Enhancing the Linguistic Features of Students' Argumentative Genre through the Process-Genre Approach

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Abstract

Argumentative genre writing is considered an important but difficult genre to develop. This paper, therefore, aimed at improving English majoring students' argumentative genre skills employing a process -genre-oriented instruction in Woldia University, Ethiopia. To do so, a quasi-experimental design was employed. Corpus and self-reflection reports were used as data gathering instruments. Genre analysis was employed to analyze the results of the students' corpus. Moreover, direct quotations and interpretations were used to analyze the results gained from the students' self-reflection reports. Thus, the results revealed that students, as they were instructed by the process-genre approach, had, with minimal problems, made paramount efforts to improve the linguistic elements of their argumentative genre from the first draft to the final draft of their argumentative essays. Participants had also positive feedbacks regarding the implementation of the process- genre approach and the role it plays in improving their linguistic features employed in their argumentative essays.

Key words: genre; argumentative genre; process-genre; genre analysis

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1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, English is given as a subject starting from grade one, and used as a medium of instruction in secondary and preparatory schools, and universities. Though it does not lose its motion, its quality has been a series concern for stakeholders especially for people who are involved in the academic arena. It has been an everyday occurrence to hear complaints from teachers, students, and researchers that the English language proficiency of students at all levels of education in the country is deteriorating time from time. In other words, despite the wider coverage allotted to English in Ethiopian schools, colleges, and universities, its current condition is under serious question requiring a call from all the concerned. Though the problem of English seems to be common to all language skills, students' writing skill is worth mentioning (Geremew, 1999).

In that regard, different stakeholders, researchers, and educators are complaining about the level of students' writing skills in educational institutions as it is losing its expected position. For instance, Bekele (2011) notes that different employing organizations are seen complaining about the writing skills of recent graduates who are applying for new career. Furthermore, the study by Abiy (2013: 51) confirmed, "The problem is acute even at postsecondary levels in which students fail to cope with the writing requirements in the courses they take." The researcher's experience has, moreover, been a witness that students' skills in producing an acceptable and effective text even at a higher education level is plunging regardless of the attempts made by the government in general and the English language teachers in particular.

The poor writing performance of students is attributed to several factors such as insufficient practice put on genre-oriented teaching (Dawit, 2013), poor writing instruction (Mesfin, 2013), less attention given to writing (Haregewain, 2008), and employment of traditional approach (Bekele, 2011). Thus, the researcher thinks that students' success in writing partly depends on the teaching method employed in the writing courses as this component is crucially associated with eminence teaching.

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Regardless of the complicatedness of writing in general, and the students' problems of writing in particular, writing is found to be crucial for various reasons. Harmer (2004) stated that as societies aspire to grow larger through industrialization, the need for citizens to be able to write becomes vital. Moreover, understanding the importance of writing in all aspects of life, Geremew (1999:1) points out:

> "Writing is involved in many of the activities that people engage in, and in highly literate societies it seems difficult to do without writing of one kind or another even if one wishes to...there is no reading without writing as far as language is concerned."

In the learning of writing in Ethiopian higher education context, students who learn English as a foreign language are required to engage in academic writing of various types such as essays (descriptive, expository, narrative, and argumentative), term- papers, reports, letters. However, from the preliminary discussions held with students, the researcher came to understand that

argumentative writing has been found to be most difficult skill to develop. This paper, therefore, was concerned with improving students' argumentative writing by executing process-genre approach.

The process- genre approach helps learners to learn the association between form and purpose on a particular genre while they write on the basis of writing process which is a step-by- step act of writing (Badagr& White 2000; Hyland, 2003b; Kim & Kim, 2005; Yan, 2005; Gao, 2007; Deng et al.2014).Badger and white (2000) describe process- genre approach in terms of a view of writing and a view of the development of writing. According to them, written texts of a variety types are composed with a view of conveying a particular purpose which comes out of a particular situation. Furthermore, understanding the problems of students in writing classes, Kim & Kim (2005) noted that a balance of process and genre approaches while teaching writing significantly minimizes the problems students face during writing. The introduction of this approach is, therefore, pronounced as good news for both EFL teachers and students in the teaching and learning of EFL writing (Yan, 2005).

