

**COGNITIVE GENRE PROTOTYPE MODELLING AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF ACADEMIC WRITING TO
LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

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Abstract

The teaching of academic writing to learners of English as a second language has long been preoccupied with two competing concerns: faithful reproduction of the formal conventions of established scholarly genres, and the development of learner agency and rhetorical creativity. This paper proposes an integrative theoretical framework — Cognitive Genre Prototype Modelling (CGPM) — that draws on Eleanor Rosch’s prototype theory, John Swales’ move-step analysis, and contemporary cognitive accounts of genre to reconceptualise genre knowledge as a structured mental representation organised around prototypical exemplars rather than rigid sets of necessary and sufficient features. The study reports findings from an eight-week pedagogical intervention conducted with thirty intermediate-level ESL learners enrolled in a university-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme, and contrasts these outcomes with those of a comparable control group receiving conventional genre-based instruction. Analytic comparison of pre- and post-intervention texts, supplemented by questionnaire data and semi-structured interviews, indicates that learners exposed to CGPM demonstrated stronger rhetorical structuring, greater discursal flexibility, and an enhanced metacognitive vocabulary for describing their own writing decisions. The paper concludes by outlining implications for syllabus design, materials development, teacher education, and the assessment of academic writing in second-language settings.

Keywords: cognitive genre theory; prototype semantics; academic writing pedagogy; English for Academic Purposes; second language acquisition; schema-based instruction.

Аннотация

В статье рассматривается интеграция когнитивной теории прототипов и жанрового подхода к обучению академическому письму студентов, изучающих

английский язык как иностранный. Опираясь на теорию прототипов Э. Рош, модель риторических ходов Дж. Свейлза и современные когнитивные исследования жанра, автор предлагает теоретическую рамку, обозначенную как «Когнитивное прототипическое моделирование жанра» (КПМЖ), согласно которой жанровая компетенция понимается как ментальная репрезентация, организованная вокруг прототипических образцов, а не как фиксированный набор обязательных формальных признаков. В работе представлены результаты восьминедельного педагогического эксперимента, проведённого с участием тридцати студентов со средним уровнем владения английским языком в рамках университетской программы «Английский для академических целей» (EAP), а также данные сопоставимой контрольной группы, обучавшейся по традиционной жанровой методике. Сравнительный анализ письменных работ, выполненных до и после эксперимента, в сочетании с результатами анкетирования и полуструктурированных интервью свидетельствует о значимом росте риторической структурированности текстов, дискурсивной гибкости и метакогнитивной осведомлённости у студентов экспериментальной группы. В заключение формулируются практические рекомендации для разработчиков учебных программ, авторов учебных материалов, преподавателей и специалистов в области оценивания академического письма.

Ключевые слова: когнитивная теория жанра; прототипическая семантика; обучение академическому письму; английский для академических целей; усвоение второго языка; обучение на основе схем.

Annotatsiya

Mazkur maqolada ingliz tilini chet tili sifatida o'rganuvchilarga akademik yozuvni o'qitish jarayonida kognitiv prototip nazariyasi va janrga asoslangan yondashuvni o'zaro birlashtirish masalasi ko'rib chiqiladi. E. Rosh tomonidan asoslangan prototip nazariyasi, J. Swales taklif etgan ritorik harakatlar tahlili va janrga oid zamonaviy kognitiv tadqiqotlarga tayangan holda muallif "Janrning kognitiv prototipik modellashtirilishi" (JKPM) deb nomlangan nazariy tizimni ilgari suradi. Mazkur tizimga ko'ra janrviy bilim qat'iy belgilangan rasmiy belgilar yig'indisi sifatida emas, balki prototipik namunalar atrofida tashkil topgan ruhiy tasavvur sifatida talqin qilinadi. Tadqiqotda universitet doirasidagi "Akademik maqsadlar uchun ingliz tili" dasturiga jalb etilgan, til bilish darajasi o'rtachadan yuqori bo'lgan o'ttiz nafar talaba ishtirokida o'tkazilgan sakkiz haftalik pedagogik tajribaning natijalari taqdim etilib, ular an'anaviy janrviy yondashuv asosida o'qigan nazorat guruhi natijalari bilan qiyoslanadi. Tajribadan oldin va keyin yozilgan ishlarning qiyosiy tahlili, anketa va yarim tarkibiy suhbatlar natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, JKPM asosida o'qigan talabalar matnlarining ritorik tuzilishi, diskursiv moslashuvchanligi hamda metakognitiv ongi sezilarli darajada yuksalgan. Maqola yakunida o'quv dasturlarini ishlab chiquvchilar,

