

Research Article

USING GENRE-BASED APPROACHES HELPS STUDENTS AT UNETI IMPROVE THEIR WRITING SKILLS AFTER TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

After doing my research on teaching writing by using genre-based approaches from 1st July to 10th December (See appendix A), I found out that my students were eager to write with genre-based approaches. The research was basically developed on both the problem solving model (Markee, 1997 p. 66) and the social interaction model (Markee, 1997 p. 61). Ninety students, potential adopters or resisters, were invited to take part in this action research with help and encouragement of the researcher (inside change agents and implementers) and the two teachers (inside change agents and implementers) who were asked to join the research. The results were analyzed through the two questionnaires for teachers and students, the two pre-tests, the two final tests and class observation records done by the researcher. This innovation would be considered as a bottom-up process. The research was done without any support from outside change – agents or agreements from the leader of the school.

Keywords: genre-based approaches; problem solving model; bottom-up process.

INTRODUCTION

The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training has reformed English textbooks concentrating on the four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing for high school students. With writing skill, students are asked to write different kinds of text. However, since the school year 2005 – 2006, students have been asked to do multiple choice tests on their final exams. The final tests and all the exams in most of high schools and universities in Vietnam have the same formula: grammar and vocabulary section, reading comprehension section and writing section. In writing section, students are asked to “rewrite” some sentences in another way but keep exactly the same meaning as the given ones. They are also asked to do the word order in jumbled-word sentences or fill in the blanks with verbs or verb phrases. The purposes of the final exams and the new textbooks are different. Therefore, most of the time in class, a large number of teachers have to focus on intensive writing skills to help their students pass the exams and also to secure their own positions. In other words, the teachers and the students share the same motivation that is to pass the exams. As a result, other approaches and activities that may be helpful in motivating students in studying writing as well as in building students' habit of being active and writing critically have been ignored. I have been teaching English to different students of levels in UNETI Hanoi, Vietnam. I have heard these complaints from my honest students: “In my opinion, writing is the most difficult, boring one and the least I want to study.” ... “We have never enjoyed writing” ... “We ourselves have to study writing because we must pass the exams at the end of the semester. However, this skill is the one we dislike most because we have to face new vocabulary, weird content and complicated structures when writing.” ... “Our teachers just ask us to write but never show us how to organize a certain kind of text or what tense or language should we use in that text.” ... “We have never been shown a single sample of a certain kind of text we need to write.” These complaints would reflect the fact that we, English teachers at UNETI have failed to activate students' interests in

studying writing because students are used to the traditional method of learning (grammar translation) and they are passive in class. We have to change our ways of teaching, consider seriously whether or not the ways or the techniques we use while teaching writing do activate our students and bring reliable results. The genre-based approach was chosen because it is becoming more influential in language teaching. It has been used in Thailand, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, and China. Hyland (2003) saw “genre-based approaches as having a considerable impact on the way we see language use and on literacy education around the world.”

Research questions

1. To what extent do genre-based approaches help students at high school improve their writing skills after training?
2. What are the students' perceptions on the use of genre-based approaches for teaching writing at uneti?

Definition of terms: (See Appendix B)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review of the innovation theories (See Appendix C)

1. A definition of an innovation:
2. A successful or unsuccessful innovation:
3. Cultures and innovation:
4. The models of the innovation
 - The social interaction model:
 - Problem-solving model:
5. Roles of stakeholders:

Literature review of the research on teaching writing by using genre-based approach (See Appendix D)

METHODOLOGY

The school and the English group: This research set out to measure if genre-based approaches helped students UNETI write. It

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was carried out at UNETI. There are forty teachers of English in this high school. Most of them graduated from university of pedagogy or Foreign Languages University. Most of them including the researchers had post-graduate diploma in TESOL. The researchers supposed to investigate whether the writing ability of students UNETI could improve with genre-based approaches. The researcher also wanted to know the students' perceptions on the use of genre-based approaches for teaching writing. Therefore, the researcher was trying to apply an effective way of teaching writing to help students improve both their writing abilities and their interest in studying writing.

The syllabus design and its cultural context: The textbooks and the syllabus used during the school year were designed by The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. There are two semesters in a school year. The first semester includes 8 weeks, twelve fifty-minute periods a week. The second semester includes 17 weeks, twelve fifty-five-minute periods a week. In each semester, students have to finish 8 units (seven periods a unit). Each unit has five parts: reading (two periods), listening (one period), speaking (one period), writing (two periods), and language focus (one period). UNETI teachers can do nothing to change this fixed syllabus. They carry out the syllabus with the headmaster's observation. Teachers have difficulty in having new ideas to access and convincing the authority to adopt them, which can negatively affect any innovation. *The researcher decided to have extracurricular writing activities in eight weeks (two periods a week) from 15th October to 8th December, 2020 (see appendix A) so that the innovation could be done.*

The rationale behind the innovation: UNETI students have been learning English with new textbooks which have been reformed for two years. In these textbooks, students are asked to write a letter in which they have to use narrative or recount text type to write. However, they are not helped with the text features and the language features of each text type. For example: In writing section of unit 2, students are asked to write a personal letter describing a past experience. This writing section contains 2 parts a and b. In part a, Students are asked to complete a given letter with the words from the box. In part b, students are asked to write a letter to tell his or her friend the most embarrassing experience of them in the same way. (See appendix E) In this letter, students have to write a personal recount but they are not helped with: The text features of a personal recount such as:

Part 1: Orientation (introduction and background)

Part 2: Recount of events in chronological order

Part 3: Reorientation

- The language features of a personal recount such as:
- Past tense for verbs
- Descriptive adjectives and adverbs
- Personal pronoun
- Direct and indirect speech
- Connecting words indicating time relationship

Most of my students said they needed their teachers help with the text features and the language features. They knew how to write a letter but they didn't know how to organize a recount, what tense, what adjective and adverb should be used correctly.

