



Analysing ESP Texts, but How?

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Received: 10.01.2015; Accepted: 01.31.2015

Abstract: *English as a second language (ESL) teachers instructing general English and English for specific purposes (ESP) in bilingual secondary schools face various challenges when it comes to choosing the main linguistic foci of language preparatory courses enabling non-native students to study academic subjects in English. ESL teachers intending to analyse English language subject textbooks written for secondary school students with the aim of gaining information about what bilingual secondary school students need to know in terms of language to process academic textbooks cannot avoid dealing with a dilemma. It needs to be decided which way it is most appropriate to analyse the texts in question. Handbooks of English applied linguistics are not immensely helpful with regard to this problem as they tend not to give recommendation as to which major text analytical approaches are advisable to follow in a pre-college setting. The present theoretical research aims to address this lacuna. Respectively, the purpose of this pedagogically motivated theoretical paper is to investigate two major approaches of ESP text analysis, the register and the genre analysis, in order to find the more suitable one for exploring the language use of secondary school subject texts from the point of view of an English as a second language teacher. Comparing and contrasting the merits and limitations of the two contrastive approaches allows for a better understanding of the nature of the two different perspectives of text analysis. The study examines the goals, the scope of analysis, and the achievements of the register perspective and those of the genre approach alike. The paper also investigates and reviews in detail the starkly different methods of ESP text analysis applied by the two perspectives. Discovering text analysis from a theoretical and methodological angle supports a practical aspect of English teaching, namely making an informed choice when setting out to analyse texts in English. It can be concluded from the literature that the register perspective yields more readily applicable data of text analysis for ESL teachers instructing in a pre-college environment. Besides teachers working in bilingual secondary school, the pedagogical conclusions of the study are also useful for teachers instructing in*

international secondary schools where the language of education is English and the alumni comprise non-native students.

Keywords: English for specific purposes (ESP), text analysis, register analysis, genre analysis, academic English, bilingual education, English as a second language (ESL)

Rational

In a bilingual secondary school in Hungary, 9th grade secondary students receive an intensive English language program, which makes them prepared for their further academic studies in English. The language preparatory year contains sixteen hours of general English classes and four hours of English for specific purposes (ESP) classes a week. The ESP classes include core academic subjects, such as history, geography, maths and physics. Despite the intensive language preparatory year, students in the 10th grade find studying subjects in English rather challenging. As a teacher of general English instructing in the language preparatory year, my interest arouse in gaining information about what my students need to know in terms of English in order for them to handle core academic subject texts successfully in the 10th grade. Since handbooks of English applied linguistics tend not to give recommendations as to which major text analytical approach to follow in the secondary environment, the present theoretical study aims to address this lacuna. Respectively, the purpose of this pedagogically motivated theoretical research is to investigate the two major approaches of ESP text analysis, the register and the genre analysis, with the aim of finding out which one is more suitable for exploring the language use of secondary school textbooks from the point of view of an English as a second language (ESL) teacher. The study aims to answer the research question whether register analysis or genre analysis yields more readily applicable data for ESL teachers in a pre-college setting. First the overlapping concepts of genre and register are clarified, which is followed by drawing a distinction between them as two starkly different approaches. The study then goes on to investigate the merits and limitations of the two approaches to draw pedagogical conclusions in the end.

Genre and register as overlapping concepts

Certain instances of communicative events and a number of discourse samples or texts display several kinds of similarities, on the basis of which they might be labelled as belonging to one common class: a genre, traditionally a literary construct (Hyon, 1996), or a register. According to *Swales* (1981, 1990), whose research has been seminal in shaping genre theory, the crucial similarity that groups a pool of discourse items in a shared category does not lie in the mere resemblance of the surface form of the language used in the items, but more importantly, *"the principal critical feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a*