darslik mualliflari, o'qituvchilar va akademik yozuvni baholash bo'yicha mutaxassislariga qaratilgan amaliy tavsiyalar shakllantiriladi.

Kalit so'zlar: janrning kognitiv nazariyasi; prototip semantikasi; akademik yozuvni o'qitish; akademik maqsadlar uchun ingliz tili; ikkinchi tilni egallash; sxemaga asoslangan o'qitish.

Introduction

The expansion of higher education across the past three decades has produced an unprecedented growth in the number of students who pursue tertiary studies in a language other than their first. Within this context, academic writing in English has emerged as one of the most consequential, and most challenging, literacy practices that learners of English as a second language must master. Whether they are undergraduates required to compose argumentative essays, postgraduates drafting research proposals, or doctoral candidates preparing manuscripts for international publication, ESL learners are confronted with rhetorical demands whose complexity exceeds the lexicogrammatical adequacy that more traditional models of language proficiency tend to foreground.

Pedagogical responses to this challenge have evolved through several recognisable phases. The product-oriented approaches of mid-twentieth-century composition pedagogy, which emphasised imitation of model texts and the correction of surface errors, gave way during the 1970s and 1980s to process-oriented approaches in which writing was reconceived as a recursive activity comprising planning, drafting, and revising. From the late 1980s onwards, however, the limitations of process pedagogy in second-language settings — its tendency to under-specify the social and discursive parameters that condition successful academic writing — became increasingly apparent. The genre-based turn in applied linguistics, associated above all with the work of Swales, Bhatia, and the Sydney School of systemic functional linguistics, sought to remedy this lacuna by foregrounding the conventionalised, communicative, and goal-oriented nature of disciplinary writing.

Yet, despite the considerable theoretical sophistication and pedagogical impact of genre-based approaches, a persistent tension has remained between two ways of conceptualising genre. On one view, a genre is a relatively stable category, definable in terms of a recurrent set of obligatory rhetorical moves and lexicogrammatical features, which learners must master if they are to produce acceptable instances of the kind. On a competing view, genres are dynamic, contested, and discipline-specific, and learners must develop the rhetorical sensitivity required to navigate variation rather than reproduce templates. The first view is congenial to syllabus design and to the production of teaching materials but risks reifying genres into static moulds; the second

is faithful to actual disciplinary practice but offers fewer purchase points for explicit instruction.

The present paper argues that the cognitive theory of categorisation associated with Eleanor Rosch and her successors offers a productive way of moving beyond this dichotomy. Rosch's demonstration that natural categories are typically organised around prototypical exemplars, with peripheral members participating in a category to varying degrees, suggests that genres should likewise be modelled as cognitive structures whose internal organisation reflects graded membership rather than necessary-and-sufficient conditions. Building on this insight, the paper proposes a framework that may be termed Cognitive Genre Prototype Modelling (CGPM), in which the teaching of academic writing is reorganised around the explicit cultivation of prototype-based mental representations of academic genres.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. The next section reviews the literature on genre theory, prototype semantics, and genre-based pedagogy in second-language contexts, and identifies the conceptual gap that CGPM seeks to address. The third section describes the methodology of an empirical intervention designed to assess the pedagogical viability of the framework, including participants, materials, and analytic procedures. The fourth section presents the findings of the intervention together with a discussion of their theoretical and practical implications. A concluding section summarises the argument and identifies directions for further research.