For these reasons, evidently an innovation for extra-curricular writing activities should be implemented

Participants of the research

Students: Firstly, the research was carried out with 90 students from two classes at UNETI. The first class has 45 students (35 schoolgirls

and 10 schoolboys). The second one has 45 students (40 schoolgirls and 5 schoolboys). Their ages are more or less 20 years old. They all study English as a required subject at UNETI. After talking to these 90 students, the researcher knew that 70 of these students "learn" English because of their grades at the exams. Twenty actually learn English because of more than the grades. The learning purposes of these students are clearly defined. Therefore, their motivation was much stronger. Secondly, Vietnamese society is a collectivist society, so these students also expect to learn how to do not learn how to learn. According to collectivist students, acquiring a certificate even through dubious means is more important than acquiring competition. These students are not exceptions. They pay much attention to grades, exams and certificates, and how to get good grades to achieve above purposes. Thirdly, Vietnamese students usually accept their teachers' opinions, new ideas because of the power distance. Students in two class above are the same. They just sit still and listen and receive what their teachers give them. The researcher hoped that these students would accept genre-based approaches introduced even though these approaches were new to them. Finally, most of students in classes are from countryside. They do not have many opportunities to practice English. Their English knowledge is not as well as they are expected. This problem is still a big problem that The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training is facing and solving. We, confidential teachers, are willing to do something to improve this problem. These two classes were chosen because the researcher was assigned to teach them at the beginning of the school year. I could not randomly choose any classes although I knew I might have problem with the validity and the reliability of the results of the research.

Teachers: Two teachers were invited to teach these classes. Both of them had a postgraduate diploma in TESOL. Each teacher was in charge of one class. Teacher A is 30 years old. She has been teaching English at UNETI for 7 years. Teacher B is 32 years old. She has been teaching English at T.A. high school for 8 years.

Stages of the innovation, finding and analyses

Pilot study

The questionnaire to the teachers: The questionnaire to the teachers was sent to three experienced writing teachers who do not participate in the study to check for its validity. Two of those have been teachers of English at UNETI for 20 years. The other is a Teacher of English at a Language Center (a private school) for 7 years. Each item of the Questionnaire to the teachers was carefully checked for the clarity. The clarity of each item was ranged from +1 to -1 (e.g. -1, 0, +1) in which "-1" means ambiguous in meaning or difficult for the respondents, then it was omitted; "0" means relatively ambiguous or difficult for the respondents, then it was revised; "+1" means clear and appropriate for the respondents. Each item should be accepted by at least two teachers. If any of the items was denied (ranged as -1) by 2 or 3 teachers, it would be eliminated from the study before administering to the teachers to check for the reliability. Also, if clarity was needed, the researcher would revise and check the problematic items again with the experienced teachers until the items were satisfactory. Questionnaire to the teachers was checked by the three experienced teachers twice. All of the three teachers kindly helped the researcher for revising suggestions with their pencil notes on the papers of the Questionnaire. Afterward, the revised questionnaire was brought back to each teacher for discussions in order to reach the agreements for each item. After validated by the three teachers, the selected items of Questionnaire were piloted to five teachers who share the same characteristics with the teachers sent later to check for the reliability.

Questionnaire to the students after training: The questionnaire to the students was piloted with the same process of piloting done with the questionnaires to the teachers. It was sent to the three teachers to check for the validity, and then 20 questionnaire papers were sent to 20 students of a private school. These students did not get involved in the two research classes, but they learned writing with other genre-based approach teachers to check for the reliability.

The classroom observation checklist: The classroom observation checklist was sent to the three teachers mentioned before to check for the validity. The researcher used this classroom observation checklist to observe three writing periods in which the teacher also used genre-based approach in one class to check for the reliability.

The two pre-tests: The two pre-tests were sent to the three teachers mentioned before to check for the validity. The researcher asked five non-genre students studying from UNETI to do these tests to make sure if they understood the questions in the test to check for the reliability.

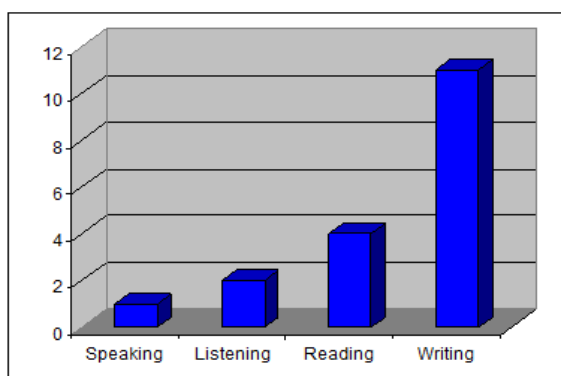
The two final tests: The two final tests were sent to the three teachers mentioned before to check for the validity. The researcher asked five "genre" students studying from a private school to do these tests to make sure if they understood the questions in the test to check for the reliability.

