A Genre-Based Approach to Developing Learning and Teaching Academic Writing Skills With Relation to the Omani Technical Context

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Teachers are supposed to apply the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) to teach academic writing in the Foundation Year Program (FYP) in the colleges of technology. However, students in these colleges find it difficult to produce a formal piece of academic work (Al-Husseini, 2004). Students seem to face lot of writing problems and so the author conducted this study to have a better understanding of what is happening. He carried a questionnaire study to reveal the causes of difficulties in academic writing. The author restricted his focus on research to lack of practice in applying these skills in students' writing as that is more relevant in the technical colleges' context. The study proved that the absence of practicing learning and teaching academic writing due to the insufficient use of the GBA, partly discourage the adequate mastering of these skills. Following the GBA to tackle such problem might be useful. As a consequence, the author considers this research study's results as an additional evidence for the value of the GBA in developing the learning and teaching of academic writing skills to FYP Omani students in the technical colleges.

Keywords: academic writing, Foundation Year Program, English for academic purposes, English language teaching, the Genre-Based Approach, writing for different genres

Introduction

Academic writing proficiency is always problematic and challenging, therefore, "unless students are provided with clear and thorough guidance on how to perform it they cannot do it in the required way" (Al-Husseini, 2005, p. 5). In the Omani colleges of technology, despite teachers are supposed to be applying the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) to teach academic writing, students in these colleges find it difficult to produce a formal piece of academic work (Al-Husseini, 2004). They seem to face a lot of problems in their specialized study regardless of the Foundation Year Program (FYP) they enrolled in. During this program they take a research skills course to provide them the necessary academic writing skills for their college study. However, many academic problems are evident in their written works. For instance, they might be poor in "writing according to a model they provided (...) or may baulk at longer essays" (McCarter & Jakes, 2009, p. 16).

After identifying the issue of the students' academic writing difficulties and to have a better understanding

of what is happening, this research study records the significance features of the incident. It firstly reviews the literature on recent strand of academic writing instructions: the Genre-Based Approach. Secondly, it presents the experimental design. The subsequent section shows a detailed discussion for the findings followed by the study's recommendations and conclusion in the last section.

Literature Review

For years after the introduction of the idea of the Genre-Based Approach, little progress was made to analyze students' academic writing. Nevertheless, "the last decade or so has seen increasing attention given to the notion of genre and its application in language teaching and learning" (Hyland, 2007, p. 148). This consideration came out as a result of the belief that the Genre-based framework is "the best-known approach to the analysis and teaching of professional and academic discourse" (Flowerdew, 2000, p. 369).

Relying on the preceding principle, the implementation of the Genre-Based Approach, represented in Martin's "Wheel" model of the Genre-based literacy pedagogy (see Figure 1 below), is partly considered as a good premise for discussing the development of the academic writing skills in the Omani technical context. This is because it not only concerns texts and writers but also the processes of learning and teaching writing. The idea of this approach is related to "the Vygotiskyan socio-cultural theories of learning and to the Hallidayan functional linguistics" (Hyland, 2007, p. 153). It pays attention to

> the notion of scaffolding that emphasizes the role of interaction with peers and experienced others in moving learners from their existing level of performance, what they can do now, to a level of "potential performance", what they are able to do without assistance. (Hyland, 2007, p. 158)

This idea of motivation has been also discussed in the seminal works of both Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1990).

