

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

The aim of this study was to implement a genre-based approach to teaching English Information Report to Chinese students at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities. The language features and schematic structures of an English Information Report written by those students were investigated before and after the implementation of the genre-based approach. Both a pretest (pre-instruction writing) and a post-test (post-instruction writing) were administered. A questionnaire was conducted after the pretest. Twenty pieces of the students' reports were collected for data analysis. Finally, the results were summarized and discussed.

The presentation of this study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one presents the rationale and the statement of the problem, as well as the objectives, the scope of the study, definitions, and significance of the study, along with the abbreviations. Chapter two reviews the related literature on genre theory, a genre-based approach in teaching, Information Report writing, an overview of ESL/EFL writing instruction, and related research on a genre-based approach. Chapter three explains the research methodology including identification of subjects, instrument employed, the data collecting procedures, and data analysis. Chapter four clarifies the data interpretation through statistical procedures. Lastly Chapter five presents a summary of the study, discussion of results, and recommendations.

### **Rationale and Statement of the Problem**

Writing skills are essential for language learners who need to communicate with others. The ability to express oneself clearly on paper is a very important element in the mastery of another language. However, most EFL learners consider writing as the most difficult language skill to develop. Even after years of learning English, their writing effectiveness is inadequate. Many factors such as motivation, anxiety, learning environment, and teaching approaches hinder EFL learners from writing effectively. In addition, EFL learners may have limited linguistic competence, vocabulary, content, and discourse forms. Hyland (1990) finds the difficulties faced by EFL/ESL students when asked to produce a piece of writing are often due to inadequate understanding of how texts are organized. Reid (1993) and Widdowson (1987) express similar concerns that many ESL writers do use their first language rhetorical patterns when writing English. Writers from one culture who write for readers in another culture often have problems fulfilling audience expectations. Thus they produce texts which do not meet the expectations of their audiences or the rhetorical patterns of the target language. Thus Raimes (1991) concludes that approaches which focus on rhetorical form and on the reader's expectations might be suitable for EFL writers.

In recent years much of the attention on teaching writing skills to ESL students has focused on the "process approach" which provides students freedom to choose topics, relying on personal experiences and concerns. Peer editing and revision make students collaborate with each other. Nevertheless, its practical

application to ESL/EFL is a primary concern. The process approach fails to address that L2 learners “ may have only limited competence in using alien discourse forms. Learners simply need more information on what we expect them to produce” (Hyland, 1990:66). Furthermore, teaching in a second or foreign language often inhibits the use of the process approach, because its focus is on expressive and personal writing. This type of writing is far more demanding of students who are “neither familiar nor comfortable with the convention and expectations of expressive writing”, and who may be low in motivation, academic standard, or English proficiency. Therefore, Pennington et al. (1997) note that many teachers take a “middle-of-the road” approach combining product and process teaching philosophies, with somewhat a more traditional approach in Asian countries. Considering the above-cited factors, there is a need to explore new approaches or alternative processes and other approaches for teaching EFL writing. As Raimes (1991) concludes, teachers have to consider a variety of approaches, their underlying assumptions, and the practices that each philosophy generates. There is a need to search for a new approach or approaches to L2 writing.

The above-mentioned problems in teaching writing to EFL\ ESL students are also true in China, particularly in Yunnan Institute for Nationalities. Being an EFL teacher for ten years at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities in China, the researcher has observed that some problems are in both teaching and in writing English.

Firstly, traditional teaching methods are still dominant in teaching of English writing. That is to say, the main focus is on teaching error free sentences. If the

student writes with few errors, he/she can receive higher marks. Thus in order to avoid errors, students write very cautiously and simply write something easier, something they know they can control (Leki, 1994). As a result, writing turns out to be meaningless and boring.

Secondly, teachers dictate topics to the students, then the students write individually after class. In this case, the students do not have any idea of what to write, what the purpose for writing is, or who the audience is. Thus students are not internally motivated. Alternatively, the students are required to write a diary without any guidance. It is a kind of personal writing in which the students can express themselves freely. However, most of the students are low in motivation and English proficiency. They can only write something about their routine life. So six or seven years later, the students still can write only about 100-word narrative essays.

Thirdly the students are not familiar with the genres of the target language, and they have limited linguistic competence, vocabulary, content, and discourse form. When they write in English, they apply their first language rhetorical patterns.

Lastly, to a large extent, writing skills and speaking skills are ignored in non-English major classes, reading skill is still considered as the most important language skill.

A genre-based approach was developed in 1980's which focused on helping learners' writing by raising the learners' awareness of both the rhetorical organization and linguistic features closely associated with a particular genre. (Martin, 1987) One of the main concerns of this approach is to clearly and explicitly provide teachers and

students with information that the type of genre will vary according to purpose, content, audience, and channel of communication. While in the past “there has been recognition of the importance of ‘purpose’ and ‘audience’ in writing, what has been lacking is a rigorous linguistic explanation of how purpose and audience are realized in language” (Hammond, 1987: 164). Furthermore, a genre approach is based on the notion that the structure of a text contributes significantly to the realization of its meanings and that a description of the structure can be an important pedagogical resource and provide learners with comprehensible input (Christie, 1987, Hyland, 1990). As Krashen (1982) confirms, the important issue in acquiring a language is comprehensible input. If students receive enough comprehensible input, then the acquisition will occur. In addition, according to Flowerdew (1993) the main emphasis of a genre-based approach is on involving students in the process of composing a text of a particular genre, not simply on the text as product.

