

Process Genre Approach in SPOC Blended Learning Environment to Improve Chinese EFL Learners' Generic Writing Competence

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8100248>

Received: 15 October 2024; Accepted: 22 October 2024; Published: 20 November 2024

ABSTRACT

Research has indicated that Chinese EFL learners demonstrated challenges in generic competence related to writing. The process-genre approach has been found to contribute positively to improving this competence, according to several studies. However, most of the relevant research and teaching practice were in traditional classroom setting, which can no longer conform to the characteristics of the digital era and China's national educational policy. The current study attempts to integrate process genre approach into a SPOC based blended learning environment at a university in China and investigate its impacts on Chinese EFL learners' generic competence in writing. A qualitative research method was employed in this study and the qualitative research instruments of semi-structured interviews and e-portfolios were adopted in the investigation. The findings revealed that participants perceived that they had improved their generic writing competence. They not only had a better understanding of the communicative purposes and main features of different genres, but also cultivated a strong sense of genre before writing essays. In addition, they were able to incorporate their awareness of organization, content, and language features in their processes of writing. Therefore, the combination of process genre approach and SPOC blended learning is highly recommended to EFL writing instructors.

Keywords: Writing, Generic Competence, Process Genre Approach, SPOC, Blended Learning

INTRODUCTION

Generic competence in writing is a kind of ability to produce a discourse that is appropriate to the situation or context (Swales, 1990, p.155). It includes genre knowledge such as the communicative purpose of the discourse, the conventions socially constructed by the discourse community (Swales, 1990), the targeted audience (Nwogu & Bloor, 1991), genre awareness, and competence in incorporating genre awareness into the writing process (Deng et al., 2014; Jarunthawatchai, 2010). Generic competence plays a pivotal role in initiating EFL learners into the discourse community of the target language (Deng et al., 2014). And developing EFL learners' generic competence is viewed as the ultimate goal in the process of teaching and learning genres in academic settings (Bhatia, 2004; Swales, 2004).

In accordance with the syllabus guided by China's national standard, EFL learners need to have the awareness of genre and the ability to master the genre structure, rhetorical structure, and lexical and grammatical features of different genre texts, and to learn to produce genre-appropriate texts according to context (Yang, 2015). However, based on previous research (Cai & Luo, 2015; Huettner, 2015; Abdelwahab, 2020), it was found that many students are not unfamiliar with the common types of genres in English writing, lack necessary genre knowledge, and are not able to tell differences among those writing styles. Additionally, as noted by Deng et al. (2014) and Jarunthawatchai (2010), college students usually do not pay enough attention to the communicative purpose in the process of writing, lacking reader awareness and genre awareness, and cannot apply genre knowledge to the communicative context, thus having weak generic competence in writing.

To address the above problem in Chinese higher educational context, an effective teaching approach is required. Process genre approach (PGA) was discovered to be effective in improving learners' generic competence in writing (Deng et al., 2014), but traditional classroom settings were no longer able to conform to the characteristics of the global information age (Wang & Zhang, 2019). As a type of blended learning model in the post-MOOCs era, Small Private Online Course (SPOC) can meet the individualized learning needs of modern young learners in the digital era (Yang & Feng, 2022), and better promote online and offline blended learning. As a result, the current study attempts to integrate process genre approach into a SPOC based blended learning environment at a university in China and investigate its effects on Chinese EFL learners' generic competence in writing. It is hoped that this teaching mode can cater to China's national educational policy of promoting digital learning, mobile learning, ubiquitous learning, personalized learning and life-long learning, and meet the current college learners' needs. Since the generic competence in writing mainly includes genre knowledge, genre awareness, and competence in incorporating genre awareness into the writing process, the following three research questions are addressed:

RQ1: To what extent does the SPOC based blended approach enhance Chinese EFL learners' genre knowledge?

RQ2: To what extent does the SPOC based blended approach improve Chinese EFL learners' genre awareness?

