rhetorical elements such as genre and audience. On the other hand, by using the genre-translation project students got to develop their natural understanding of genres to a nuanced understanding. Such kinds of studies may contribute to the deepening understanding of how to teach a genre-based classroom and what assignments, minor or major, to use in order to improve students’ long-term genre-awareness.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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