genre is some shared set of communicative purposes" (Swales, 1990:46). In this view, the formation of a genre is a response to communicative purposes in common, where the members of a discourse community typify the conventions of the genre while achieving their shared communicative goals. Applying the Swalesian definition to the present research, texts in general English course books used in the 9th grade definitely share a set of communicative purpose (they aim to provide written samples of the target language for EFL learners), and so do texts in a academic subject textbook (they intend to inform students of educationally selected topics of the discipline). Consequently, both groups of texts in the present investigation might be treated as unmistakably different genres. Following the Swalesian idea, subject textbooks and general English course books can be distinguished as two distinctively different genres since they are written for different audiences with different purposes. As Lee (2001) points out, the term genre is "*assigned on the basis of external criteria such as intended audience, purpose, and activity type, that is, it refers to a conventional, culturally recognised grouping of texts based on properties other than lexical or grammatical (co-)occurrence features*" (Lee, 2001:38). A given variety of language, or discourse, is used by a specific community, which Swales (1990) calls a discourse community. Among his criteria of a discourse community, Swales (1990) maintains that "*a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis*" (Swales, 1990:28). This point of view is further explained by Ramanathan and Kaplan (2000) by claiming that "*members of a discourse community, who become insiders of the community, partially out of long-standing participation in that community, evolve a selective lexis – modes of communication, acronyms, jargons, textual forms – that facilitates easy communication among peers*" (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000:177). Since the two sets of texts under investigation belong to two distinctive genres read by two different discourse communities, it possible and worth considering to what extent their language use overlaps and differs.

The term genre is frequently used interchangeably with that of register, their definitions are compatible (Lee, 2001; Rittman, 2007). As Biber and Conrad (2009) warn, "*there is no general consensus concerning the use of register and related terms such as genre*" (Biber & Conrad, 2009:21), which makes "*genre literature a complicated body of scholarship to understand*" (Hyon, 1996:693). Several scholars endorse one of the two overlapping concepts and disregard the other, for instance Biber (1988), Bhatia (2002), Samraj (2002), Bunton (2002), Love (2002) and Swales (1990, 2004) apply the term genre solely in their works, while Ure (1982), Ferguson (1983), Hymes (1984), Heath and Langman (1994), Bruthiaux (1994, 1996), Biber (1995), Biber et al. (1999), Conrad (2001) prefer register over genre. Similarly to the Swalesian concept of genre, the notion of register defined by Biber et al. (1998) relies on non-linguistic or situational characteristics. The Biberian register, which is a "*cover term for varieties defined by their situational characteristics*" considering the "*purpose, topic, setting, interactiveness, mode, etc.*" of the situation (Biber et al., 1998:135), also emphasizes the notion of a specific need of communication. In accordance with the Swalesian term genre, the Biberian concept of register groups discourse items on the basis of situational characteristics rather than focusing on the immediate surface

similarities of their language use. Although the Biberian definition of register uses different distinguishing elements (such as purpose, topic, setting, interactiveness, and mode) than the Swalesian one of genre (where the idea of a shared set of communicative purposes appears), underlying scheme of the two is the same: it is the situation in common that connects and classifies discourse items. Both approaches treat the situational characters and not the linguistic phenomena to be of primary importance since “*linguistic differences can be derived from situational differences*” (Biber & Conrad, 2009:9), but not the other way round. Examining the texts in focus of the present study, that is, the reading tasks in the English course book used in the preparatory year and the chapters of the biology textbook, obvious differences can be observed in the purpose and topic of the two, thus the term register can also be applied to them when making a differentiation between them. That is to say, the two sets of texts, EFL reading materials and chapters of subject textbooks, belong to different registers in the Biberian sense and as such, their “*identifying markers of language structure and language use differ from the language of other communicative situations*” (Biber & Finegan, 1994:20). According to Halliday, this is exactly the reason why registers can be studied analytically, claiming that clusters of “*associated features have a greater than random tendency to co-occur*” in a register (1988, p. 162). In more general terms, Biber notes that all discourse analysts working in the field of ESP uncover “*specialized registers in English*” (1998, p. 157), which implies that each and every ESP field forms a different register.

