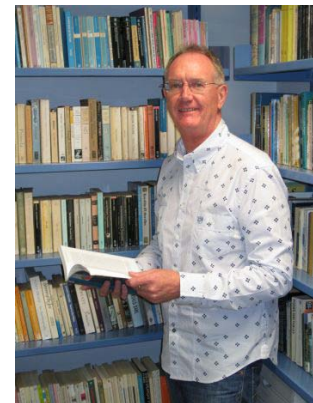




## A Genre Approach to Understanding Empirically Based Thesis Writing

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### Introduction

Writing an empirically based thesis or dissertation for the first time, be it at honours, masters or doctoral level, requires a clear understanding of what is expected or required for each of its part-genres (sections or chapters). Empirical and anecdotal evidence reveal, however, that students writing their first thesis or dissertation often have an unclear understanding of the purpose(s) or function(s) of each part-genre. Consequently, this can often mean that they are also unclear about (1) what content should or should not be presented, (2) how the content can be most effectively organized so that maximum rhetorical effect is achieved, (3) which linguistic features typically characterise how claims and appropriate interpretations are made, and (4) disciplinary-specific presentational conventions. The way in which these issues are addressed can vary from supervisor to supervisor, discipline to discipline, and institution to institution. One approach that has proven to be effective in one New Zealand university is the genre approach. This article describes the approach and explains how it can be employed by both students and their supervisors in any discipline area. For illustrative purposes, the article focuses on how the approach has been used in teaching students how to write the discussion of results section of an empirically based thesis or dissertation. The approach can be applied equally well to multi-study theses in any discipline where the research being reported was empirically based.

### The Need for the Practice

Self-report comments by both L1 (native speakers/writers) and L2 (non-native speakers/writers) students and their thesis supervisors in several empirical studies (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995, 1997; Dong, 1998; Parry, 1998) reveal the range of discourse issues students may encounter when writing the various parts of a thesis. In each of the studies, students report that they are

sometimes unclear about what content should be included or not included in a particular chapter and whether or not there can be an overlap in content between two or more chapters (e.g. introduction chapter and literature review chapter or discussion of results chapter and conclusion chapter). When it comes to organizing the content, supervisors in these studies often explain that their students have difficulty developing their ideas and arguments coherently because propositions are not appropriately sequenced and because transitions between propositions and topics are not provided. They also report that students sometimes overstate or understate the claims and conclusions they are making. A limited linguistic repertoire may to some extent account for this practice. Supervisors in these reports also explain that they have to direct their students' attention to the need to use modal verbs and hedging verbs. Students interviewed in these surveys frequently report that they are unsure about some of the presentational conventions of their discipline.

To some, it may be a little surprising that students are unclear about their supervisors' or institutions' expectations. However, it should not be so surprising because students writing their first thesis or dissertation are writing in a completely new genre. Even though they may have done research methods courses, these courses may not have focused to any extent the writing up of various parts of a thesis. Practitioner advice in the form of handbooks and guides on writing a thesis often do not provide sufficiently detailed accounts and illustrations of the content, structure, linguistic and presentational characteristics of the separate part-genres of a thesis (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Paltridge, 2002). When reading for their literature reviews, students often focus more on the findings and methodological issues than on the discourse features of journal articles and other theses. They also report in the literature that their supervisors, while being very able researchers and publishers, often have difficulty transferring their tacit knowledge to explicit articulations of what is expected and of how to achieve it (Cooley & Lewkowitz, 1997; Parry, 1998). How supervisors, departments/schools and institutions address these needs is an area of practice that has not been covered very satisfactorily in the literature. The aim of this article, therefore, is to address this need by suggesting how one approach – the genre approach – has been successfully used in one New Zealand university.