Literature Review

The contemporary understanding of genre in applied linguistics owes much to a foundational distinction articulated by Carolyn Miller, who proposed that genres should be understood not as classificatory labels but as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations”¹. Miller's reorientation away from formal taxonomy and towards social action had a transformative effect on subsequent scholarship. Within the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tradition, John Swales developed an analytic apparatus capable of identifying the rhetorical “moves” through which texts in a given genre accomplish their communicative purposes. His Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model of research-article introductions, in particular, became one of the most widely cited contributions to the field and inspired a generation of move-step analyses of disciplinary writing.

In parallel, the Sydney School of systemic functional linguistics, drawing on the work of Halliday and Martin, developed a typology of school genres that has informed literacy curricula in Australia, Singapore, and a number of other settings. Although the

¹The seminal articulation appears in C. R. Miller, “Genre as social action,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70(2), 1984, pp. 151–167. Miller's redefinition of genre in terms of typified social action rather than formal classification represents a watershed in twentieth-century rhetorical theory and informs much of the subsequent ESP and Sydney School scholarship.

Sydney School and the ESP tradition emerged independently and emphasise different aspects of the genre-text relationship, they share a commitment to making the rhetorical demands of academic and professional writing explicit to learners who would otherwise have to infer them from exposure alone. The third recognisable strand, often referred to as the “New Rhetoric”, has been more sceptical of explicit teaching, emphasising instead the situated and ideologically saturated character of genre knowledge and the difficulties of transferring such knowledge from instructional to disciplinary contexts².

Within ESL pedagogy, the genre-based approach has been extensively elaborated by Hyland, who has documented in detail the disciplinary variation in metadiscourse, citation practices, and rhetorical positioning that characterises academic writing in English. Hyland’s research underscores that academic writing is not a single, monolithic register but a constellation of disciplinary practices, each with its own conventions of stance, engagement, and evidential argument. This finding has direct pedagogical implications: a learner who masters the conventions of, say, applied-linguistics research writing cannot be assumed thereby to have mastered those of bioengineering or international law.

Eleanor Rosch’s experimental investigations of categorisation, conducted in the 1970s, fundamentally challenged the classical Aristotelian view that categories are defined by necessary and sufficient conditions for membership. Rosch demonstrated that, for a wide range of natural categories, members are not equivalent: some are judged to be “better” examples than others, response times to category-membership questions vary systematically with such judgements, and the centrality of an exemplar within a category correlates with the number of features it shares with other members of the same category and the small number of features it shares with members of contrasting categories³.

The implications of prototype theory for cognitive science and linguistics have been extensively developed, most notably by Lakoff, who argued that human categorisation is pervasively structured by prototype effects, idealised cognitive models, and radial extension. Subsequent work in cognitive linguistics has shown that the same principles apply to grammatical and discursal categories, and that linguistic knowledge generally involves graded judgements rather than all-or-nothing rules. Within applied linguistics, however, the uptake of prototype theory in the analysis of

²The contrast among the three traditions is mapped in S. Hyon, “Genre in three traditions: Implications for ESL,” *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(4), 1996, pp. 693–722. The New Rhetoric tradition has been particularly influential in North American composition studies but has had less direct impact on ESL pedagogy than the ESP and Sydney School traditions.

³The empirical demonstration of graded category membership is most accessibly presented in E. Rosch, “Principles of categorization,” in E. Rosch and B. B. Lloyd (eds.), *Cognition and Categorization*, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1978, pp. 27–48. Rosch’s experiments with bird categories — in which “robin” was consistently rated a more central exemplar than “penguin” — remain a paradigmatic illustration of prototype effects.

genre has been comparatively modest, despite the obvious affinity between Rosch's categorisation framework and the recognition that some texts are clearly "better" instances of, say, a research-article introduction than others.

A small but theoretically significant body of work has begun to bridge prototype semantics and genre theory. Paltridge, in particular, has argued that the categorisation of texts as members of genres is best understood in prototype-theoretic terms: speakers of a language identify a text as belonging to a particular genre on the basis of the degree of similarity between that text and prototypical exemplars stored in memory, rather than on the basis of a checklist of required features⁴. Bawarshi and Reiff likewise emphasise that genre knowledge involves what they describe as "antecedent genres" — prior textual experiences that furnish the cognitive resources needed for engagement with new instances.