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2. Statement of the problem

Regardless of the importance of argumentative genre writing for university students to express their positions on a particular topic using rationally appropriate structures and strategies, studies show that students encounter difficulties while composing it. Crowhurst (1990) noted that so long as argumentative writing is more cognitively demanding than narrative writing, it is said to be a tough task for students to compose. Ferris (1994) has shown that this essay type is especially problematic for non-native learners because they have both linguistic and rhetorical deficits. According to Knudson (1992:170), moreover, "argument is a complex activity; one that frequently incorporates many of the other writing tasks stressed in a composition course."

Despite its complexity, however, argumentative genre has been proved to be important for students to be successful in their academic life and for general life purposes (Crowhurst, 1990). Moreover, McCann (1989) cited in Knudson (1992) argued that in a narrow sense, argument is an important tool for students who face the task of writing papers; in a broader sense, argument is an essential instrument for a free society that deliberates about social, political, and ethical issues. Hence,

taking the problems students encounter in argumentative writing, a number of studies (Crowhurst, 1990; Hyland, 1990; Knudson, 1992; Ferris, 1994; Dawit, 2013), among others have been carried out worldwide to suggest ways in improving students' argumentative writing performance; and, most of them suggested the application of effective approaches and direct/ explicit instruction to gauge the weaknesses of students' writing ability.

Among the approaches that enable teachers to apply explicit instruction, the process-genre approach has been playing a paramount role in enhancing students' writing skills in a particular genre. Even though the process-genre approach has been studied in different places in the world, so far, little attention is given to genre-oriented study in Ethiopia. In this regard, Dawit (2014) is found to be the pioneer to study a set of business genres, calling for further research into the genre based writing in Ethiopian EFL context applying a process-genre approach. Hence, this study tried to fill this gap by addressing the following basic research questions.

3. Research questions

1. What are the linguistic features used in the students argumentative genre before and after the intervention?
2. What are the feedbacks of students regarding the implementation of the process- genre approach in enhancing their argumentative writing?

3. Methodology

3.1. Study design

The study investigated the effects of process- genre approach on students' linguistic elements in their argumentative genre. The one- group interrupted time series design was particularly employed since it is useful in educational studies (Gray, 2004). Hence, the study employed quasi-experiment since it tried to find out the effects of process- genre teaching on the linguistic features of English majoring university students' argumentative essays.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study were second year EFL regular students taking the course "Advanced Writing Skills" in Woldia University, Ethiopia. EFL students were targeted the fact that they take at least three writing courses during their three years full time study. This means that they had a

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better background knowledge of the different pieces of writing required to compose at university level. Thus, data were generated from 30 participants in the second semester of 2017 academic year.

3.3. Research instruments

A Pretest and series of posttests were employed as data collection instruments to assess students' overall performance in terms of composing effective argumentation. In all tests different tests with parallel topics had been administered in order to avoid the carry-over effects that arise from similar topics. Moreover, since the focus was on the overall communicative quality of argumentative essays, administering different tests may not affect the results. Self-reflection report was also employed so as to get students' feedbacks regarding the impacts of the process-genre approach on their argumentative genre scores in terms of the linguistic features.

In this regard, for test 1 (text 1), a topic on whether or not attendance should be mandatory in tertiary education, for test 2 (text 2), a topic on whether or not social media should be banned in the current situation of Ethiopia, for test 3 (text 3), a topic on whether or not wearing a uniform should be banned in secondary schools, and for the last test (text 4), a topic on whether or not university students should be allowed to evaluate their teachers were their written arguments.

3.4. Evaluation scheme of the tests

The analysis of students' linguistic elements was based on Hyland's (1990) model. The students' written argumentative works in the four texts were marked by two experts. The first was the researcher; the second had been the researcher's colleague who has nine year experience in teaching English at university.