Genre and register as different approaches

Although the terms genre and register are typically used synonymously in the literature, covering similar notions in a parallel manner, lately a clear distinction has been made between them. It was Biber and Conrad (2009) who distinctively separated the two overlapping concepts by treating them as two different *approaches* of text analysis. In their terminology, the genre approach examines rhetorical organisations and linguistic characteristics that structure whole texts. While examining texts from a different point of view, the register approach has a focal point of words and grammatical features that are frequently present in representative excerpts of numerous texts.

Register analysis

The register approach holds that communicative situations predetermine the choice of language use to a great extent. This is the reason why one can find the right words in the right place to convey the intended message (Pickett, 1986). The register perspective postulates that core linguistic features are “*commonly used in association with the communicative purposes and situational context of the texts*” (Biber & Conrad, 2009:2). Presuming the fact that some linguistic features are more typical in certain communicative situations than in others, the register perspective aims to

identify the pervasive linguistic characteristics, typical lexical and grammatical features in a variety. Pervasive linguistic features are not exclusively unique of a given register, they might occur in any other variety; however, they are “*much more common in the target register*” (Biber & Conrad, 2009:6). Since it is the extent of pervasiveness of linguistic features that is analysed, the register perspective applies mathematical calculations and statistical methods of determining the frequency of certain linguistic items in a set of texts. Within the frame of the register approach, the analysis is regularly based on the collection of excerpts of texts instead of relying on complete, full texts. Besides computing frequencies of lexical and grammatical items of representative excerpts, the register approach combines numerical analysis with the examination of the situation of language use. In this way, the fingerprinting of a register consists of the exploration of three major components: the situational context where the texts stem from, the linguistic features whose pervasiveness is determined through statistical accounts, and the functional relationship between these two elements. The functional analysis of the characteristic linguistic features in a register description is possible due to the fact that linguistic features tend to occur in a register when they are “*particularly well-suited to the purposes and situational context of the register*” (Biber & Conrad, 2009:6). Thus the third component of a register analysis attempts to interpret why certain linguistic features are more abundant in a register than in other contexts. Disclosing functional relationships between linguistic choices and situational contexts is “at the heart of studying register variation” (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 10). In the frame of the register approach it is indispensable to try to explain why pervasive items, for example in the case of near synonyms or roughly equivalent grammatical structures, are applied in the given register.

As a rule, single lexical or grammatical features fail to characterize registers. Rather, it is a set of linguistic features whose level of pervasiveness in the given variety illuminates the typical language use of the texts, as early researchers (Ervin-Tripp, 1972; Hymes, 1974) in sociolinguistics have shown. Accordingly, register analysts discover the functional use of batches of prevailing linguistic items instead of examining specific, isolated linguistic markers. Biber et al. (1998) emphasize the necessity of investigating a group of wide-ranging linguistic features since it is not common for a register to be identified and well-described by the presence of a solitary linguistic feature. On the contrary, sets of several linguistic features tend to describe different registers, it is the frequency of various linguistic patterns that depicts the distinctiveness of a register. The exception to the rule of exploring multi-features is the attempt to identify register markers. These unique linguistic features are fixed expressions or “*distinctive linguistic constructions that do not occur in other registers*” (Biber & Conrad, 2009:53). A register marker is so genuinely typical of a variety that it immediately reveals the communicative situation where it is naturally applied. Hearing for instance the fixed expression, ‘Mind the gap,’ one instantaneously identifies that the auditory warning was played at one of the tube stations in London, and the speaker is directly identified as the recorded announcer of the public

transport company. Clearly, distinctive register markers are infrequent, therefore groups of register features are investigated, instead.

Register analysis is a comparative approach by nature. To claim that the prevalence of any recurring linguistic item is a distinguishing feature of a given register, its frequency needs to be compared to that appearing in another variety. Average frequencies without comparison across registers mean little, practically it is impossible to give a meaningful description of the distinctiveness of a register using figures without comparing these values to those of other registers. For register analyses to be effective, the data of pervasive linguistic items need to be compared to an adequate basis.