QUESTIONNAIRES TO TEACHERS: (Appendix F)

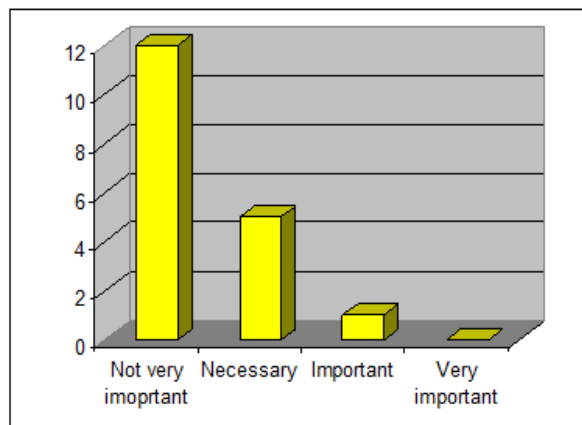
The questionnaire papers were in English and administered to 20 teachers including the two teachers invited to take part in the research. They were at private school I and UNETI located in Hanoi, Vietnam. 18 questionnaire papers were received from the teachers (90%). There were five teachers with an age from 41 to 50, eight teachers from 30 to 40, and 7 teachers under 30. Two of the teachers completed their diplomas in TESOL, and eighteen had B.A degrees. This questionnaire consisted of 19 items (18 closed questions and one open-ended question) developed by the researcher. It aimed at finding out teachers' opinions about teaching writing, especially by using genre-based approaches. The teachers felt free to answer the questions because most of them did not participate in the research process.

Findings and analyses: First of all, most of the teachers thought that writing was the last skill to be acquired, which meant teachers at high school considered writing skill as a difficult one to be acquired. They also thought that writing is not very important for their students. In fact, students do not use writing skill to do their papers. They are just asked to build sentences or rewrite some sentences, keeping the same meaning of the original ones.

The last skill to be acquired – the teachers' responses

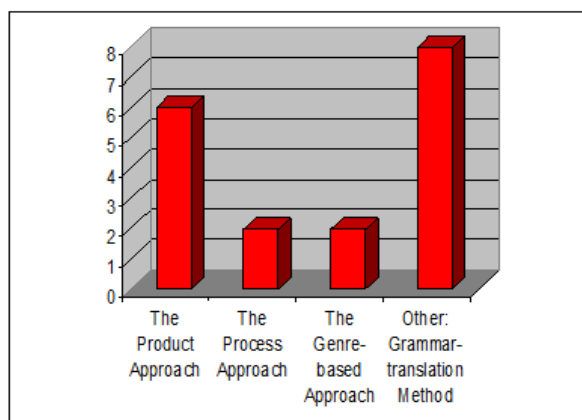


The importance of writing – the teachers' responses



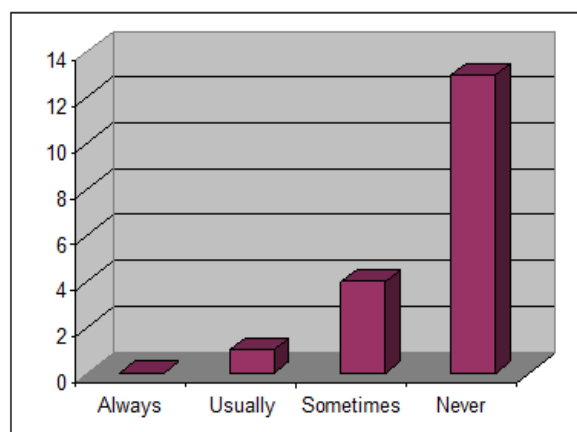
Secondly, when the question of approaches was asked, eight teachers used Grammar-Translation Method. Six used Product Approach. Two used Process Approach and two teachers used Genre-based Approach. It indicated that many of the teachers kept teaching with Grammar-Translation Method. Genre-based approaches seemed strange to them.

The approaches used to teach writing the teachers' responses



Thirdly, when teachers were asked whether they helped their students become aware of the text types of the texts they were going to write, most of them said they did nothing to help their students certainly because they just helped their students build sentences or rewrite ones. They ignored writing a whole text.

The frequency of teachers' help given to students to become aware of the text types



In conclusion, the researcher realized that genre-based approach were unfamiliar with most of the teachers given the questionnaires, which made the researcher more determined to use the social interaction model to carry out this innovation. The researcher hoped that other teachers could see the effects of genre-based approaches and use them when teaching writing.