RQ3: How does the SPOC based blended approach impact Chinese EFL learners' competence in incorporating genre awareness into the writing process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2000, Badger and White first proposed the process genre approach, which summarized the respective weaknesses and strengths of the process approach, product approach, and genre approach. Since the innovative teaching method was put forward, it has been studied and practiced by quite a few scholars in the past decades. Hyland (2003) believed that this integrated approach had the largest impact on the ESL writing teaching, drawing strengths from needs analysis, discourse analysis, genre description and linguistic theory. Zhou (2024) and Fiallos (2024) concluded PGA was efficient in developing writing skills for EFL students, such as strategically planning and outlining ideas before writing, and revising and editing after writing.

It turned out that PGA is feasible and effective in fostering and enhancing language learners' generic competence in writing (e.g. Abdelwahab, 2020; Deng et al., 2014; Kihal, 2015; Mirzamohammadi, 2024; Rusinovci, 2024; Zhou & Chen, 2003; Zhou, 2024). More specifically, the process genre approach is conducive to the improvement of genre knowledge and genre awareness. For instance, in view of Zhou and Chen (2003), PGA was able to assist students fully engage in all phases of the entire writing process and cultivate students' writing ability in terms of genre awareness, communicative purpose, content, language use, textual cohesion and coherence. However, there was a lack of empirical evidence in their study. Kihal (2015) investigated the effect of PGA on EFL students' awareness of academic writing, finding that the majority of participants became aware of the genre characteristics and the writing purpose before starting to write and learned how to select their audience and fit their interests and levels. Furthermore, Abdelwahab (2020) found the participants developed their knowledge of different genres under the influence of PGA, because they benefited a lot from the explicit instruction of genre analysis and modeling. Mirzamohammadi (2024) maintained that PGA helped students get more familiar with the genres specific to a certain context and deeply understand the genre structure, content, and language features regarding each genre, thus contributing to effective communication in a professional context. Moreover, Rusinovci (2024) found PGA had helped students raise interest and awareness about genres, and develop a more intricate knowledge of writing processes, genres, and other elements related to EFL writing.

Furthermore, the process genre approach has proved to be beneficial for the improvement of competence in incorporating genre awareness into the writing process. According to Jarunthawatchai (2010), after the experiment, students cultivated genre awareness, learning to consider genres from multiple dimensions, such as social situation, communicative purposes, writer-readers relationship, content, organization, as well as

language use. They were also able to incorporate such genre awareness in their writing process. However, it was indicated that some students' genre awareness was still vague and incomplete, and they did not fully understand the writer-readers relationship.

All the studies above were conducted in the traditional classroom setting, and studies focusing on generic competence in writing in a blended learning environment are still under explored. Therefore, the study attempts to examine whether genre process approach in a SPOC based learning environment has a positive impact on EFL learners' generic competence in writing.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative research method was employed in this study, which is concerned with feelings, ideas, or experiences, producing insights by collecting non-numerical data (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). In the present study, interviews and e-portfolios were used in gathering the data. According to Jamshed (2014), interviewing is the most used method in qualitative research; the semi-structured interview is a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984) and often viewed as an easy data collection method (Wengraf, 2001). Moreover, e-portfolios are extensively used in classroom assessment (Barrett, 2006), as one of the most effective instruments to support EFL students in language acquisition, especially in developing students' writing performance (Tran & Nguyen, 2023).

Research Context and Participants

The study was implemented in the second semester of the school year 2023-2024 at English Department, Zhejiang Ocean University, China. The research lasted 16 weeks from late February to the end of June 2024. The convenience sampling technique were adopted in the study as the researcher taught the class himself therefore, he had full access to the participants. The participants were 34 sophomores from an intact class, and their ages range from 19 to 22, with the length of exposure to English ranging from 11 to 14 years. All of them were exposed to SPOC environment and eight of them were invited to attend the semi-structured interview after the treatment. According to Karania (2017), the suggested number for interview sample size is between below ten and not more than thirty interviewees.

Research Instruments

Research instruments including semi-structured interviews and e-portfolios were adopted to address the three research questions. There were six questions in the semi-structured interviews, focusing on different aspects of generic competence in writing. In terms of the validity and reliability of the semi-structured interview, all the questions were adapted from the research of Deng et al. (2014) and Pei (2022) and were cross-checked by an experienced English teacher. Additionally, all the protocols of interview questions were written in Chinese, and they could answer them in Chinese as well, so that the language barriers would not affect the results of the interview.