Shortly after the birth of the register approach in the 1960s, its popularity declined among ESP language analysts, dramatically fewer register studies appeared in the 1970s. There might be different reasons why the approach was not widely used. The register perspective has been criticized for being too simplistic since it fails to deal with any characteristics of the text beyond the sentence level (DeMarco, 1986). A relatively homogenous register that shows little variety among its users, for instance the language use of air traffic controllers, can be mapped effectively through describing its typical lexis and grammar. However, more complex ones with greater freedom of lexical and grammatical choices on the part of the language user are more difficult to be depicted through frequency accounts, moreover, the predictive value of these accounts is less reliable. This suggests that in the case of analysing more complex registers additional variables should be introduced. Another problematic point about register analysis voiced by *DeMarco* (1986) lies in the nature of the method of investigating texts on a linear, word-by-word or sentence-by-sentence basis. It is implied that such linearity results in losing global meaning when overemphasising the parts. Additionally, regardless of the fact that register analyses based on calculating pervasiveness were able to make authentic representations of the specific language use language learners wished to acquire, still there were serious discrepancies when applying this knowledge in the compilation of teaching materials. Exposing students directly to the most typical discrete elements of a register did not enable them to handle communicative situations effectively, where pragmatic knowledge is also required. This complaint was voiced by *Selinker* et al. (1976) when they claimed that students tended not to understand “*the total meaning of the EST [English for Science and Technology] discourse even when they understand all the words in each sentence*” (Selinker, 1976:82). Despite the above mentioned weaknesses, the register perspective did not come to its end in the course of ESP history. Its revival is the benefit of the rapid advancement of computer technology taking place in the 1980s. Computerized register analysis, which is less demanding to carry out than manual text examinations, is prone to be more reliable, besides, its scope of investigation can be wider-ranging and thus it can encompass greater complexity.

Register analysis has been applied in various academic and professional fields. Among the numerous foci of examining the typical language patterns of different communicative situations, sports announcer talk (Ferguson, 1983; Reaser, 2003), engineering English (Verantola, 1984),

note-taking (Janda, 1985), academic prose (Biber, 1988), newspaper, radio and other media registers (Bell, 1991; Biber et al., 1999), personal ads (Bruthiaux, 1994), coaching (Heath & Langman, 1994), classified ads (Bruthiaux, 1996), abstracts of research articles (Connor, 1996; Flowerdew, 2002; Hyland & Tse, 2005), research articles (Conrad, 1996; Hyland, 1998), textbooks (Conrad, 1996; Hyland, 1999), scientific prose (Atkinson, 1999; Conrad & Biber, 2001), medical guidebooks (Vilha, 1999), internet registers (Crystal, 2001; Gains, 1999; Herring & Paolillo, 2006), student essays (Hyland, 2002), PhD dissertations (Hyland & Tse, 2004; Paltridge, 2002), computer-based instant messaging (Fox et al., 2007; Thurlow, 2003), middle English medical texts (Taavitsainen & Pahta, 2004), university lectures (Biber 2006; Biber et al., 2007; Csomay, 2005), news in tabloids (Bednarek, 2006), dating chats (del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006), office conversation (Koester, 2006) were discovered through giving register analytical attention to them.

Genre analysis

In line with register analysis, genre analysis also underlines the importance of situational context when analysing texts. The approach maintains that genres primarily develop within social formations (Kamberelis, 1995) thus genre analysis involves providing descriptions of communicative purposes and context in which a text variety arose. Although ESP scholars (Bhatia 1993; Flowerdew, 1993; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Thompson, 1994; Weissberg, 1993) working within the framework of the genre approach agree on the need to specify these purposes and the context, Hyon (1996) warns that many of them pay disproportionately much attention to “*detailing the formal characteristics of genres while focusing less on the specialized functions of texts and their surround social context*” (Hyon, 1996:695). The genre perspective does not fail to recognize social relationships. The ways in which social relationships are codified in language use form the basis of generic exploration of text varieties. It holds true to such an extent that Kress and Hodge (1979) pointed out the fact that one tends to identify the conventional aspect of a communicative event as a distinctive genre. The social structures of discourse communities produce disciplinary communication, which relies on their own built-in system of rules. In turn, genres are kept alive and in circulation through the social practices of a discourse community, as Giddens (1979) points out.