Meeting students and talking about genre-based approaches: To start the research, the researcher spent four periods explaining genre-based approaches to the students because they were new to the students. The researchers wanted to make sure that students knew all of the terms used in the questionnaire papers determined to them at the end of the research and the terms used during the innovation such as: “genre-based approaches”, “building the knowledge of the field”, “text features”, “language features”, “narrative”, “personal recount”. The researcher used explanation text type as an example. The researcher also helped students know the following terms: “gap filling drills”, “sentence building drills”, “sentence transformation drills”. The researcher also gave students the analytic scale for scoring ESL writing consists of five components:

- Content (3 points)
- Organization (2 points)
- Vocabulary (2 points)
- Language use (2 points)
- Mechanics (1 point)

Findings and analyses: The researcher found that the students in classes were interested in genre-based approaches. They said genre-based approaches helped them know how to write an explanation in the correct order with typical language features of explanation text type. Genre-based approaches might be useful for students.

Teaching writing: (Appendix G & J)

Two teachers were invited to teach these two classes. Both of them had a postgraduate diploma in TESOL. Each teacher was in charge of one class. Teacher A taught first class with genre-based approaches. She helped students analyze the text types (narrative and personal recount), characteristic structures and language features of each type. He also helped them write texts according to each type.

Teacher B taught second class with grammar – translation method as teachers at UNETI have been doing. The teacher just focused on grammar, sentence structures that appeared in the text in textbook.

Findings and analyses: The researcher randomly observed eight out of sixteen periods in each class. The researcher used classroom observation checklist (Appendix K) to collect data and found out:

First Class: On one hand, teacher A performed strictly the three stages of the lesson. He used different activities to build the students’ knowledge of the field they were going to write, Modeling the genre, and Joint-constructing a text. On the other hand, according to the researcher’s observations:

- Thirteen out of forty five students considered as early adopters were really interested in learning writing with genre-based approaches.
- Twenty four students considered as early majority happily accepted genre-based approaches.
- Five students considered as late majority were not very interested in genre-based approaches. It took them nearly a month to accept these approaches.

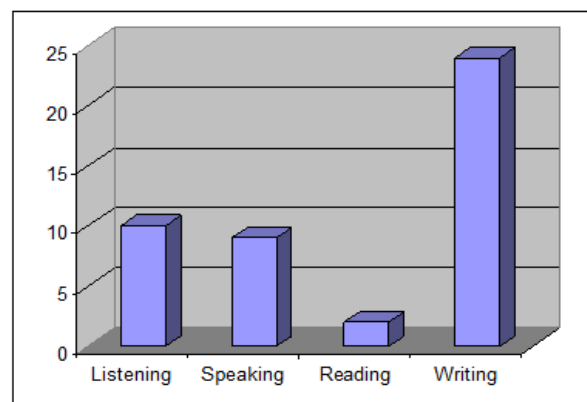
- The researcher considered that there were three students considered as laggards went to class but did nothing. They did not want to study.

Administrating the questionnaire to students: (Appendix P)

The questionnaires to the students were designed by the researcher, and were sent to 45 students in class the first class involving in the research process. There were 13 questions in Vietnamese. All of the questions were closed ones. This activity was aimed to investigate the perceptions of students about writing skills and discovering the motivation and attitudes from students towards learning writing with a genre-base approach teacher. Finally, 45 questionnaire papers were returned to the researcher to complete the research.

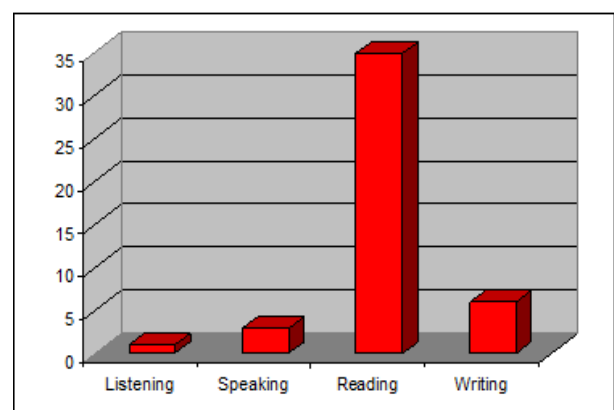
Findings and analyses: Ten students said listening was the most difficult skill. Nine said that was speaking, two said reading was most difficult, and twenty four students confessed themselves totally afraid of writing. The researcher found out that most of the students were accustomed to reading comprehension because most of the teachers at high school have been teaching them so that they could do their test well. The teachers nearly ignored speaking, listening and writing skills because most of them used grammar-translation method to teach in class.

The most difficult skill in learning English at Uneti

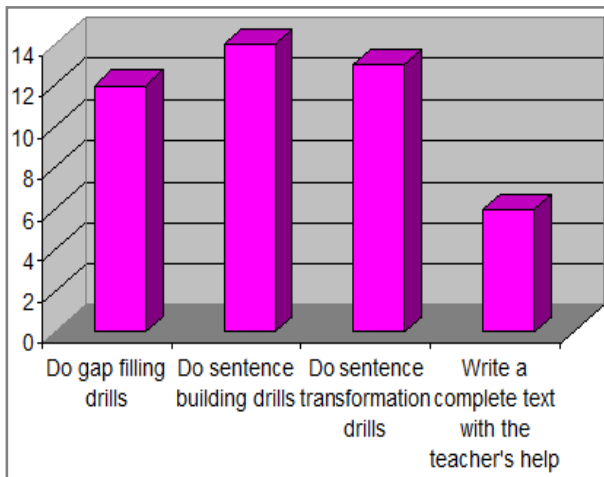


In question 2 and 3, the researcher wanted to know students’ attitudes toward writing before they started learning writing with genre-based approaches and realized that 35 out of 45 students paid attention to reading and of course grammar to do their test well. They had no motivation to learn listening, speaking and writing skills. In writing periods, students did not like to write a complete text even with their teachers help as shown in the following charts.