The e-portfolio contents were designed based on research done by Deng et al. (2014) and Duong (2015), including five parts. All the research participants were required to do detailed individual text analysis after learning a new genre and write reflections on the target genre accordingly. They need to evaluate sample texts in a group (each member was assigned with a different role). In addition, they should include four multi-drafted topic writings of different genres over time (from the first draft to the final draft) with peer review and self-reflections, as well as five summaries. Finally, they were required to make an end-of-course reflective report, including aspects such as their achievements gained in the course, obstacles in the process, changes over time, and suggestions for the blended learning mode. All the documents were submitted to the researcher at the end of the semester.

Research Procedures

One of the researchers who was the class lecturer communicated with students about the research procedure,

research objectives, and instruments, and asked for their consent for the research. In class, the research participants were put in a SPOC-based blended learning environment and taught by process genre approach. After the end of semester, eight students with different levels of writing performance were asked to attend the interview in an informal way. Finally, all of them were required to submit their e-portfolios to the class lecturer.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using content analysis method. As one of today's most extensively employed analytical tools (Allen & Reser, 1990), qualitative content analysis is mainly inductive, which involves a process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005).

After transcribing and coding all the interviewees' responses, the researchers classified these data according to research questions. The interviewees were labeled from the first (SI1) to the eighth (SI8), so that their personal information would be kept private and remain confidential. Typical interview excerpts were chosen as evidence to support some of the research findings. After all the e-portfolios were collected, they were coded and qualitatively analyzed. Their e-portfolios were labeled from the first (SP1) to the last (SP34) according to the sequence of their student ID number.

FINDINGS

Participants' Genre Knowledge

Regarding the learner's genre knowledge, questions about the concept of genre, the communicative purpose of each genre, and genre differentiation were asked in the semi-structured interview. The excerpts below highlighted the interviewees' familiarity with the four genres, their communicative purposes, and genre features. Both interviewees clearly demonstrated an understanding of the structure and purpose of each genre.

I am familiar with the four types of English writing. For example, a narrative essay mainly describes the process of an event in detail, including its beginning, development, climax and end. An argumentative essay is an expression of an author's point of view. Generally, that point is arguable. It is a point worth discussing, which can be discussed with both positive and negative aspects. Then demonstrate this point of view through reasoning, examples, analogy, comparison, causal analysis and other argumentation means, and make their own point of view recognized. (SI2)

I have a better understanding of genres than before. For example, a narrative essay mainly takes accounts of an event, including the beginning, cause, climax and ending, and there are contradictions and conflicts. However, a description is a specific description of a person or thing, so that the reader can have a picture in his mind. Description can be subjective or objective. An expository essay mainly refers to a relatively objective explanation of the characteristics of a thing. Argumentative writing is the expression of one's own views and it is subjective. (SI4)

In the first excerpt (SI2), the interviewee distinguished between a narrative essay, which focused on detailing the stages of an event, and an argumentative essay, which involved presenting a debatable point and supporting it with various argumentation techniques, such as reasoning, examples, and causal analysis. This reflected an understanding of both the communicative purposes and the structural features of these genres. Similarly, the other interviewee (SI4) also showed a comprehensive understanding of genres. The interviewee described narrative writing as involving a sequence of events with conflicts, while descriptive writing focused on creating vivid mental images of a person or thing, either subjectively or objectively. The interviewee also differentiated between expository and argumentative essays, noting that the former explained something objectively, while the latter expressed subjective viewpoints. This demonstrated their grasp of the key characteristics and purposes of each genre.

In addition, concerning their generic competence in distinguishing between genres, some believed that the

differences between narration and description were apparent, and three of them still found it difficult to distinguish between exposition and argumentation especially when there were both expository and argumentative parts in the same essay. For instance:

It is easier to distinguish between narrative and descriptive texts, but expository and argumentative ones may need to be considered. ... So, by looking at the structure of the article itself, you can actually distinguish which is a narrative essay and which is a descriptive essay. (SI3)

About the four genres, after systematic learning in this semester, I can roughly distinguish between them, and I learned much more genre knowledge than before. (SI4)