The wheel consists of three phases. The first is the *Modeling* phase, where students are exposed to a number of targeted texts that model the genre in which they will write (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). For example, if the topic was about how ants construct their houses, students may read about how spiders do so. In the second phase, *Joint Negotiation of Text*, the students firstly prepare for writing a new text through discussion or taking notes, for instance (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Then they write this text under the guidance of their teacher. This phase is characterized by the feature of scaffolding that students get either from their teacher or from each other while constructing their texts (Hyland, 2007). After the joint construction of the class text, the students move to the last phase, *Independent Construction of Text*, where the teacher's guidance and group work decrease. Students work independently to create their own texts through more determined preparation in the determined genre, drafting with final consultation from the teacher, editing critical evaluation of the work, and finally "exploiting the genre to present the other field" (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993, p. 11).
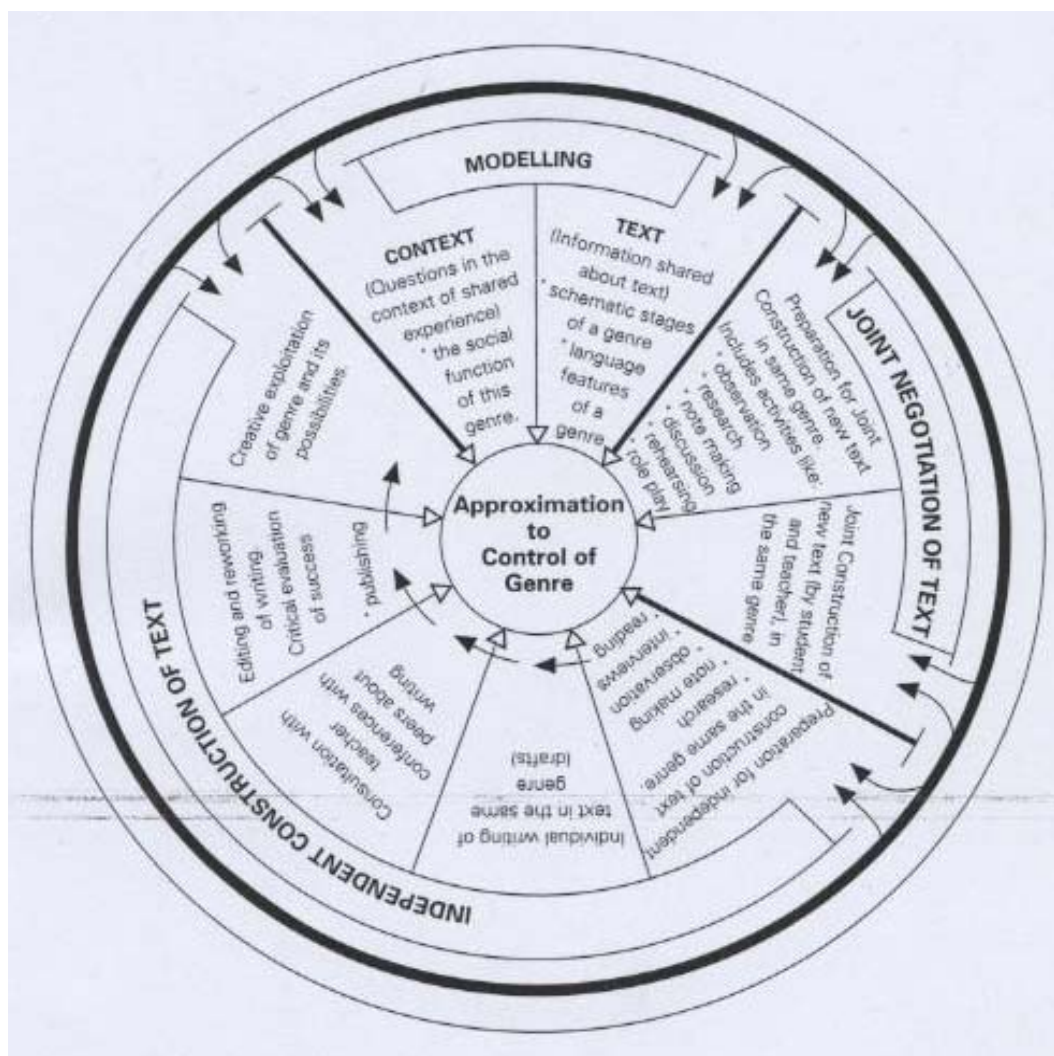
Figure 1. Martin's "Wheel" model of genre literacy pedagogy. Source: Cope & Kalantzis, 1993, p. 11.