## The Genre Approach

The genre approach provides an effective means of addressing the issues that students encounter as they approach the task of writing up their theses or dissertations. A claim such as this begs the question, first of all, of what is meant by the term 'genre'. As Swales (2004) and Devitt (2004) explain, a genre is a text that has particular and distinctive communicative functions, distinctive and recognisable patterns and norms of organization and structure that result in a conformity of practice by its users. This means, therefore, that each part-genre (section or chapter) of the whole genre (thesis) will be recognisable by its particular functions, content and organisation. Discourse analyses, reported in the literature, of discipline-specific journal articles and thesis/dissertation part-genres reveal the interrelationship between function, content and structure. Kwan (2006), for example, explains that the crucial starting point for a move analysis (an analysis of the content units) is to consider the purposes (or functions) of the target genre (chapter or section) that regulate its propositional content, schematic pattern or organisational structure, and choice of register. This means students need to understand, first, the purpose(s) or function(s) of each part-genre and, second, that content and structure are functionally related. Discourse analyses further reveal that content units are referred to as discourse moves and that these moves are organised or staged through the use of various sub-moves (strategies or steps). Empirical evidence reveals that the moves and sub-moves employed within the various thematic or topic units of a part-genre should be seen as options rather than as requirements and that there may be a

considerable recycling of moves and sub-moves within thematic or topic units. Illustrations of this theoretical overview will be presented in the next section of this article.

It is important to point out that the instructional use of insights gained from analysing samples of a genre have been both applauded and criticized. Understanding what the criticisms are enables one to avoid them. The advantages of the genre approach are several: it focuses on the very issues identified by supervisors and students as potentially problematic; it can provide explicit understanding of how target texts are structured and why they are written the way they are (purpose & function); it can demystify the requirements and expectations and empower students to approach the writing of a thesis or dissertation with ease and confidence. The main criticism of the approach has been that writers' self-expression and creativity can be inhibited if they feel they must conform to a prescriptive approach. While it is agreed that there are dangers in static decontextualization pedagogy, that is, an instructional approach that considers discourse outside its wider context, there is nothing intrinsically prescriptive about a genre approach that acknowledges options and possibilities as well as variation across and within disciplines. Some may say that there is a certain constraining power in the use of this approach but it is important to note that it does not dictate. As Swales (2004) points out, a sufficient similarity in characteristics across texts within a given genre is what is important in the classification. Variety in the use of move and sub-moves options has been clearly illustrated in a range of analytical reports, e.g. thesis abstracts (Hyland, 2000) and thesis introductions (Samraj, 2008). Instructors have sometimes questioned the extent to which an analysis of patterns and norms in one discipline area can be transferred to that of another. One study (Cheng, 2007) has demonstrated how generic discourse features and skills can be effectively transferred and recontextualized in another disciplinary context. Against this background, the following section details an approach that has been used successfully at one New Zealand university for more than eight years.

## Applying the Genre Approach

The university provides its thesis-writing students across the faculties/disciplines with a generic introduction to the part-genres of theses or dissertations reporting on empirical research. The programme comprises a series of interactive seminars/workshops on each part-genre. This article describes one of these – the discussion of results. The three-hour session is divided into the following sections: the approach taken (the genre approach); purpose(s) and function(s); content and structure; key linguistic characteristics; frequently asked questions; further activities and reading.

### 1. The approach

The genre approach and reasons for its use are explained to the students. By the time they come to this chapter in the seminar/workshop series, they only need to be reminded of the key points made in the earlier sessions on the other part-genres.

### 2. Purpose(s) and function(s)

This section includes the following stages:

- Participants discuss in pairs what they understand to be the purpose(s) and function(s) of the discussion of results chapter
- A plenary reporting back on the key ideas
- A presentation of the following table. Attention is drawn to the importance of functions 4 and 5.

#### Functions of a thesis discussion of results chapter

1. An overview of the aims of the research that refers to the research questions or hypotheses
2. A summary of the theoretical and research contexts of the study
3. A summary of the methodological approach for investigating the research questions or hypotheses
4. A discussion of the contribution you believe your results or findings have made to the research questions or hypotheses and therefore to existing theory, research and practice (i.e. their importance and significance)
5. This discussion will often include an interpretation of your results, a comparison with other research, an explanation of why the results occurred as they did, and an evaluation of their contribution to the field of knowledge

### 3. Content and Structure

This section includes the following stages:

- The presenter explains that the discourse analyses of discussion of results chapters in the literature have identified a series of typical moves (content units) and sub-moves used to create each main move.
- These are then presented in a handout and discussed so that students understand how the sub-moves relate to the main moves. It is emphasised that these are options and that a recycling of moves and sub-moves is characteristic of the part-genre.