I can distinguish some of the simpler genres. I find it difficult to distinguish expository writing from argumentative writing. Sometimes I don't know whether an article is an explanation or an argument. Therefore, I feel that sometimes I can't accurately judge whether the passage is argumentative or not. (SI7)

According to the above excerpts, due to the growth in genre knowledge, the second interviewee (SI4) could distinguish between genres. The first interviewee (SI3) thought it was easier to distinguish between narrative and descriptive texts by comparing their typical genre features or structures. The two excerpts showed that some of them mastered the distinctive features of the four genres and could roughly distinguish between them, especially between narration and description. As for expository and argumentative essays, both the interviewees (SI3 and SI7) had difficulty in distinguishing between the two genres. Sometimes, they even felt confused about the specific genre of a given text. Therefore, after being exposed to SPOC, it was revealed that some students did gain competence in distinguishing between genres by examining their genre features and textual structures, especially between narration and description, while still others were not confident and competent enough to distinguish between exposition and argumentation.

Based on the analysis of students' e-portfolios, the researchers could easily learn about their development of genre knowledge. It was found that all of them had correctly sorted and assembled relevant tasks concerning different genres. Most of the tasks to be included in the e-portfolio were related to different genres, thus they had to clearly and correctly search and collect all the information, reflecting their generic competence in identifying and distinguishing genres. The first two tasks were to individually and collectively conduct textual analysis (based on analysis of genre, organization, content, and language use), they had to search for an essay of target genre and analyze it thoroughly. The third task was topic writing, including the first draft, peer review, and final draft, with reflection of each genre after final revising, and students had to draft, revise, and submit their writings as required for each genre. All of them were clear on their assigned tasks, thus they had no trouble in this regard.

In addition, an analysis of students' reflections in the e-portfolios also suggested their development of genre knowledge. Most students stressed the better understanding of genres and their communicative purposes, and they mastered writing techniques of target genre after the treatment, as shown in the following excerpts:

Through studying narrative writing in this course, I have learned a lot. Firstly, I have gained a clearer understanding of the structure of a narrative. I learned that a narrative typically consists of a beginning, development, climax, further development, and ending. Secondly, regarding writing techniques, I have learned how to use different techniques to showcase my story instead of simply recounting it. I can bring my descriptions to life by using sensory details or using parallel structure to make the structure of my essay more streamlined. (SP2)

Through the learning of the writing class in this semester, I have understood the common types and genres of English writing and can distinguish them. I have learned the difference between argumentation and exposition. In expository essay, the writers present their point of view and then explain them as clearly as possible. On the contrary, argumentation involves more than presenting a point of view and providing evidence. (SP24)

According to the first excerpt (SP2), the student mentioned her clearer understanding of the structure of a narrative and mastery of different techniques to showcase a story instead of simply recounting it. Another

student (SP24) shared her insights on the common genres of English writing and could distinguish between them, demonstrating the gains in genre knowledge. These two excerpts illustrated their understanding of genres and the communicative purposes, and they had mastered writing techniques of target genre.

All these findings of e-portfolios are in much consistency with those of semi-structured interview. The overwhelming majority of them have gained valuable knowledge about four genres of essay writing. They were able to generalize the genre features, communicative purposes, necessary semantic elements of the four text types, and distinguish between genres.

Participants' Genre Awareness

Genre awareness is another important element in students' generic competence in writing (Deng et al., 2014). Participants' development in genre awareness was reflected in their positive responses to the question given in the semi-structured interview. It was found that most of the interviewees had developed an awareness of the genre, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

After the study of this semester, compared with the past, I have a sense of genre in the process of writing. Before writing in English, I will carefully examine the topic and judge what kind of article it is. (SI1)

I think in my writing process, I pay more attention to the semantic structure now. Before I learned this course, I didn't know that the semantic structures of different genres are different. Now before I write an essay, I may think about its genre or text type, outline my ideas first, produce a framework, and then supplement it. (SI7)

According to the above excerpts, the two interviewees (SI1 and SI7) had developed a sense of genre and learned to consider genre or text type of the given writing task before outlining and drafting. This demonstrated that they cultivated genre awareness and acknowledged great significance to it.