Despite these similarities, the linguistic analysis of the genre approach contrasts with that of the register perspective by aiming at identifying conventional structures used in the entirety of the text instead of finding pervasive linguistic features. Such conventional generic features might occur in the text only once or in strictly limited number, for instance the abstract of a research article, the title or the subheadings of a chapter in a textbook. For this reason, studies in the genre approach investigate complete texts instead of analysing a collection of excerpts. The genre approach tends to discover the conventional ways of language use in the genre, for example the beginning or ending of business letters. Focusing on the rhetorical elements that organize a text, the genre approach is

characterized by top-down analysis, “*where the starting point is the macrostructure of the text with a focus on larger units of text rather than sentence-level, lexico-grammatical patterning*” (Flowerdew, 2005:324). The target of genre analyses is to unveil the linguistic repertoire of structuring texts from a particular genre and to clarify for what communicative purposes they are applied. This vantage point is in stark contrast with the view of the register analysis, which relies on bottom-up descriptions starting out from smaller units of lexical and grammatical features limited by the sentence level. Genre markers, or distinctive expressions and devices that give a structural flow to the text are explored in the genre approach. These formulaic and typically once-occurring genre marking expressions can be found at a particular location of the text, such as ‘To be continued’ at the end of the episode of a series. Through describing the typical structuring phrases and expressions at various places of the text, the genre approach exposes the otherwise covert macrostructure of the text. When discovering the macrostructure of a text or a specific part of a text, the genre approach makes extensive use of the Swalesian move structure analysis, which “*classifies segments of text according to their prototypical communicative purpose for a particular genre*” (Flowerdew, 2005:323). The Swalesian moves are divisions of the text, which are further subdivided into steps; for example the genre of introduction to a scientific article typically follows the moves of the CARS model, whose starting point is the text’s communicative purpose, that is, Creating A Research Space (CARS) for the new piece of work. In the model, each move contains specific information, which is systematically divided into steps through which the communicative purpose is reached. Move structure analysis collects syntactic and lexical features that are characteristically used in the steps and moves. In finding conventional structures and explaining their communicative functions, genre analysis does not aim to map out the myriad of different possible ways of expressing a message but focuses on the comparatively small set of codifications that have become typical and conventionalized in the genre.

Genre-based pedagogy has typically focused on written texts and made use of genre studies at writing classes (Hyon, 1996). The instruction of the results of genre analyses, in second language writing courses is not without debates. Form-focused model introducing instruction has its advocates and opponents. Genre researchers (Gosden, 1992; Love, 1991; Miller, 1984; Swales, 1981, 1990) hold that conventionalized forms are typical means by which information is dispersed in a discourse community with shared interests. In their view, teaching genre markers and discussing textual organization is of great importance since through developing students’ awareness of the communicative purposes of generic typifications learners become more able participants of the genre community and can better control the organizational and stylistic features of texts. Not all scholars believe, however, that employing generic knowledge in the service of language education is beneficial. Some challengers of the approach (Fahnestock, 1993; Freedman, 1993; Martin et al., 1987; Raimes, 1991; Reid, 1987; Threadgold, 1988; Zamel, 1984) assign more importance to the individual originality of the writer and to the process of writing itself, and put lesser emphasis on the specific elements of genre and organization. This, however, does not mean the complete

ignorance of generic elements in second language instruction, genre markers are still advised to be addressed in the phase of rewriting, with a secondary importance compared to the verbalization of the message of the writer. More ardent opponents of genre-based instruction (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Dias, 1994; Freedman, 1993; Freedman & Medway, 1994) argue that the use of the conventions of generic knowledge in social context cannot be taught explicitly, it is a skill acquired tacitly through enculturation as students become active participants of the disciplinary community. Other scholars (Freedman, 1993; Williams & Colomb, 1993) warn that genre instruction has serious negative impacts on genres themselves as teaching textual rules to future writers acts in favour of rigidifying writing conventions.