3.4. Analysis

The student's corpuses were analyzed using genre analysis. In doing so, frequencies, percentages, and textual analysis techniques were employed in order to notice whether or not the implementation of the process-genre approach enhances students' use of linguistic elements across the four argumentative essays. Moreover, the reflections of the participants were also analyzed through direct quotations and interpretations.

3.5. Treatment

The implementation of the process-genre approach was conducted for five weeks in the Advanced Writing course in a naturally occurring group which consisted of 30 students. The group was taught argumentative writing using the material prepared by the researcher based on the basic tenets of process-genre approach as described by Yan (2005). The descriptions had six stages: preparation, modeling and reinforcing, planning, joint constructing, independent constructing, and revising.

Preparation

Students, at this stage, were introduced to the social context of argumentative genre and the social purpose it achieves. Activating students' schemata to define argumentative genre and its structural features was the main focus.

Modeling and reinforcing

At this stage, both the teacher and the learners discussed and explored the rhetorical structures of argumentative genre, and its linguistic features including its grammatical features and choice of vocabulary in relation to its function in the given context.

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Planning stage

In here, students' schemata about the argumentative topic, including brainstorming, discussing, and reading associated material were elicited so as to develop an interest in the topic by relating it to their experience.

Joint constructing

At this stage, the teacher and students worked together to begin writing an argumentative text. While doing so, the teacher used the writing processes of brainstorming, drafting, and revising. The final draft provides a model for students to refer to when they work on their individual compositions. Activities at this stage were carried out in small groups, as working with peers gives learners the experience of integrating knowledge of context, genre, and the process of writing text (Hyland, 2004).

Independent constructing

In this stage, students were requested to research the context of the given topic and construct argumentative genre independently by using knowledge of genre and writing skills they had learned from previous stages.

Revising stage,

At the revising stage, students eventually came up with a draft that undergone final revision and editing. They could also carry out self-evaluation and exchange their drafts with their peers for comments.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Linguistic features

The analysis of linguistic features was concerned with tenses in the information move, phrases in the proposition move, argumentative verbs in the proposition move, auxiliary verbs in the claim move, and the presentation of markers in the conclusion stage. The tables below indicate the frequency of these linguistic features across the four argumentative texts.

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Table 1. Frequency of tenses in the information move

Move	Tense	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4
		Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
Information Move	Simple Present	1	10	14	22
	Future			1	
	Present perfect	1	2	1	4

As indicated Table 1 above, the present tense, present perfect tense, and the simple future tense were observed in the students' argumentative texts. *Present tense* was found to have the highest frequency in all the texts; whereas, the '*future tense*' was found to have the least occurrence which was employed in text 2. 10 statements with simple present tense were composed in text 2 while the frequency had a positive increase to 14 in text 3 and 22 in text 4, indicating students' awareness on the use of this tense in the information move. The '*present perfect tense*' was also noticed in all the texts. 4 papers were noticed containing present perfect tense that is used to indicate the contemporary relevance to the thesis to be argued. In conclusion, as a result of the incorporation of the process-genre approach, students were able to be familiar with the importance of present and present perfect tenses in discussing contemporary issues on the thesis to be argued.

Examples of tenses in the information move from students' texts

..... whether or not high school students should wear uniform <u>has been</u> an agenda.(S4*)*

The idea of evaluating teachers should be banned <u>becomes</u> many people's concern. (S8)

It is argued that wearing uniforms <u>will</u> be banned in high school. (S32)

Table 2. Frequency of Phrases in the Proposition Move

Move	Phrase	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4
		Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
Proposition Move	As far as I am concerned,	2	4	7	10
	For me,	1	3	4	7
	In my opinion,	0	3	5	6
	Personally speaking,	0	2	3	5
	My belief is that	0	1	0	0
	In my view,	2	5	3	5