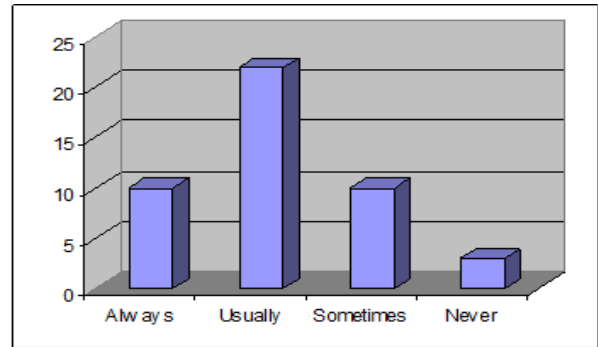
The most important skill in learning English at Uneti



Students' likes in their writing class



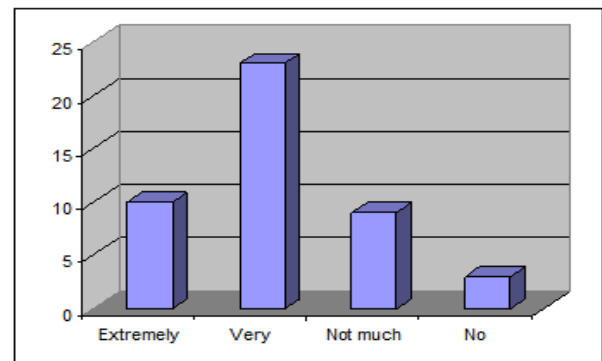
Students' habit of building the knowledge of the fields



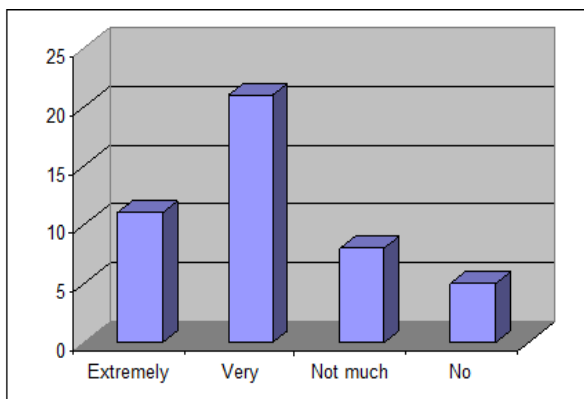
As we have seen before, students did not like writing. However, they are progressively interested in writing. They found genre-based approaches helped them solve their previous problems:

- They were helped with new vocabulary, weird content and complicated structures when writing.
- They were shown samples of a certain kind of text they needed to write.
- Teachers showed them how to organize a certain kind of a text or
- What tense or language they should use in that text.
- The researcher found that:
 - 24.4 % of students was early adopters.
 - 46.7 % was early majority.
 - 17.8 % was late majority.
 - 11.1 % was laggards.

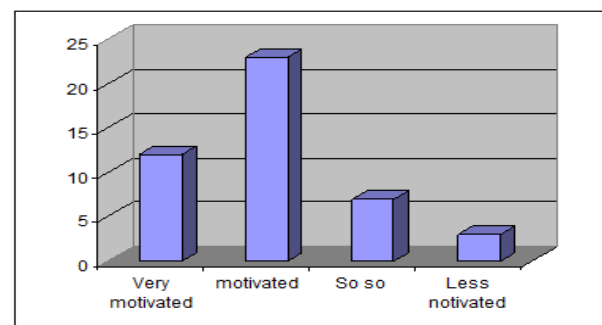
Students' interests in reading texts relating to the genre written



Students' interests in genre-based approaches

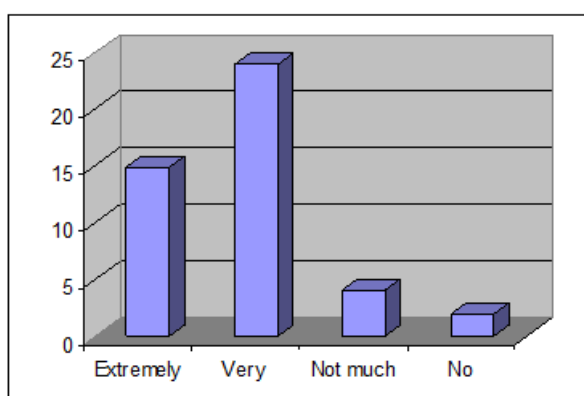


Students' feelings after two months of learning writing with genre-based approaches