The researcher tried to implement a genre-based approach to see if it could help the Chinese students at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities improve their English writing. The researcher believes that this approach encourages students to vary their writing according to schematic structures that match their purposes for writing. They use language as a resource for constructing meanings. Further, a genre-based approach makes genres explicit to enable the Chinese students to understand genres and use them to create their own writing for conveying their experiences, information and ideas.

Students at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities in China bring with them rich resources of their customs, folk music, folk dance, and knowledge of rare plants or animals in different parts of Yunnan province. So obviously they come to their English writing class with a lot of ideas. Such ideas could be expressed more realistically if they are written for real or authentic audiences such as foreign friends who are interested in the culture and nature of Yunnan. The students are supposed to write to introduce themselves and their native interests. Therefore, an English Information Report genre was chosen to help the students organize their ideas and get across their meanings. A genre-based approach is implemented to provide the students with comprehensible input of schematic structure and language features used in a particular genre. Thus the students learn the schema for organizing different types of information. Along with that, they learn to present content in ways which are most appropriate to the writer's purpose.

The situation discussed in the foregoing section poses the following research problems:

1. Will the genre-based approach be workable with the Chinese students at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities?
2. Can we discern definite improvements in the writing output by the Chinese students at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities as a result of implementing a genre-based approach?

### **Objectives of the Study**

The following three objectives were to be carried out in the study:

1. To investigate the schematic structure and language features of an English Information Report written by Chinese students at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities before implementing a genre-based approach.
2. To study the schematic structure and language features of the Information Report after implementing a genre-based approach.
3. To discern improvements in the students' writing that could be looked upon as the result of implementing the genre-based approach to form the basis of recommending such an approach to EFL writing.

### **Scope of the Study**

1. The subjects are limited to ten first year Chinese students enrolled in the 1999 academic year at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities, Kunming, Yunnan, China.
2. Independent variable is the teaching approach – a genre-based approach.
3. Dependent variable is an Information Report genre.

### **Definition of Terms**

The key terms used in the study are defined as follows:

**A genre-based approach.** This term used in this study refers to the teaching method which is to make both form and function of language explicit and enables students to be aware of how language functions meaningfully in a social context. It puts an emphasis on meaning and on how language is involved in the construction of meaning. (Based on Callaghan, M. & Rothery, J. 1988, Derewianka 1990).

**An Information Report.** This term, as used in this study, refers to a kind of factual genre used to describe the way things are. They can describe a whole range of natural, cultural and social phenomenon (e.g. customs, plants or animals).

**Schematic structure.** This term is used in this study to refer to rhetorical pattern of an Information Report. An Information Report consists of a general classification or a statement, a description, and a conclusion (optional).

**General classification.** This term refers to the beginning paragraph of an Information Report. It is used to locate what is being talked about in the universe of things. It often takes the form of a classification or a definition.

**Description.** This term, in the study, refers to the body paragraph of an Information Report. It is used to describe facts about parts or function, qualities and characteristics of the subject matter.

**Language features.** This term refers to linguistic features used in an Information Report, which includes generalized participants, simple present tense, linking verbs, action verbs, and descriptive language use.



**Generalized participants.** This term refers to nonspecific participants as a whole class of things (e.g. bells, bikes, newspaper) rather than specific participants (e.g. my bell, The Newsweek).

**Descriptive language.** This term refers to factual and precise words used in an Information Report. In other words, no use of first person pronouns, no expression of personal feelings, opinions and emotion characterize it.

**Linking verbs.** This term refers to verbs used to link bits of information or one part of the clause to another, e.g. is, is, seem, and belong to.

**Action verbs.** This term refers to verbs used to describe behavior of animals or actions happening around us, e.g. climb, eat, capture, kill.

**Mental verbs.** This term in the study refers to verbs used to express mental senses, e.g. like, believe, know, see, fear, enjoy, and love.

**Existential verbs.** This term refers to verbs used to indicate that something exists, or introduce the major topic or locating what is being talked about.

### **Significance of the study**

This study aims to implement a genre-based approach to teaching English writing in an EFL setting and to determine the viability of applying this approach to the teaching of EFL writing to Chinese students at Yunnan Institute for Nationalities. It will also serve as a pioneering model for improving teaching English writing in Yunnan Institute for Nationalities. A genre-based approach provides EFL teachers with a practical approach to the teaching of writing by utilizing the teaching of vocabulary and grammar forms within a larger context of text purpose and audience. Teachers are able to give their students a constructive framework for writing, and students can develop appreciation for language-use in context. The findings may draw some pedagogical implications for the teaching and research of EFL writing in China.