Schema theory, originally developed in cognitive psychology by Bartlett and subsequently elaborated by Rumelhart and others, offers a complementary perspective. According to schema-theoretic accounts, comprehension and production of texts depend on the availability of structured background knowledge, organised as schemata, against which incoming information is interpreted. Carrell's seminal application of schema theory to ESL reading research demonstrated that learners' difficulties are often attributable not to lexicogrammatical limitations but to inadequate or culturally divergent content and formal schemata. Although Carrell's work focused on reading, the same logic extends to writing: a learner whose schema for, say, the discussion section of an empirical research article is impoverished or inaccurate will produce texts that, however grammatically well formed, fail to satisfy disciplinary readers.

The pedagogical literature on genre-based instruction in ESL contexts is rich and has documented a range of beneficial effects. Cheng's longitudinal case studies of advanced learners have shown that systematic engagement with genre exemplars enhances learners' rhetorical awareness and analytic competence. Tardy's three-dimensional model of genre knowledge — encompassing formal, process, rhetorical, and subject-matter components — has provided a conceptual map for tracing learners' developmental trajectories⁵. These contributions notwithstanding, two limitations of the existing pedagogical literature merit attention.

First, although many genre-based interventions implicitly assume something like a prototype representation, few have made the cognitive architecture of genre knowledge an explicit object of instruction. Learners are often invited to analyse exemplar texts and identify rhetorical moves, but the question of how exemplars are

⁴See in particular B. Paltridge, "Working with genre: A pragmatic perspective," *Journal of Pragmatics*, 24(4), 1995, pp. 393–406, where the prototype-theoretic interpretation of genre membership is developed in detail.

⁵C. M. Tardy's framework distinguishes formal, process, rhetorical, and subject-matter knowledge as analytically separable but interacting components of genre competence; see C. M. Tardy, *Building Genre Knowledge*, West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2009.

mentally organised, why some are recognised as more central than others, and how learners can deliberately develop and refine such representations is rarely thematised. Second, the dichotomy between rule-following and rhetorical creativity persists in classroom practice: teachers are sometimes accused of imposing rigid templates, while learners report uncertainty about when and how it is permissible to depart from the conventions presented to them.

The framework proposed in the next section seeks to address both gaps by foregrounding the cognitive structure of genre knowledge as a pedagogical target and by treating prototype-based representation as a resource for principled rhetorical flexibility rather than as a constraint upon it.

Methodology

The empirical component of the study was designed as a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods classroom intervention conducted within a university-based English for Academic Purposes programme during a single eight-week instructional cycle. A quasi-experimental design was preferred to a fully randomised trial because the institutional context required intact-class assignment; while this design entails certain limitations with respect to causal inference, it is consistent with the bulk of the existing classroom-based literature on genre instruction and permits meaningful comparison between conditions.

Two parallel sections of an EAP writing course, taught by the same instructor and following the same baseline syllabus, were assigned to experimental and control conditions respectively. The experimental section received instruction structured around the principles of Cognitive Genre Prototype Modelling, while the control section followed a conventional move-step genre-analysis sequence. Identical writing tasks were administered before and after the intervention to both groups, and supplementary qualitative data were collected from the experimental section through end-of-cycle questionnaires and a sub-sample of semi-structured interviews.

Thirty-two learners initially enrolled in the experimental section and thirty in the control section; following the exclusion of participants who did not complete the post-intervention writing task, the analytic sample comprised thirty learners in each condition. All participants were undergraduate or first-year postgraduate students with intermediate-to-upper-intermediate proficiency in English (CEFR B2, as established by an institutional placement test). The cohort was linguistically heterogeneous, including speakers of Uzbek, Russian, Mandarin, Arabic, Turkish, and several other first languages; this heterogeneity was deliberately preserved as it reflects the realistic composition of contemporary EAP classrooms. All participants provided informed consent for their writing samples and questionnaire responses to be used for research purposes.