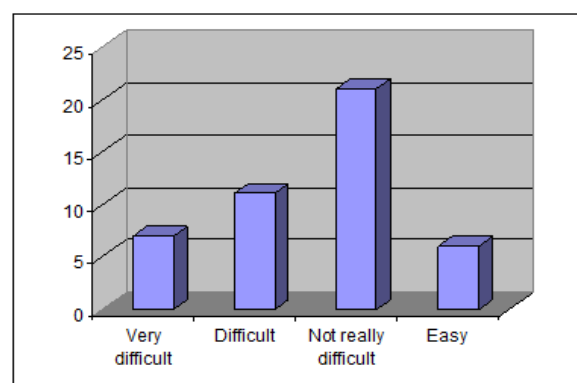


After two months studying writing with genre-based approaches, the students have been feeling better. Their attitude towards writing changed. They used to think that writing was the most difficult skill but now six of them think it is easy. Twenty one think writing is not very difficult. Eleven think writing is difficult and seven of the students think it is very difficult.

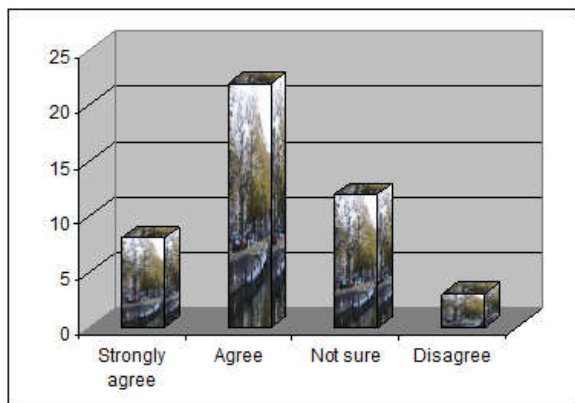
Help from pre-writing activities – students' responses



Student's thoughts about writing after learning with genre-based approaches



Students' enjoyable feelings when learning writing with genre-based approaches



Tests: There were four tests. Students received 10 points for each test. Students of the two classes were asked to do each same test in ninety minutes following the research schedule. After each test, students handed their papers in to be rated.

RATING CRITERIA AND A RATING APPROACH (See Appendix P)

Two pre-tests: The researcher wanted to use these two pre-tests as diagnostic tests to expose students' difficulties, gaps in their knowledge, and skill deficiencies which were foreseen. These tests were also opportunities for students to have a look at the genre they were going to study beforehand. The two pre-tests were designed to check how well students performed on their writing skills before learning with their genre-based approach teacher. The results of these pre-tests were compared with those of the final test to measure how well students progressed in terms of writing different genres with help of the genre-based approach teacher (11A⁶) and how well students progressed in terms of writing different genres with help of their non-genre teacher (11A⁷) during the time of the research. The results of the test showed the different levels of each student at the current time. Then, the researcher picked out nine representative students from each class who showed discriminating differences, Three of them just got under 3 marks from their test. The other three got under 5 marks and the rest of them accomplished over 5 marks. These two nine-student groups were focused on during the time of the research because they were the representatives of the research of the two classes. The results of these students were kept until the end of the course to compare with the results of the final test 1 given at the end of week 4 and final test 2 given at the end of week 8.

Pre-test 1: (See Appendix L)

It was about writing a narrative text, a story (300 words) about one of your past experiences.

Pre-test 2: (Appendix M)

It was about writing a personal recount, a personal recount (300 words) about your scary or funny experiences.

Two final tests: These two final tests were very important. Their results were regarded as the final findings of the research. The results of the final test 1 and these of the pre-test 1 were compared in each class. The results of the final test 2 and these of the pre-test 2 were also compared in each class. The results of the final test 1 of students in class 11A⁶ where students learned writing with their "genre" teacher were compared with those of students in class 11A⁷ where students learned writing with the teacher who used grammar – translation method.

The results of the final test 2 in class 11A⁶ and class 11A⁷ were also compared as done before.

Final-test 1 (Appendix N)

It was about writing a narrative (300 words) about an unforgettable birthday party.

Final-test 2 (Appendix O)

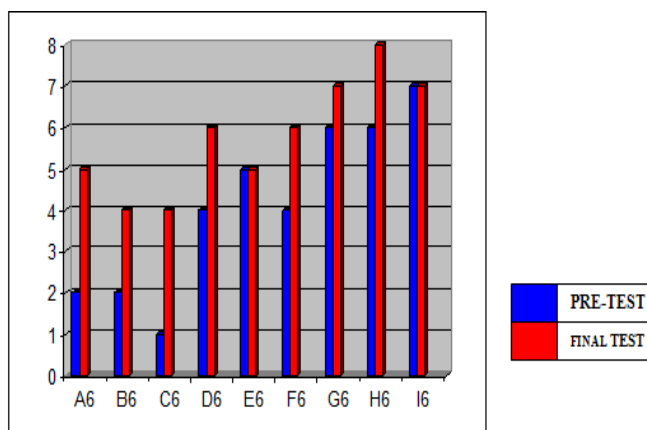
It was about writing a personal recount about an unforgettable birthday party.

The text types used in the final tests were the ones the students had already studied to make sure that all students could do their writing. If the students could do so, the findings from the research could be more reliable. Finally, the results of the final tests, especially of the 18 students from the two classes, were compared.