The abovementioned stages led Flowerdew (2000), Johns (2002), and others to regard the Genre-Based Approach as a pedagogy that may fulfill the English teaching needs, specifically writing, in Middle Eastern EAP contexts. Therefore, and since there is a hope to apply this approach in the Omani technical context, there is a need to demonstrate how the Genre-Based Approach may help to develop the students' academic writing skills. The following section will exhibit how that may be acheived.

Methodology

The following lines present the conducted study to measure the extent to which the students are trained to practice implementing the academic skills in their writing. The extent of application of certain language uses in the technical colleges' foundation year writing classes was investigated, attributing the causes of these difficulties to a lack of the types of practice that could lead to the mastery of these vital skills. Hopefully, the findings of this study will provide with some insights to achieve future development in the academic writing field, both for technical teachers and for students.

The Participants

- The teachers

Twenty teachers (12 males and eight females) from the technical colleges participated in the study. They were of various nationalities, such as British, Omani, Canadian, Indian, Filipino, and Iraqi. Most of them held Ph.D.s and MAs in education. Their experience in teaching English for academic and specific purposes ranged from three to 25 years.

- The students

The study involved 60 students who were divided into two groups. The first group comprised 30 students, 15 males and 15 females, who were in their second year. The second group, which was also equally divided as to males and females, consisted of 30 foundation year students. Both groups had finished level four, where they were supposed to have studied most of the required genres in the college's modules. Moreover, they had taken a research skills course in which they studied research skills methodology. The mother tongue of the two groups of students is Arabic. They had been studying English as a foreign language (EFL) since they were in grade four. They were selected randomly to represent students who were in the FYP as well as those who had finished the foundation year and started their specialization studies.

The Participants

Teachers Male   ■ Teachers Female

2nd year students Male   ■ 2nd year students Female
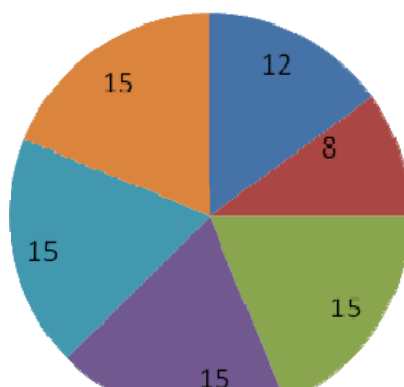
FY students Male   ■ FY students Female

Figure 2. The distribution of the participants in the study.

Questionnaire Data

In order to triangulate the sources of information and research tools, the current study involved data collection from students and teachers in the technical colleges. The data were collected by means of two research tools, namely students and teachers' questionnaires.

Two closed-ended questionnaires were designed: one for the teachers and another for the students. The author asked about the same practices in the two questionnaires, since he wanted to cross-check and validate

the data gathered from the teachers' questionnaire to see how truthful both the teachers and students had been in reporting their actual practices. The questionnaires aimed to elicit the teachers' and students' experiences of the extent of respectively teaching and practicing certain uses of English language academic writing, as these uses represent the phases of the Genre-Based Approach, with the FYP students. The author derived these practices from previous studies such as Al-Husseini (2004). The questionnaires involved closed questions for ease of analysis (Hyland, 2002b). This approach may also save time and effort and provide more reliable results (Wallace, 1998; Dornyei, 2003). The author preferred questionnaires to interviews because they may involve a larger number of participants, which is impossible with interviews (Kormos, Kontra, & Csolle, 2002). The questionnaire also gives privacy to participants, especially if they are not required to cite their identity, thereby encouraging them to express themselves freely (Robson, 1993).

Eighty questionnaires were sent to teachers and students in the technical colleges and then returned through electronic mail. The returned data were analyzed quantitatively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to simplify the data and to minimize the possibilities of losing data (Wallace, 1998).