#### *Move and sub-move options*

Moves	Sub-moves
1. Provide background information	a. restatement of aims, research questions, hypotheses b. restatement of key published research c. restatement of research/methodological approach
2. Present a statement of result (SOR)	a. restatement of a key result b. expanded statement about a key result
3. Evaluate/comment on results or findings a. restatement of aims, research questions, hypotheses	a. explanation of result – suggest reasons for result b. (un)expected result – comment on whether it was an expected or unexpected result c. reference to previous research – compare result with previously published research d. exemplification – provide examples of result e. deduction or claim – make a more general claim arising from the result, e.g., drawing a conclusion or stating a hypothesis f. support from previous research – quote previous research to support the claim being made g. recommendation – make suggestion for future research h. justification for further research – explain why further research is recommended

- The participants are then provided with the text below for illustrative purposes. It is explained that the sample material comes from an Applied Linguistics thesis on the willingness to communicate of second language learners in the language learning classroom. This particular thesis was chosen because it is an excellent example of an empirically based thesis. It won a special award from the Applied Linguistics community. It is also explained that the content is quite accessible for those unfamiliar with the topic or the discipline area. Participants will also be reminded that the discourse analytical skills applied in the analysis of the move structure of the text can be transferred to texts in any other discipline area so that similarities and differences in what typically characterises the writing of such texts can be identified.
- The following text is given to the participants as a handout but the moves structure presented here is not included. The presenter takes the group through the first 2–3 paragraphs and asks them which moves and sub-moves have been used by the writer.

*Text of first research question discussion*

<p>1. The first research question investigated the relationship between self-report WTC and WTC behavior in class. 2. This question relates to the concept of WTC as a trait variable or a state variable.</p>	<p>Move 1 (background)</p>
<p>3. Correlation analysis,8 indicated that self-report WTC strongly predicted WTC behavior in group work, while self-report WTC negatively predicted WTC in the whole class and pair work. 4. The strong positive relationship between self-report WTC and WTC group work demonstrated that participants' self-report WTC was consistent with their WTC behavior in group work. 5. However, participants' WTC behavior in the whole class and in pair work contradicted their WTC reported in the questionnaire.</p>	<p>Move 2a (SOR) Move 2b (Expansion)  Move 2a (SOR) Move 2b (Expansion)</p>
<p>6. Results from an examination of the relationship between self-report WTC and WTC behavior in three classroom contexts on an individual basis, were found to be mixed (see Table 4.1). 7. For half of the class (Sherry, Jerry, Ray and Cathy), self-report WTC was consistent with actual WTC behavior in class, whereas for the other half (Erica, Sophie, Allan and John), self-report WTC contradicted classroom WTC behavior.</p>	<p>Move 3d (Illustration) Move 3a (Explanation)</p>
<p>8. It is interesting to note that Erica, who reported high WTC in the questionnaire, appeared to demonstrate low WTC across the three class situations, as well as appearing to lack interest in class. 9. She was observed to be rather quiet and worked on the tasks by herself most of the time. 10. Sometimes the teacher had to call her to participate in classroom activities or call on her to answer questions. 11. In the interview, she attributed her extremely low participation across all contexts to the classmates whom she seemed to be unfamiliar with, and some of whom, to her, seemed to have 'snatched'</p>	<p>Move 3d (illustration)</p>