Based on the assessment of participants' e-portfolios, it was revealed that improvement in their genre awareness could be found as well. The assignment of textual analysis in the first two parts of an e-portfolio not only displayed students' improvement in genre knowledge, but also showed their development in genre awareness. Another task in the e-portfolio related to the students' improvement in genre awareness was the reflections of the writing course. Many students explicitly mentioned their development of genre awareness, as shown in the excerpts:

After learning the course, I have learned a lot in the following parts. First of all, it is necessary to first judge the genre of the passage. The basic element is different in different kinds of passages. Our writings are supposed to base on the judgement of the genre, which was often ignored by me before. But after learning the course, I master the awareness of genre and understand the requirements better. (SP14)

Through this semester's writing course, I can basically master the semantic structures of different genres and establish a sense of genre. Before writing, I can choose the appropriate genre according to the topic and the overall grasp of the genre structure, and carry out the conception and creation, instead of relying only on the topic of writing. (SP16)

Based on the above excerpts, both students (SP14 and SP16) mentioned that they had learned to establish genre awareness through the course. They suggested that learners should think about the communicative purpose and choose appropriate genre according to directions in the writing task. It showed that students had cultivated and established genre awareness, and they were able to judge and choose suitable genres before writing. Such findings are in consistence with those qualitative findings of semi-structured interview.

Participants' Competence in Incorporating Genre Awareness in the Writing Process

Another factor in assessing generic competence in writing is competence in incorporating genre awareness in the writing process. The findings revealed that participants were able to incorporate their awareness of organization, content, and language features in their processes of composing essays. The interviewees were asked to share their changes in writing habit in the semi-structured interview. Based on the replies, it was

revealed that most of the interviewees had developed an awareness of genre and could incorporate it in writing. To be specific, in order to achieve the communicative purpose, they could select appropriate genres and had a clear awareness of the overall organization of the essay based on the given context and direction. Besides awareness of organization, some students mentioned their common practice in writing concerning the incorporation of their awareness of content and language, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

Before writing in English, I will carefully examine the topic and judge what kind of genre is proper. In writing, the corresponding semantic structure will be used for writing, and after writing, the corresponding format specification will be checked again. Because the semantic structure and format specification of languages are a key point in the teaching process of this semester, it has been emphasized many times in class, which is also one of the main references for inspection in the panel review. (S11)

Before writing, I start to outline and find that it will stop me from stray from the point. In the process of writing, I constantly look at the outline, check whether it is related to the subject matter, whether the content is substantial, thinking what word is used, and what sentence type is used. After writing, I will read it all over. If I think the language is not very smooth, there are grammatical mistakes, and the sentence pattern is relatively simple, I will add some advanced sentence patterns, and I will also ask my classmates to help check them. (S15)

I don't write immediately when I see the title. Before writing, I consider the topic, and then roughly plan how to put forward ideas, expand the content, and then how to write the end. In writing, I write around the topic sentence, and then pay attention to the coherence between the sentences. After writing, I will revise it many times, pay more attention to the unity of the article, and can better grasp the integrity of the article. (S18)

The first extract (S11) showed how the interviewees' writing habits had changed, how they chose the appropriate genre for a particular topic and how they adopted the appropriate semantic structure when writing. The second interviewee (S15) mentioned the writing process of outlining, drafting and revising and emphasized the importance of incorporating awareness of content and language into the writing process. Apart from the awareness of organization, content, and language mentioned in the third excerpt (S18), the interviewee emphasized the coherence and unity in writing. These excerpts demonstrated their development of genre awareness and incorporation of their awareness of organization, content and language in writing.

Based on the analysis of students' e-portfolios, it was found that they were able to develop genre awareness and incorporate it into their writing processes. They realized that a specific text was crafted in response to a particular social situation, with the intention of accomplishing its communicative purposes within that given context. To be specific, during the textual analysis and group evaluation section (the first two tasks in e-portfolio), students could firstly and clearly point out the communicative purpose (genre type) of the given text, and whether it was implicitly or explicitly presented. Moreover, they were able to comment on the writer-reader relationship, which affected the formality and appropriateness of language use. Thirdly, the obligatory and selective elements in the genre (semantic structure) were discussed and commented on, so that contextual configuration of the target genre could be complete and in correct sequence. Finally, they were able to make comments on language use such as the word choice, sentence pattern, and mechanics. The third task in e-portfolio was topic writing, including the first draft, peer review, and final draft, with reflection of each genre after final revising, and students had to draft, revise, and submit their writings as required for each genre. All of them performed well in the three parts, demonstrating their competence in incorporating their awareness of genre in writing, revising and commenting processes.