Results and Discussion

The author summarized the main results in Table 1, to make the discussion easier to follow and to avoid repetition in presenting the findings. Both of the two groups, teachers and students marked their responses in a three-point Likert scale, often (1), sometimes (2), and never (3). In this analysis, both "Often" and "Sometimes" will refer to the academic writing uses that were practiced or taught whereas "Never" will refer to those that have not been performed. After going through the responses of both the students and the teachers, the author noticed that the females' responses are close to the males' ones in both groups. Therefore, the participants were merged in two groups, teachers and students.

The first step in the analysis was to calculate the percentage for each practice according to the teachers' and students' responses (see Table 1 below).

Table 1

Summary of the Main Results

Language use	Responses %					
	Teachers			Students		
	Often	Sometimes	Never	Often	Sometimes	Never
Modeling (Presentation and planning)						
1 Address and analyze the writing task question	90	10	0	75	18	7
2 Write a plan for the writing task	30	62	10	60	37	1
3 Be aware of the types of essays (discussion, comparison, reporting, rationale, etc)	100	0	0	42	33	25
Joint negotiation of text (Structure and organization)						
3 Be aware of the types of essays (discussion, comparisons, reporting, rationale, etc.)	100	0	0	42	33	25
4 Recognize the process of organizing each type of essay	35	35	10	58	23	18
5 Use brainstorming activities to generate ideas	30	65	5	35	35	30
6 Select ideas and then link and classify them	75	20	5	58	25	17

(Table 1 continued)

Language use		Responses %					
		Teachers			Students		
		Often	Sometimes	Never	Often	Sometimes	Never
Independent construction of text (Academic style and feedback)							
7	Be familiar with the necessary academic language and vocabulary to be used in each essay type	100	0	0	52	35	13
8	Use of titles, sub-headings, and numbering skills	15	85	0	53	27	25
9	Be aware of paraphrasing, summarizing, & quoting skills to support their ideas when writing essays	5	65	35	53	27	25
10	Use of appropriate referencing and/or footnotes and bibliographical conventions	90	10	0	55	40	5
11	Use criteria or a checklist to check the essay's requirements and evaluate it before submitting	5	60	35	5	60	35
12	Proofread the final draft of the essay (in pairs)	15	40	45	45	35	20

The summary of the results discussion is divided into three categories as follows:

The first category as it is seen in Figure 1 is:

A. The teachers and the students agreed that there was an adequate application of the following practices (1), (2), & (7).
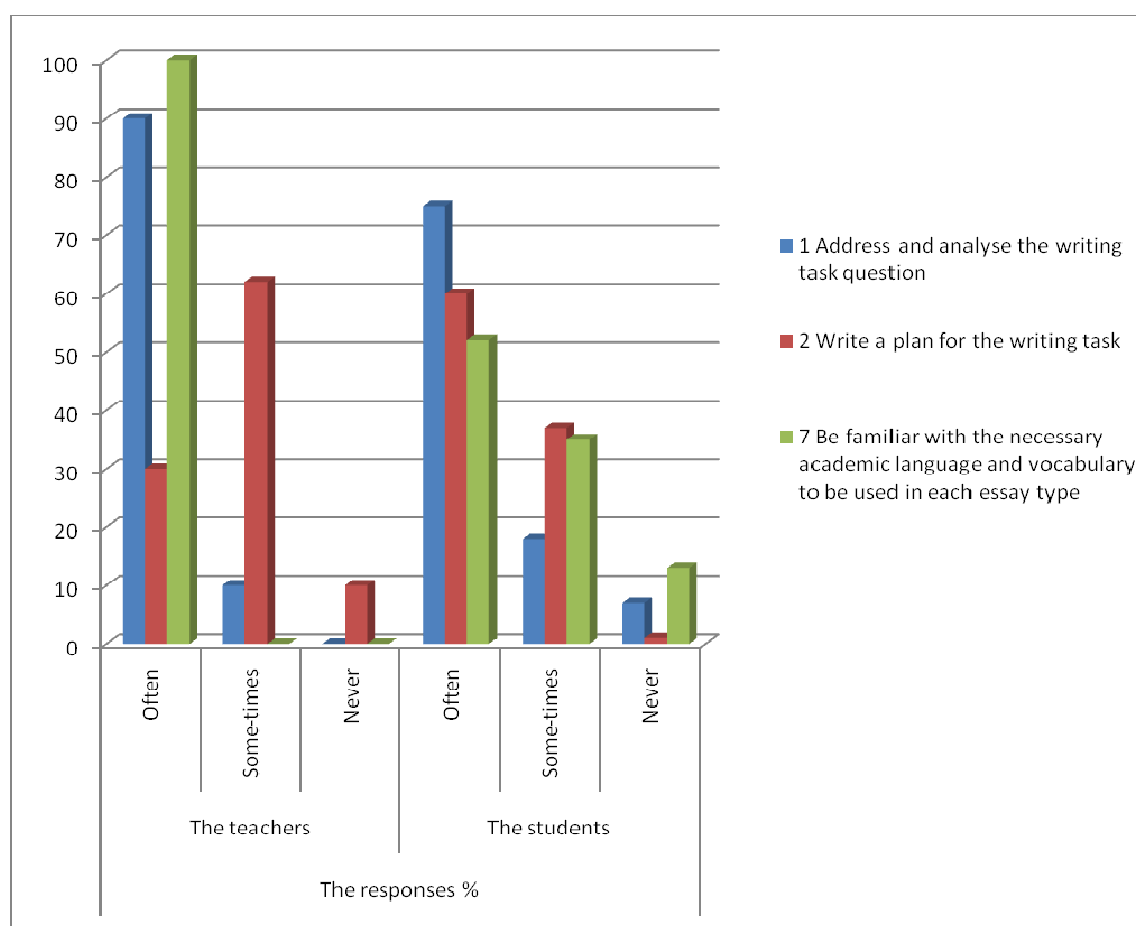

Figure 3. Chart 1—Category A.

These findings are presented in Chart 1, above. Since it is reported that these uses are practiced adequately, the analysis will be limited to the last two categories (B and C), due to their immediate influence in causing the issue under investigation.

Figure 2 shows the second category which is:

B. Most of the teachers and about half of the students reported that aspects (9), (11), & (12) were rarely or never practiced.
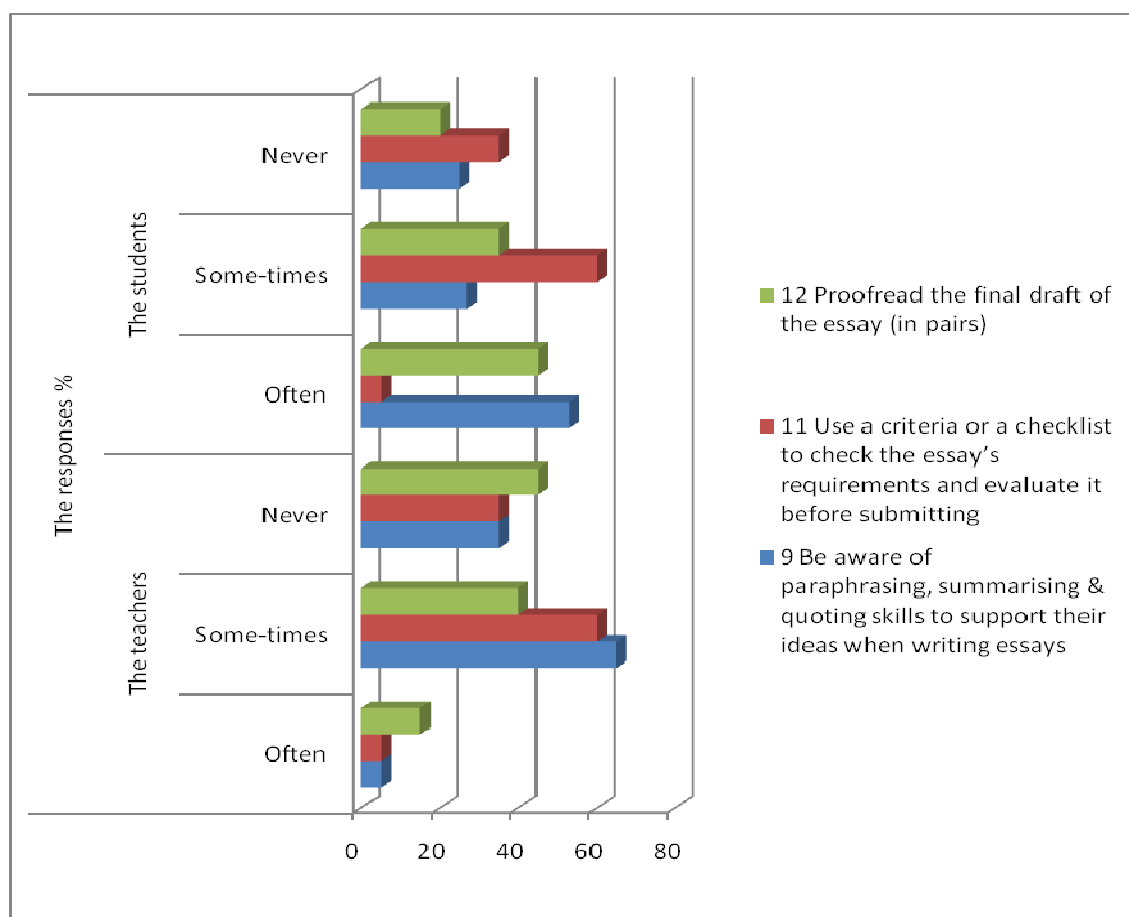