<p>opportunities for communication. 12. For this learner, WTC did indeed appear to be influenced by lack of familiarity with interlocutors and lack of appropriate opportunities to participate in class.</p>	<p>Move 3a (explanation) &amp; Move 3c (previous research)</p>
<p>13. Likewise, Allan and John, who reported high WTC, seemed to be relatively quiet in the classroom. 14. Both demonstrated low willingness to communicate, particularly in the whole class situations. 15. This may have been due to an over-optimistic self-reporting of their WTC, suggesting, perhaps, that their self-reported WTC was in effect paying 'lip service' to the survey, without actually having made any commitment to participate actively (Dörnyei &amp; Kormos 2000: 290). 16. In other words, they may have been concerned about presenting themselves favorably, thus causing them to respond inaccurately. 17. Another possible interpretation could be that they had high trait WTC, but they may have needed extra encouragement from the teacher, and more cooperation from their peer classmates, for them to participate more. 18. Allan actually expressed concern in the interview that there were not many chances to talk when the teacher talked most of the time in the whole class situation.</p>	<p>Move 3a (explanation)</p> <p>Move 3d (illustration)</p> <p>Move 3e (claim)</p> <p>Move 3c (previous research)</p>
<p>19. Sophie, who belonged to the group of low WTC in self-report, on the other hand, showed very high WTC in the whole class and was an equally active participant in pair and group work. 20. Her self-report WTC seemed to contradict her claim of herself being generally an extroverted and talkative person, a personality trait which was manifested in her actual behavior in class.</p>	<p>Move 3e (claim)</p> <p>Move 3f (previous research)</p>
<p>21. The findings above seemed to reveal the dual characteristics of WTC proposed in previous studies: the trait-like WTC and the situation-based WTC. 22. MacIntyre et al.'s (1998: 546) claim that WTC in L2 should not be limited to a trait-like variable but a 'situational variable with both transient and enduring influences' appeared to be supported by the findings of this study.</p>	<p>Move 3e (claim)</p> <p>Move 3b (unexpected)</p>
<p>23. It is possible, however, that learners' WTC behavior in the class context was influenced by both trait-level WTC and state-level WTC. 24. As MacIntyre et al. (1999) have pointed out, trait WTC may bring an individual into situations in which communication was likely, but once in a particular situation, state WTC could influence whether communication would take place. 25. MacIntyre and his colleagues argued that state WTC predicted and affected the decision to initiate communication within a particular situation, which may explain the discrepancy between self-report WTC and WTC class behavior among half of the participants in the present study. 26. Although their trait-level WTC determined their general tendency in communication,</p>	<p>Move 3c (previous research)</p> <p>Move 3a (explanation)</p>

state-level WTC appeared to have a particularly strong impact on the participants' communication behavior in particular class contexts. 27. Their state-level WTC seemed to be influenced by a variety of factors, which will be discussed in Section 5.5.

Move 3b (expected) & 3c  
(previous research)

28. The findings of the relationship between self-report WTC and WTC behavior in class in this study do not appear to fully support those of Chan and McCroskey (1987), in which observational data indicated that fewer of the students who had low scores on the WTC scale participated in class, than those who scored high on the scale. 29. In Chan and McCroskey's study, more of the total participation in class came from students with high scores than from students with low scores. 30. They therefore concluded that class participation may be in large measure a function of an individual's orientation toward communication (trait WTC), rather than a situation-specific response (state WTC). 31. The results of the current study do not support this conclusion. 32. A possible explanation is that Chan and McCroskey considered students' participation in class where L1 instead of L2 was used. 33. This would make the findings of the present study not comparable with those of Chan and McCroskey's, since WTC in L2 was unlikely to be 'a simple manifestation of WTC in the L1' (MacIntyre et al. 1998: 546). 34. It was also possible that not all learners with high WTC in the present study exhibited high participation. 35. Similar results to those of Chan and McCroskey may have been found had the sample size been larger.

Move 3b (expected) & 3c  
(previous research)

36. The findings of the present study do, however, support Weaver's (2004) conclusion that students' WTC within the EFL classroom varied significantly across different speaking situations and tasks.

37. The findings also lend support to MacIntyre et al.'s (2001a: 377) acknowledgement of the weakness of the self-report questionnaire as a reliable method for examining state WTC, because 'thinking about communicating in the L2 is different from actually doing it'. 38. While their study failed to find any evidence for the existence of state WTC by using the single method of a self-report survey, in the present study, state WTC was identified by observation of WTC in three classroom contexts. 39. On this basis, structured observation is proposed as a more suitable method for the examination of state WTC, a variable difficult to identify by using a single self-report technique.