Applying genre analytical methods, the language use of text organizing elements have been uncovered in numerous academic and professional fields. Among these are research articles (Biber et al., 2007; Swales, 1981), research article introductions (Gledhill, 2000; Samraj 2002a; Stotesbury, 2003; Swales, 1990), grant proposals (Connor, 1996; Connor & Mauranen, 1999; Swales, 1990), business faxes (Louhiala-Salminen, 1999), research abstracts (Salager-Meyer, 1990), popularized medical research reports (Nwogu, 1991), sales letters (Bhatia, 1993), university lectures (Thompson, 1994), fundraising discourse (Bhatia, 1998), promotional genres (Connor & Mauranen, 1999), property transaction reports (Kong, 2006), academic e-mails (Gains, 1999), job application letters (Connor et al., 2002; Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Upton & Connor, 2001), editorial letters (Flowerdew & Dudley-Evans, 2002); direct mail letters from organisations (Upton, 2002), PhD dissertations (Swales, 2004), PhD conclusion chapters (Bunton, 2005).

With the aim of comparing and contrasting the two uniquely different approaches of text analysis, Table 1 provides a quick overview of their similarities and differences.

Table 1. A contrastive overview of two different theories of text analysis: register analysis and genre analysis

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Register Analysis</i>	<i>Genre Analysis</i>
Length of the text(s)	various samples of text excerpts or complete text(s)	complete text(s)
Linguistic focus	lexico-grammatical feature(s)	conventional expressions; rhetorical, textual organization
The rate of occurrence of linguistic features	frequent items	typically once-occurring in a particular place in the text
The method of analysis	bottom-up	top-down
The scope of explanation	the features are functionally connected to the situational context of the variety	how language features conform to the culturally expected way of constructing texts belonging to the variety

Conclusion: Pedagogical Implications

Considering the benefits and limitations of the reasonably different ways of text analyses reviewed above, the present research recommends the register perspective for ESL teachers to gain insights into the characteristic linguistic features of secondary subject textbooks. The results gained from comparing and contrasting the merits and shortcomings of the two methods provide appropriate information not only for general English teachers teaching in a bilingual secondary school, but for educators working in English-language international schools where the alumni includes non-native students and ESP teachers alike.

The register approach provides more readily applicable data for ESP teachers in the pre-college setting for various reasons. It is the register approach which gives space for identifying a great number of linguistic features simultaneously that characterise a pool of texts, thus it can serve ESL and ESP teachers alike with substantial information on the possible foci their teaching materials ought to be directed at. Within the genre approach, however, less numerous focal points can be examined. Furthermore, the register approach discovers the language use of the text in hand, producing knowledge that is clearly applicable for secondary students who are in need of processing academic subject texts but are not expected to create textbook chapters during their studies. In contrast, the genre approach unveils structural rhetorical information about texts, which is indispensable for writers of similar texts in the process of becoming accepted members of their discourse communities. Generic knowledge is less informative for those who aim at understanding and processing but not at creating generically similar texts, that is, for pre-college students. Additionally, the register perspective is comparative by its nature, which is advantageous in the environment described since it allows a direct comparison of the two registers students meet in the course of their studies (reading texts in English course books and chapters of subject textbooks). Following the register approach, the set of 10th grade textbooks can be compared to that of the previous year. In this manner, the comparison generates linguistic information for general English teachers instructing in the 9th grade, which can serve as applicable feedback about the linguistic relevance of the intensive English course in the preparatory year to the linguistic needs of the academic subjects pursued in following year. Bearing the pedagogical challenges of the register approach in mind, it should be noted that it is not utterly effective to provide the results of the register analysis directly to the students for instance in the form of lists of pervasive linguistic items, but these linguistic elements ought to be the basis of pragmatic tasks.

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