Figure 4. Chart 2—Category B.

In this category, the teachers attributed their non-application of these practices to a variety of reasons. For example, some of them consider such uses too difficult for students at this lower level of English proficiency. Therefore, the teachers' focus is directed to teaching them aspects of writing that they will need to continue their future technical study, such as the vocabulary that relates to each specialization and the grammatical structures to be used in writing a piece of work. This supports Hedge's (2000) seminal work, which reported that in university writing classes, the emphasis is mostly on enabling students to use textual features such as grammatical structures and lexical items.

Muncie (2002) also attributes much of the inadequacy of academic writing skills to the heavy emphasis on grammatical forms. Teachers emphasize how students accurately apply grammatical rules in their compositions. The reason behind this, as mentioned earlier, is the students' weak writing skills. Therefore, most teachers in the Omani context find it difficult to apply new methods in their classrooms due to the lack of time to teach

academic research skills (Al-Husseini, 2004). However, such emphasis on accuracy does not necessarily guarantee the students' awareness of the grammatical and linguistic features of academic text, as it limits their exposure to the academic features of composing (Chang & Swales, 1999). As a result, learners proceed to the subsequent levels of study with weaknesses in both of these fields.

Another reason is related to an opinion that some of the teachers embrace. They believe that even in the FYP, students are taught how to write different types of essays and attend a research course in which they study academic writing skills, but many of them do not apply these skills in their assignments. This might be related to the fact that during their group work on the research course, only the one good student did the tasks properly. Therefore, the students who are graduating from the FYP without mastering these academic skills face remarkable difficulties in applying these skills in their future technical study.

Concerning the above reasons, they might be considered among the causes for the absence of the teachers' effective feedback. Teachers might think that since the students are not paying attention to acquire these skills so the sufficient feedback will not be highly valued by them. However, Ferris (2002) argues that a well-constructed error feedback may be of great benefit to their writing development. Johns (1997) mentioned as well that students might feel frustrated due to unfair assessment of their works. This develops beause teachers of general writing are not consistent with teachers of academic writing in evaluating their students' compositions (Leki & Carson, 1997). This is at least partly the cause in the Omani technical context, where the FYP teachers focus on general features such as grammatical points when assessing their students' texts, while the technical specialization teachers draw attention to the content and the results of their students projects. Therefore, in the Omani technical context, it would be beneficial to accompany the written feedback with other forms of feedback such as teacher-student conferencing (Ferris, 2002).