The results of the nine "chosen" students in 1st class

No	Names	Results of pre-test 1	Results of final test 1
Three students got under 3 marks at their pre-tests 1			
1	A6	2	5
2	B6	2	4
3	C6	1	4
Three students got under 5 marks at their pre-tests 1			
4	D6	4	6
5	E6	5	5
6	F6	4	6
Three students got over 5 marks at their pre-tests 1			
7	G6	6	7
8	H6	6	8
9	I6	7	7

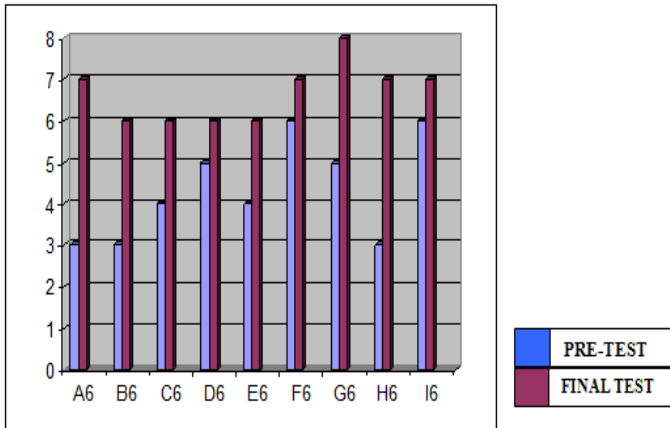
The improvements of the nine "chosen" students in 1st class after the first four weeks



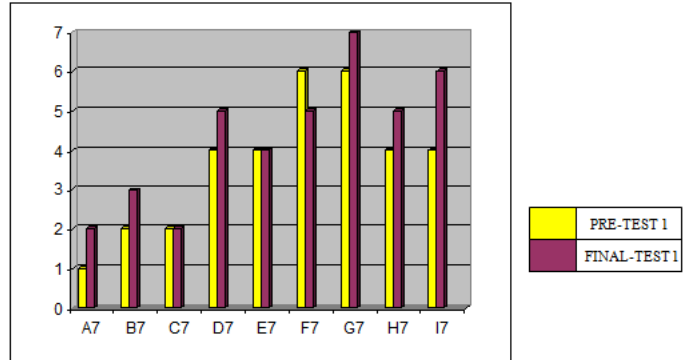
The results of the nine "chosen" students in 1st class

No	Names	Results of pre-test 2	Results of final test 2
Three students got under 3 marks at their pre-tests 1			
1	A6	3	7
2	B6	3	6
3	C6	4	6
Three students got under 5 marks at their pre-tests 1			
4	D6	5	6
5	E6	4	6
6	F6	6	7
Three students got over 5 marks at their pre-tests 1			
7	G6	5	8
8	H6	3	7
9	I6	6	7

The improvements of the nine "chosen" students in 1st class after the second four weeks



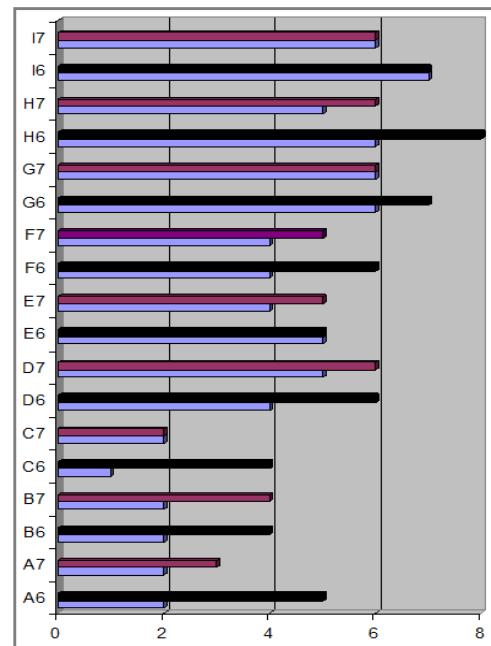
The improvements of the nine "chosen" students in 1st class after the second four weeks



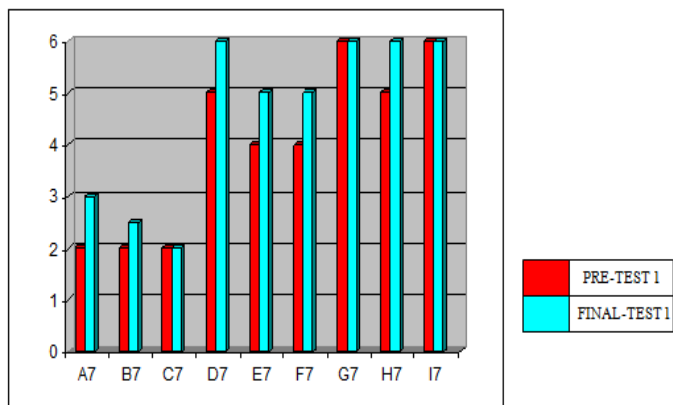
The results of the nine "chosen" students in 2nd class