Table 2 indicates the presentation of appropriate phrases used in discussing the proposition in the thesis stage. As shown in the Table, 6 different phrases were employed in students' argumentative essays across the four texts. The most frequently occurred phrase was '*as far as I am concerned'*; this phrase had 23 occurrences in all the four texts. The students' awareness of the use of this phrase had been enhanced in the texts composed after the introduction of the process-genre approach. Similarly, the phrase '*in my opinion'* was used in ten texts in all the four argumentative essays. Likewise, ten texts employed '*for me'* again in all the texts. The presentation of these phrases in all the texts written in the post-intervention phase has shown important progress. Phrases such as '*personally speaking'* and '*in my opinion'* were found to have 10 and 14 appearances in all the texts. The least frequency was observed in the phrase '*my belief is that'* which occurred in 1 text only.

Examples of phrases in the proposition move from students' texts

<u>*As far as I am concerned*</u>*, wearing uniform should not be banned in high school.* (S12)

<u>*In my opinion*</u>*, I reject the idea that social media should be banned in Ethiopia.* (S23)

<u>*In my view*</u>*, attendance should not be mandatory in universities.* (S1)

Table 3. Frequency of argumentative verbs in the Proposition Move

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Move	Argumentative verb	Text 1 Frequency	Text 2 Frequency	Text 3 Frequency	Text 4 Frequency
Proposition Move	Support	3	6	4	5
	Agree	4	3	4	6
	Disapprove	0	0	1	2
	Reject	0	2	4	4
	Oppose	0	3	4	5
	Believe	2	3	3	3
	Confirm	0	0	0	1
	Prove	0	0	1	0
	Think	0	0	1	2
	Dislike	0	1	0	0

As can be seen in Table 3 above, 11 different function words were employed in all the four students' argumentative texts. Among the words, '*support*' was used by 18 texts with an increased frequency in the texts composed after the intervention. The word '*agree*' was also found to have 17 appearances. Likewise, '*believe*' was also occurred in 16 texts, showing increased frequencies in the last three texts. '*Confirm*' and '*prove*' were detected having the least frequency compared to the rest of the words. The other argumentative verbs had very few occurrences in all the texts though most of them were found to occur in the texts undertaken after the treatment. In short, students were found to be familiar with the different argumentative verbs that are presented in the proposition move. The table above, moreover, discloses the increased awareness of students on the different argumentative verbs through which the writers could be able to state their stance on the topic identified as a controversial issue.

Examples of argumentative verbs in the proposition move from students' texts

……, I <u>agree</u> with some persons' view that wearing uniforms in high school should not be banned. (S30)

I <u>oppose</u> the ban of social media. (S21)

I <u>dislike</u> the view the students should evaluate their teachers. (S4)

Table 4. Frequency of Auxiliary Verbs in the Claim and Support Moves

Move	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4

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	Auxiliary verb	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
Claim and Support Moves	Can	4	7	8	8
	Will	0	3	6	7
	May	3	3	2	3
	Could	3	3	4	4
	Might	1	0	0	2
	Would	0	0	0	1

Table 4 above shows the different auxiliary verbs that were employed in all the students' argumentative texts in the claim as well as the support moves. Among the words, *will* and *can* appeared in many texts. The frequency of these verbs showed an increase in the texts written after the intervention. In this regard, only 4 texts were found to have *can*, while *will* was not presented in text 1. The frequency of *can* has increased to 7 in text 2, to 8 in text 3 and 4 respectively, indicating student' increased awareness on the use of this verb in stating the claim and the support moves. The verb *will* was also appeared in many texts undertaken after the intervention. 3 texts were observed containing *will* in text 2. The frequency increased to 6 and 7 in text 3 and text 4 respectively, revealing students' understanding of the use of this verb in discussing claims and supportive statements while composing argumentative genre. The verbs *may* and *could* were also appeared in many texts though the frequencies were not observed as much as *can* and *will*. In this case, the occurrences of these verbs had increased in the texts carried out in the post-intervention phase. Verbs such as *might* and *would* have been presented in few texts composed after the introduction of the process-genre approach.