In addition, according to the self-reflections of the participants, it was found that the participants could incorporate their awareness of organization, content, and language in writing, as shown in the following.

I have a lot to pay attention to in terms of language. First, the length of the sentence, I have had the problem of too long sentences in many writings. Sentences that are too long can be difficult to understand, and readers will feel tired if they read too much. Second, the problem of connecting words, in writing, there has been a problem of repeating connecting words in the same paragraph, which makes readers easily confused. Therefore, in the future writing, I will accumulate more synonymous connectives to avoid the above problems. Third, the

sentence structure or vocabulary is not rich enough, sometimes it is more common, and there is still room for improvement in this area. (SP7)

I have gained precious writing methods. In the past, when I wrote a composition, I was more spontaneous, and I merely conceived the general structure and content of the article. But now I have formed the habit of thinking carefully about the genre, structure, content, connection of various parts, and what kind of language can achieve the purpose of writing the article before writing. (SP15)

In terms of content, I realized that the beginning and end of the article are actually very important because it makes a very strong impression on others. For example, the beginning needs to attract the reader's interest, and at the end, it is necessary not only to summarize the overview, but sometimes to sublimate the topic. Therefore, in my writing, I pay more attention to it and make it more reasonable and vivid. (SP20)

The three excerpts illustrated that they were able to incorporate genre awareness in planning, writing, and revising. As for the excerpts of SP7 and SP20, they share their insights in the aspects of language and content respectively, reflecting on their problems and offering suggestions. The second one mentions their writing habits and awareness in genre, organization, content, and language.

Such findings are in line with those qualitative findings of semi-structured interview. The participants not only established and developed genre awareness but were able to incorporate their genre awareness in the writing process.

DISCUSSION

The research findings revealed that participants' generic competence in writing was enhanced greatly. Regarding learners' genre knowledge, notable improvements can be observed in their understanding of genre concepts, communicative purposes, and the ability to differentiate between genres. All the eight interviewees confirmed they not only had a better understanding of the concept of genre, but they also became quite clear about the communicative purposes and main features of different genres and were able to distinguish between genres with typical genre features. The findings were also consistent with what was discovered in their e-portfolios. After reading students' assignments in text analysis, the researcher confirmed they were familiar with the communicative purpose, discourse pattern, semantic structure and genre features of a target genre. In addition, an analysis of students' self-reflections in the e-portfolios also revealed their development of genre knowledge. Therefore, SPOC learning environment is effective in enhancing participants' genre. The results of present study were in line with previous research (e.g. Abdelwahab, 2020; Crosthwaite et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2014; Jarunthawatchai, 2010; Mirzamohammadi, 2024). For example, Abdelwahab (2020) found PGA helped the participants develop their genre knowledge and benefited a lot from the explicit instruction of genre analysis and modeling. Crosthwaite et al. (2021, p.1) revealed blended learning was advantageous in improving students' understanding of text structure, organization, generation of ideas, and knowledge of genre rhetorical features. In addition, Deng et al. (2014, p.40) mentioned the most evident change in EFL learners' generic competence in writing was the considerable increase of their genre knowledge after the implementation of the process genre approach, and the participants were able to distinguish concepts like generic structure, communicative purpose, linguistic features, discourse pattern, and so on. Mirzamohammadi (2024) also concluded that PGA was able to help students get more familiar with the genres specific to a certain context and deeply understand the genre structure, content, and language features regarding each genre.