The third category is presented in Figure 3, which indicates that:

C. There is discrepancy between the teachers and the students' responses to practices number (3), (5), (6), (8), & (10).
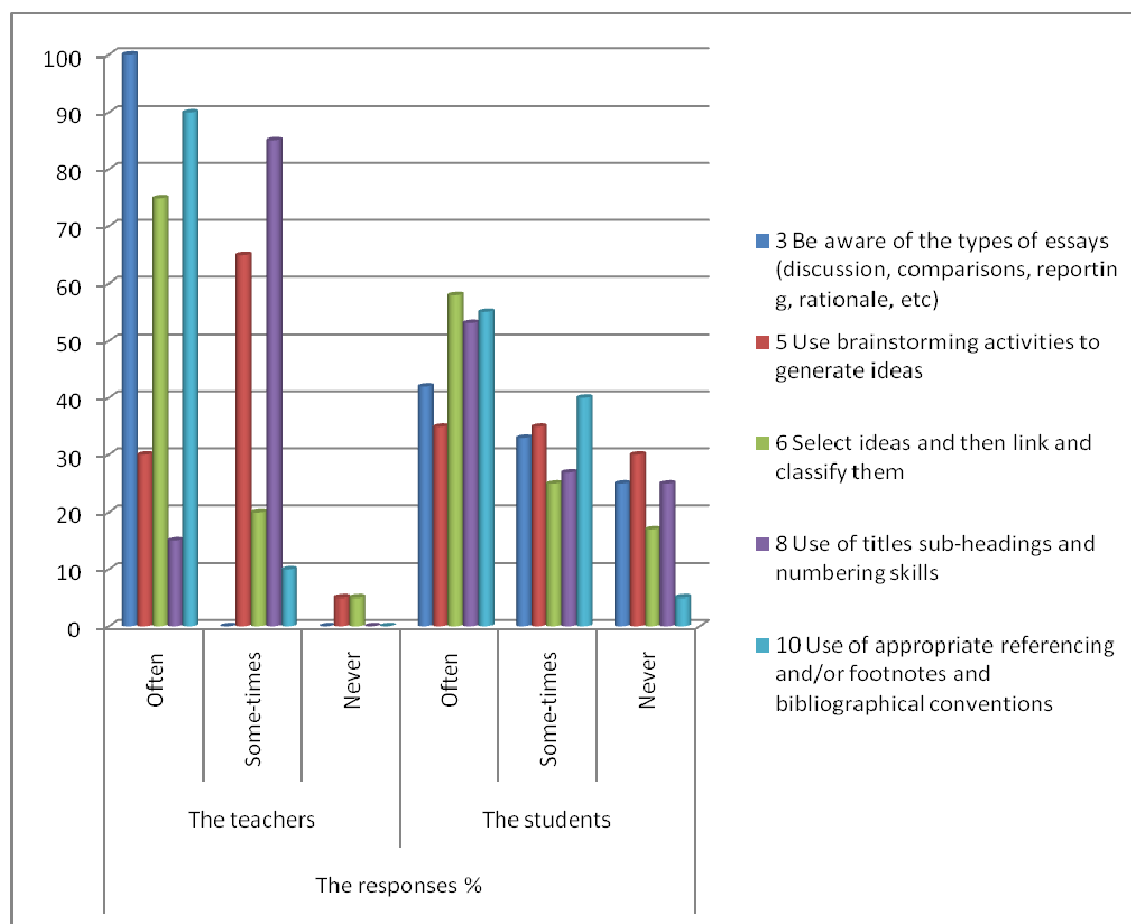
Figure 5. Chart 3—Category C.

Regarding the issue of the discrepancy between the teachers and the students, few teachers, or in some cases, none of them, admitted that they never taught or asked their students to perform these practices, whereas some of the students disagreed and reported that they never practiced them.