The intervention comprised eight weekly sessions of three contact hours, supplemented by independent reading and writing assignments. Each session was organised around a single academic sub-genre — for instance, the literature-review section of an empirical research paper, or the introduction to an argumentative essay — and proceeded through four pedagogical phases.

In the first phase, learners were exposed to a curated set of authentic exemplars representing differing degrees of prototypicality within the target sub-genre. Exemplars were selected on the basis of expert judgement and were accompanied by metadata indicating their source, intended audience, and disciplinary context. In the second phase, learners engaged in guided analytic activities designed to elicit explicit judgements of prototypicality and to identify the family-resemblance features that supported such judgements. In the third phase, the instructor introduced relevant concepts from prototype theory and genre analysis in non-technical terms, and learners were invited to articulate, in their own words, a “prototype description” of the sub-genre under study. In the fourth phase, learners produced their own texts, with the explicit task of approximating, departing from, or hybridising the prototype, depending on the rhetorical goals they set themselves⁶.

The control condition followed the same task sequence but treated genres as classificatory categories defined by obligatory and optional moves, in line with conventional move-step pedagogy.

Pre- and post-intervention writing samples were assessed using an analytic rubric comprising four dimensions: rhetorical structure, discursual flexibility, lexicogrammatical control, and metadiscursual awareness⁷. Each dimension was scored on a six-point scale by two independent raters; inter-rater reliability, measured by Cohen’s kappa, exceeded 0.80 on all dimensions. Differences between pre- and post-intervention scores within and between groups were analysed using paired-sample and independent-sample comparisons of central tendency.

Questionnaire responses were analysed descriptively, while semi-structured interviews — conducted with a purposively selected sub-sample of eight learners from the experimental group — were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Coding proceeded in two cycles: an initial open coding to surface emergent themes, followed by a focused coding cycle in which codes were consolidated and related to the conceptual framework of the study. Triangulation across the quantitative, questionnaire, and interview data was used to assess convergent and divergent patterns.

⁶The four-phase sequence described here is loosely cognate with the “teaching-learning cycle” of the Sydney School (deconstruction, joint construction, independent construction) but differs in foregrounding prototype identification and family-resemblance analysis as explicit pedagogical stages.

⁷The rubric was adapted from instruments described in S. C. Weigle, *Assessing Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, with modifications to operationalise the metadiscursual-awareness dimension following the framework set out in K. Hyland, *Metadiscourse: Exploring Interaction in Writing*, London: Continuum, 2005.

Results and Conclusions

Both groups showed measurable improvement on all four rubric dimensions over the eight-week cycle, a result consistent with the well-documented effects of sustained writing instruction in EAP contexts⁸. The relative magnitude of improvement, however, differed substantially between conditions. Learners in the experimental group exhibited markedly larger gains on the rhetorical-structure and discursal-flexibility dimensions than did learners in the control group. The largest between-group difference was observed on the discursal-flexibility dimension, where the experimental group's mean score increased by approximately twenty-eight per cent against an increase of twelve per cent in the control group.

Improvements on the lexicogrammatical-control dimension were comparable across the two groups, suggesting that the experimental treatment did not detract from learners' attention to micro-linguistic features. On the metadiscursal-awareness dimension, the experimental group again outperformed the control group, although the magnitude of the difference was smaller than on the rhetorical-structure dimension. Taken together, these results indicate that CGPM produced its largest pedagogical effects in precisely those areas where conventional genre-based instruction has been most frequently criticised: the development of rhetorical flexibility and the cultivation of explicit discourse-level awareness.

Thematic analysis of the interview data identified three recurrent themes among learners in the experimental group. The first concerned the development of an explicit metalanguage for describing rhetorical choices: learners reported that the conceptual vocabulary introduced during the intervention — including terms such as “central exemplar”, “peripheral instance”, and “family resemblance” — gave them tools for articulating decisions that they had previously made intuitively or not made at all.

The second theme concerned a shift in learners' affective relation to the writing task. Several interviewees described a reduction in the anxiety associated with reproducing a “correct” template, and an increased willingness to experiment with rhetorical structure on the assumption that variation around a prototype could be defended on principled grounds. The third theme concerned the perceived transferability of CGPM across academic genres: learners reported that, having developed prototype-based representations for a small number of sub-genres, they felt more able to approach unfamiliar genres analytically rather than imitatively⁹.