- Once the text has been analysed, the move patterning is discussed. The recycling of moves and the sequencing of moves are noted. The effectiveness of the way in which the student has organised her content is then discussed.
- Other sample texts can then be analysed. Section 6 below refers to some possibilities.

#### 4. Key linguistic characteristics

The following stages can be employed when discussing the linguistic characteristics that students should examine:

- For illustrative purposes, the following text can be used to draw their attention to the use of hedging (reducing the degree of assertiveness) when making claims and offering explanations about certain findings.
- The presenter defines hedging verbs (seems; appears) and modal verbs (may) and illustrates their use in the first paragraph of the text. These have been italicised in the following text but should not be italicised in the handout given to the participants. It is also pointed out that adjectives such as 'possible' might also be used for hedging purposes (e.g., It is possible that...).

1. Whether L1 or L2 was used as the medium of communication also appeared to exert an influence on learners' WTC. 2. As MacIntyre et al. (1998: 546) have suggested, the differences between L1 and L2 WTC may be due to 'the uncertainty inherent in L2 use', and the level of linguistic competency can be one differentiating factor existing in L1 and L2 WTC. 3. In this study, Jerry noted that a lack of linguistic competence in L2 inhibited communication, but when L1 was used, such a problem was not present. 4. Cathy also considered a lack of lexical resources in L2 as a factor affecting her perceived competence, which in turn influenced willingness to communicate at times. 5. This seems to support House's (2004) claim that lack of actual linguistic competence in L2 can prevent communication.

6. Differences in L1 and L2 WTC were also detected in task engagement in pair work. 7. Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) found that learners' relationships with their interlocutor had a considerable impact on the extent of their engagement in the task in L1, but this relationship failed to emerge in an L2 task. 8. They suggested that when L2 was used as the medium of communication, the challenge of trying to express one's thoughts using a limited linguistic code in addition to decoding the interlocutor's utterances, created an emotional state different from the communication mode in L1, which may 'alter one's perceptions of the constraints of the interaction' (ibid. 293). 9. Differences in WTC in pair work in both L1 and L2 were, however, beyond the scope of this study and, as a consequence, were not examined. 10. It appears to be another area for further research.

- Other samples can then be analysed by the participants – these can be from any discipline.

#### 5. Frequently asked questions

The following frequently asked questions are then discussed. Often, they have been addressed during the course of the seminar/workshop but it is useful to return to them towards the end of the session.

1. Can I introduce any new literature in the discussion of results section?
2. How much of the literature review do I need to refer to when comparing one of my results with those of a study referred to in the literature review?
3. To what extent do the ideas presented in the discussion chapter have to be based on the literature presented in the literature review?

## 6. Further activities and reading

It is useful to have samples and/or recommendations of other textual material for participants to use in a classroom context or in their own time. Some students may also be interested in the literature informing the content presented in the seminar/workshop. Examples of further activities and reading can be found in the recently published book: Bitchener, J. (2010). *Writing an Applied Linguistics thesis or dissertation: A guide to presenting empirical research*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

## Evidence

The approach described here is *one* approach. It has proved effective for those who have been introduced to it, as several different types of evidence reveal. First, the approach has been used with postgraduate students at AUT University (Auckland), Michigan State University (USA), Brock University (Canada), Edith Cowan University, ANU and University of Canberra (Australia), and Nanyang University (Singapore). Evaluative feedback (using a 7-point Likert scale to determine level of perceived usefulness from the programme employing the approach) from a total of 840 participants over a seven-year period reveal an extremely high level of satisfaction: 92% rated it at level 7 (extremely useful), 6% at level 6 (very useful), and 2% at level 5 (useful). In the evaluations, qualitative assessments were also sought. Four from a recent seminar follow:

- *Course provided a solid foundation structure for both masters and doctoral style thesis construction and useful for all disciplines*
- *Handouts and format of the session was brilliant – feel very confident to approach my thesis now – thanks John!*
- *After attending John's workshops, I took on board his comments, information provided and would like to advise that I got an 'A'*
- *The veil has now lifted!*

Considering empirical evidence published in double-blind, peer-reviewed journal articles, Cheng (2007) measured by means of a pre-test and post-test design the extent to which Chinese students were able to apply the genre approach taught in one discipline to that in another and found a very high level of success over time. She found that introduction chapters, written by Chinese-speaking students in electrical engineering, incorporated the generic move and rhetorical patterns taught with reference to such diverse genres as newspaper letters, job application letters, manuscript submission letters, and most significantly in terms of academic genres, the generic features of method, discussion and conclusion sections of research articles. Based on her analysis, she argues that the significance of genre-based learning can be captured more fully through observing how learners *recontextualize their genre awareness* in their writing.