Regarding the importance of genre awareness, it was found that participants valued genre awareness very much, and they also cultivated a relatively strong sense of genre before writing an essay. In addition, based on their evaluation of peers' essays in e-portfolios, it was revealed that they were able to comprehensively analyze and evaluate an essay based on their genre knowledge. And according to their self-reflections in e-portfolios, they believed they had cultivated strong genre awareness and were able to judge and choose suitable genres before writing. The results of the present study were in line with previous research (e.g. Abdelwahab, 2020; Crosthwaite et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2014; Jarunthawatchai, 2010; Kihal, 2015; Rusinovci, 2024). For instance, Deng et al. (2014) held that EFL learners could recontextualize and foster their genre awareness through regular detailed textual analysis and multi-draft writing practice in a particular context, which helped

the development of learners' generic competence in writing. In addition, Kihal (2015, pp. 326-328) found the process genre approach assisted most participants to become aware of the genre characteristics and the writing purpose before drafting an essay, enhanced their cognitive skills to process their own essays and taught them how to select their audience and how to fit their interests and levels. Moreover, Rusinovci (2024) found PGA could help students raise interest and awareness about genres and develop a more intricate knowledge of writing processes and genres related to EFL writing.

The semi-structured interview and e-portfolios revealed that participants were able to incorporate their awareness of organization, content, and language features in their processes of writing. The results of the present study were consistent with previous research (e.g. Crosthwaite et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2014; Jarunthawatchai, 2010; Kihal, 2015). For instance, Jarunthawatchai (2010, p.280) found the students' improvement of the text quality could be explained by their gains in explicit awareness of genre and the incorporation of genre awareness into their writing process. And it was concluded that process genre approach helped them solve the problems of content, organization, and language feature and transform their ideas into L2 text using appropriate content, organizational, and linguistic features. Moreover, Kihal (2015, p.328) also concluded that the process genre approach helped participants choose relevant content, logical organization, academic vocabulary, academic structure, conventions, spelling, and punctuation which could fit the academic purpose of essay genre, or any other specific purpose of a written genre. However, the results of present study were not in line with that of Hsu and Liu (2019), who found although the participants benefited from blended English genre-based writing instruction, their improvements in writing were not significant.

To conclude, the improvement in their generic competence in writing could be attributed to the following factors. Firstly, it was revealed that the implementation of the process genre approach was able to foster and strengthen students' genre knowledge concerning concepts like generic structure, communicative purpose, linguistic features, discourse pattern, and so on. Students could benefit a lot from the teachers' explicit instruction of genre analysis and model essays and could recontextualize and foster their genre awareness through some activities such as regular detailed textual analysis and multi-draft writing practice in a particular context. Moreover, the improvement of genre awareness could enable learners to transform their ideas into writings with appropriate content, organization, and language features, which reflected the development of learners' generic competence in writing. Secondly, blended learning environment was also found to be advantageous in improving students' genre awareness in understanding textual structure, generation of ideas, and genre rhetorical features. Blended learning provided students with flexible learning opportunities catering to their different learning styles and learning habits. Moreover, students were required to discuss many aspects of the writing task in advance on the SPOC platform and attend in-depth group discussion and peer review; thus, they could share their opinions about the genre analysis, communicative purpose, potential readers, textual structure, language features, and so on. Such activities had a positive impact on the cultivation and development of their generic competence in writing.

CONCLUSION

With the advance of educational informatization, EFL writing instructors ought to change the teaching concept, actively use information technology, and comprehensively improve the effect of English writing teaching. The combination of process genre approach and SPOC-based blended teaching mode was proved to be effective in enhancing students' generic competence in writing by the present research. Therefore, this blended approach is recommended for EFL writing instructors. Moreover, e-portfolios ought to be highly recommended in the EFL classroom. Based on the study, a great majority of the participants held very positive attitudes towards the multifaceted writing portfolio. It is very helpful to improve their generic competence in writing, because it provided them with a good channel of genre knowledge input and output.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The period of experiment can be extended in future study. It is found that many English major undergraduates, especially from international studies universities in China, are required to learn these four genres in four semesters (two academic years). While the current research was conducted within only one semester (16 weeks in total). Therefore, it is recommended that some teachers should carry out a longitudinal study to examine the

effectiveness of process genre approach in SPOC blended learning environment over a longer period. Different qualitative data collection methods can be adopted for further study. For example, to investigate students' development of genre awareness in the learning process, a think-aloud (or thinking aloud) protocol and stimulated recalls can be selected in collecting qualitative data. These findings can be used to triangulate the results of present research.

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