⁸A useful overview of the cumulative effects of EAP writing instruction is provided in A. M. Johns (ed.), *Genre in the Classroom: Multiple Perspectives*, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2002. Improvements on the order of those observed here in the control condition are consistent with reported findings across that literature.

⁹The reported sense of transferability is particularly noteworthy given persistent concerns in the genre-pedagogy literature about the limits of cross-genre and cross-context transfer; see, for instance, A. Freedman, “Show and tell? The role of explicit teaching in the learning of new genres,” *Research in the Teaching of English*, 27(3), 1993, pp. 222–251.

Questionnaire data corroborated these themes and identified a residual concern: a minority of learners expressed difficulty in deciding when departure from the prototype was rhetorically warranted and when it constituted a deviation that disciplinary readers would treat as a flaw. This concern, far from being a weakness of the framework, points to an area in which pedagogical scaffolding could be further refined.

The findings reported above support several conclusions of pedagogical and theoretical significance. First, the explicit cultivation of prototype-based mental representations of academic genres appears to enhance learners' rhetorical structuring and discursive flexibility beyond the gains attributable to conventional genre-based instruction alone. Second, CGPM equips learners with a metalanguage that can be used to articulate, defend, and refine rhetorical decisions, thereby promoting the development of metacognitive awareness identified by previous scholarship as a hallmark of advanced academic literacy¹⁰. Third, the framework is compatible with the theoretical commitments of the genre-based tradition while addressing some of its persistent limitations, particularly the tendency to over-emphasise template fidelity at the expense of rhetorical creativity.

For syllabus designers, the implications include the desirability of organising EAP curricula around clusters of related sub-genres whose prototypical exemplars can be analysed comparatively, and the value of devoting explicit instructional time to the cognitive architecture of genre knowledge rather than to formal features alone. For materials writers, the findings suggest that exemplar selection should attend to the prototypicality gradient as an explicit dimension of pedagogical design, with central, peripheral, and hybrid instances being deliberately included. For teachers, the framework implies a shift in classroom discourse from the language of rules and requirements to that of prototypes and family resemblances. For assessment, the framework invites the development of rubrics that reward principled departure from prototypical structure as well as competent reproduction of it.

Several limitations of the study warrant explicit acknowledgement. The eight-week duration of the intervention, while consistent with the constraints of a single instructional cycle, is too brief to assess the longer-term consolidation of the gains observed. The intact-class design, while pragmatically necessary, leaves residual concerns about non-equivalence of the experimental and control groups at baseline; although pre-intervention scores were comparable, unobserved differences cannot be excluded. The reliance on a single instructor, while it minimised confounding due to teaching style, limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research could usefully extend the intervention across multiple semesters, multiple instructors, and a wider

¹⁰The claim that metacognitive awareness is constitutive of advanced academic literacy is developed at length in K. Hyland, *Genre and Second Language Writing*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004, especially chapters 4 and 5.

range of disciplinary contexts; could examine the developmental trajectory of prototype-based representations through longitudinal designs; and could explore the integration of CGPM with corpus-informed materials and with computer-assisted feedback systems.

This paper has argued that the integration of cognitive prototype theory with genre-based pedagogy offers a productive framework for the teaching of academic writing to learners of English as a second language. The proposed Cognitive Genre Prototype Modelling framework reconceptualises genre knowledge as a structured mental representation organised around prototypical exemplars rather than as a rule-governed classification, and operationalises this reconceptualisation through a four-phase instructional sequence. The empirical evidence reported here, while necessarily preliminary, suggests that CGPM produces meaningful gains in rhetorical structuring, discursal flexibility, and metacognitive awareness, and provides learners with a metalanguage adequate to the analytic and rhetorical demands of advanced academic writing. The framework does not displace existing approaches to genre-based pedagogy but complements them, addressing limitations that have long been identified in the literature without abandoning the insights that have made the genre-based tradition one of the most fertile in contemporary applied linguistics.

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