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Examples of auxiliary verbs in the claim and support moves from students' texts

Using social media for bad purposes <u>will</u> result in conflicts among people. (S18)

Wearing uniforms <u>can</u> avoid social discrimination. (S10)

It is clear that evaluating teachers by us <u>could</u> influence our relationship. (S25)

Table 5. Frequency of Markers in the Conclusion Stage

Move	Marker	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4
		Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
Marker move in the conclusion stage	In short,	0	4	5	8
	To sum up,	1	3	5	4
	In sum,	0	2	2	4
	All in all,	0	3	1	3
	In general,	1	5	8	9

To conclude,	0	0	2	3
In a word,	0	0	1	3

Markers in the entrance of the conclusion stage indicate the connection between the argument and the conclusion stages. The markers showed in Table 5 were employed in students' argumentative texts despite their varied frequencies in each text. Among them, the marker '*in general*' appeared in most of the essays across the four texts. In this regard, 23 texts used this marker; moreover, the frequencies showed a positive increase in the texts written in the post-intervention phase, indicating students' effort in using the phrase '*in general*' that signal the conclusion. The second most frequently occurred marker was '*in short*' which appeared in 17 texts, revealing significant improvements in the argumentative essays composed after the intervention. Likewise, the marker '*to sum up*' had 13 appearances, 12 of them were employed in the texts composed in the post-intervention phase. Compared to the other phrases, the words '*to conclude*' and '*in a word*' were observed in very few texts written after the intervention. 5 texts used '*to conclude*', while 4 texts employed the marker '*in a word*' to make a transition to the conclusion stage.

Examples of markers in the conclusion stage from students' texts

In short, evaluating teachers by students is helpful. (S17)

To sum up, attendance is not important in university. (S13)

In general, social media is needed. (S4)

4.2. Students' reflections

Students were requested to give feedbacks regarding the implementation of the process-genre approach and its impacts on their argumentative genre writing. The words of the participants notified that students, as they were instructed by the process-genre based instruction, were in a position to be aware of:

- The purpose of developing an argumentative genre;
- The elements they should consider when they develop an argumentative genre;
- The structural organization of the elements of this important genre;
- The linguistic elements they have to use in asserting their arguments;
- The illustrations they make use of in offering examples suitable to the reader;
- The necessary supportive ideas they use to sustain their arguments;

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- The use of counter arguments in refuting opposing viewpoints;

Moreover, from the reflections, students honestly declared that as they got busy considering all the elements of a well-written argumentative genre, they were in trouble in controlling their grammar, spelling, vocabulary and punctuation.

5. Conclusion and suggestion

In conclusion, the paper discussed the tenses used in the proposition move, phrases that were used in discussing the proposition to indicate attitudinal stance, the argumentative verbs employed in the proposition move that indicate the writers' position on the given argumentative topics, the auxiliary verbs employed to show the ability, probability, and possibility of the action stated in the claim move, and the markers in the entrance of the conclusion stage that indicate the connection between the argument and the conclusion stages. In this regard, the presentations of these linguistic elements were enhanced in the post-intervention phase, showing the role the process-genre approach plays in improving students' argumentative essays.

The finding of the study showed that students have used more linguistic elements in the post-intervention phase than in the pre-intervention phase. The frequencies of the linguistic elements used in the texts carried out after the incorporation of the process-genre approach were higher though there were considerable differences regarding their occurrences. In the analysis, moreover, it was also found out that students' awareness on the different aspects of argumentative genre has been enhanced resulting from the synthesized approach. Students' generally reflected that the process- genre approach is crucial in enhancing their argumentative essays in terms of the linguistic features. Not only could they perform better but they were in a position to become aware of the social purpose and structure of a written argument.

In conclusion, writing, when suitable approaches are used, would be improved. The findings of this study, in this case, would be useful for English teachers that the implementation of process-genre approach has been proved to produce positive results in students' argumentative genre writing.

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