My own empirical research with Banda and Turner also attests to the need for and the effectiveness of the approach. In Bitchener and Banda (2007), we reported on the level and depth of knowledge that

thesis writers of a literature review have of the diverse functions of this particular part-genre of the thesis. We were interested in understanding this because of the relationship between understanding what the functions of a part-genre are and what discourse moves and strategy options might be appropriate. If students have an unclear or incomplete understanding of the functions of a part-genre like the literature review, they are also likely to have an incomplete understanding of the discourse moves and strategies available to them. From 37 participants in the study, it was clear that they had a very incomplete understanding of the main functions of the thesis literature review: while 92% revealed an understanding of the need to review the published literature, only 30% explained that a critical assessment of the literature is important, and only 22% referred to the role of the literature review in informing the design and direction of a new project. Such gaps in knowledge would inevitably result in an equally impoverished understanding of the discourse moves and strategies available for writing a thesis literature review.

This evidence, together with anecdotal reports from thesis supervisors that students typically fail to understand all the types of content that should be presented in the different part-genres of a thesis, led us to investigate the effectiveness of a teaching approach that focussed on the functions and discourse moves/strategies of thesis part-genres. The first study, Turner and Bitchener (2009), measured the effectiveness of a teaching approach that included the genre approach to the writing of literature reviews. The study included a pre-test, treatment (instruction using the genre approach), and post-test design. The delayed post-test revealed that all participants successfully benefitted from the instructional approach in aspects that were targeted: introductions (100%), global organization of discourse moves/strategies (86%), propositional sequencing or rhetorical organization of propositions/statements reflecting move/strategy structure (79%), logical juxtaposition of proposition/statement within individual moves/strategies (93.8%) and overall cohesion of textual argument (91.4%). In a more extensive follow-up study (Bitchener and Turner, in press) of 52 participants across two university populations in New Zealand and the US, we found that across the seven areas targeted by the instructional approach (the genre focus as well as other argument-creating strategies) only two participants failed to meet our 'achieved' threshold, namely, more than a two-thirds accuracy rate in successfully applying the targeted skills. In appropriately using the discourse strategies taught, these students appeared to be a little handicapped by difficulties in understanding the text material they were asked to use and it is questionable whether they should have been attempting thesis research and writing at that time. For all other participants, the ability to make effective use of the discourse move/strategy content they were taught was evident in the immediate post-test results where 26/52 participants revealed an improvement in their writing as a result of employing the move/strategy approach. We noted that 24/52 revealed no change (because they had already demonstrated their ability to meet the assessment criteria in the pre-test), and that only 2/52 revealed a regression, that is, a failure to benefit from the instruction provided. In the delayed post-test, the retention level of 96% was considered high. Although this evidence refers to evaluations of the effectiveness of the genre approach to one part-genre only, the literature review, we see no reason for it not to be equally effective when applied to other thesis part-genres.

## Conclusion

The approach outlined in this article can easily be adapted if a less presenter-centred style is preferred and time permits a deductive approach. Group presentations can be in the form of seminars, workshops and classroom-based lessons. Illustrative textual material can be drawn from any discipline. Greatest value for students tends to result if they are required to analyse textual material as soon as sample analyses have been discussed. Finally, it needs to be remembered that the genre approach presented in this article draws on the research findings of numerous journal articles reporting empirical investigations of what are typically the requirements and expectations for each of the part-genres of the

thesis in specific discipline areas. This research base draws on analyses of the genre characteristics of many theses within and across disciplines. Understanding how to carry out a genre analysis of a piece of text in any discipline area equips one to apply the same approach to the analysis of texts in any discipline. The practice outlined above explains how this may be achieved.

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