No	Names	Results of pre-test 1	Results of finnal test 1
Three students got under 3 marks at their pre-tests 1			
1	A7	2	3
2	B7	2	4
3	C7	2	2
Three students got under 5 marks at their pre-tests 1			
4	D7	5	6
5	E7	4	5
6	F7	4	5
Three students got over 5 marks at their pre-tests 1			
7	G7	6	6
8	H7	5	6
9	I7	6	6

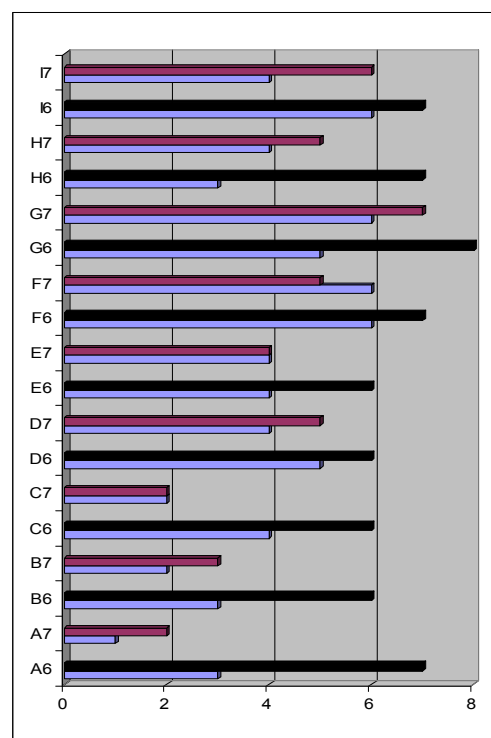
1st & 2nd class students' progression in the first four weeks (test 1)



The improvements of the nine "chosen" students in 2nd class after the first four weeks



1st & 2nd class students' progression in the second four weeks (test 2)



The results of the nine "chosen" students in 2nd class

No	Names	Results of pre-test 2	Results of finnal test 2
Three students got under 3 marks at their pre-tests 1			
1	A7	1	2
2	B7	2	3
3	C7	2	2
Three students got under 5 marks at their pre-tests 1			
4	D7	4	5
5	E7	4	4
6	F7	6	5
Three students got over 5 marks at their pre-tests 1			
7	G7	6	7
8	H7	4	5
9	I7	4	6

In general, the comparisons of the results of the tests showed us that after being trained, most of the students got more or less progressed. Students in 1st class got more progressed than students in 2nd class, which showed the researcher that genre-based approaches had a good influence on students in class 1st.

Overall assessment

Through personal observation, the results from questionnaires for teachers, the results from questionnaires for students at the end of the researcher, and the results of the tests given to students, I noted that students were enthusiastic about genre-based approaches. This reflected a positive change.

Positive

- Students' attitudes towards writing have positively been changing. After the research, forty three students thought writing was not very difficult. Eighty five out of ninety students said they liked genre-based approaches.
- Students felt enthusiastic about writing because they were helped with new vocabulary, weird content and complicated structures when writing. They were also shown samples of a certain kind of text they needed to write and tenses or language they should use in a text.
- In the final exam of the first semester of school year 2019 - 2020 on 28th December 2007, students from 1st class and 2nd class got higher marks in writing section in which they were asked to write a letter to invite an aunt to visit their house on Tat holiday than other classes.

Negative

There were five students considered as laggards (two in 1st class and three in 2nd class). Their grades were bad. They had no motivation to learn. They indifferently took part in the innovation.

Some limitation

When analyzing the data and the results of the research process, I found out some limitations from my work. Firstly, the research was done in a short time, only 8 weeks. There were only two forty-five-minute periods a week. It was not enough to have a valid conclusion. The researcher should implement the research for at least 8 months to make sure the results are "true". Secondly, this innovation was just an innovation for extra-curricular writing activities because of the administrative obstacles as mentioned on pages 7 and 8. The research was done with only two teachers and ninety students. Its results were not highly reliable. There should be more teachers, more classes, and more students getting involved in the process of research, about 10 to 12 teachers with 450 students. If more teachers and more students took part in the research, it would show the variety of the results. As a result, the researcher would discover more findings. Thirdly, in terms of Vietnamese customs, teachers are highly respected, so students sometimes dared not give any complaints about the teachers' methodology. They may have given good comments in the questionnaires, so the questionnaires to the students may not be so reliable. This is Hawthorne effect.

CONCLUSION

This research was one of the new versions that helped teachers at UNETI with a new effective method to improve students' writing abilities and interests. Although the research had some limitations, it still had remarkable results in the writing classes. Thanks to the findings of this investigation, the researcher felt more confident in the

philosophy of the genre-based approach. The researcher found out that students were more relaxed in writing when the teachers taught them how to write, not only tested them (Jacobs & Reynandya, 1999). The easiest way for students to write is to write. If they do so, they will overcome their fears of writing. The researcher also has a strong belief with the saying "the best way to test people's writing is to get them to write". The more the students write, the more skillful they are. In addition, if the writing teachers want their students to commit to writing in class, they need to know the way to stimulate students to write through activities. Students will be more engaged in the activities when the teachers know how to "connect new information and language to their current knowledge, interests and feelings" (Jacobs & Reynandya, 1999).

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