This discrepancy might be due to factors such as "the absence of a written syllabus which may unite stakeholders' perception of the ultimate objectives of the FYP" (Al-Husseini, 2004). Such cause merits contemplation, since the technical education authorities aspire to develop the quality of curricula in the technical context. The author also attributes this discrepancy to the possibility that the objectives of the FYP are not provided to the students. In other words, the teachers might not inform their students about the purposes they are expected to achieve in the FYP. Therefore, each student differs in his understanding of the purposes of the course. A third reason might concern the teachers' belief that since the aim of the FYP is to provide students with the competency they need in order to study their technical specializations (Flowerdew, 1993; Al-Husseini, 2004), teachers might think it is a waste of time to teach the learners practices they should have acquired during their previous study.

Actually, the above causes of the discrepancy might be the reason for not adequately applying the Genre-Based Approach in teaching and designing academic writing courses. A case study conducted in a Korean university (Kim & Kim, 2005), attributes the academic writing difficulties to the absence of an accurate application of the Genre-Based Approach in teaching students. Freadman and Medway (1994) argued that

students who study in writing classes will specialize in various fields and thus need to be aware of the contexts of the genres to which they will be exposed. In addition, Al-Husseini (2004) conducted a study in the Omani technical context to analyze FYP students' needs. He concluded that one of these needs is to apply the Genre-Based Approach in designing the course curricula. The author concurs with the application of the Genre-Based Approach in both teaching students and designing teaching materials since "it suits such a context" (Swale, 1990).

Additionally, and in line with Gee (1999), it is "essential for students to be aware of expectations of the context in which writing is practised" (p. 39). This will develop their awareness of the genre they are writing (p. 39). Actually, this fact is discussed in previous studies in the Omani context, such as Al-Husseini (2004) and Al-Issa (2006); however, it seems that it still needs further examination.

Subsequent to this analysis, and as the issue needs improvement, the next lines suggest some recommendations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Concerning the study's scale, questionnaires proved to be a useful tool for collecting data from large numbers of participants. However, collecting data by using this approach only is insufficient to uncover the issue's causes. Therefore, this study recommends that if the questionnaire approach is to be used in finding the influence of the extent of practicing academic writing skills on the students writing proficiency in the Omani technical context, it should be triangulated with other tools such as observations and interviews.

Regarding the students, and as an action plan for future development, teachers may focus on students who appear to be underachieving and talk to them about the skills in which they think that they are weak. Additionally, it seems from the study that a Genre-Based Approach to learning academic writing will be welcomed by the students; therefore, teachers might apply the Genre-Based Approach and see whether it leads to further development in the students' academic writing skills.

As regards the teachers, they need to be provided with a proposal of the strategies they may apply to enhance their students' writing. They should inform their students about what they are expected to achieve by the end of the FYP. They should also try to maintain a balance between teaching textual features and academic writing skills, rather than depending on the only research skills course that students take. In addition, they are recommended to take account of the drawbacks of the insufficient feedback they provide and try to find alternatives. In short, there is a need for a satisfactory application of the Genre-Based Approach while teaching students academic writing skills.

The author would furthermore ask the authorities governing technical education to set a united curriculum for the FYP and provide the teachers and students with the specific aims they are expected to achieve by the end of the program. He also recommends them to make genre models fundamental to unite these goals in ways enhancing the students' abilities to develop their academic writing skills (Hyland, 2003). Moreover, getting the teachers to teach textual composing features and at the same time making their students grips with the models of genre they are learning is not easy. Therefore, authorities are recommended to provide the teachers some training programs so that they can acquire the necessary skills to achieve a good teaching process.

Finally, the outcomes indicated that there is an eagerness to find a learning approach that would help the students in their future study and at the same time help the teachers uncover the hidden needs for further development. Since the study proved that the absence of practicing learning and teaching academic writing

partly discourage the adequate mastering of these skills, hence following the Genre-Based Approach to tackle that might be useful. As a consequence, this research study's results may be an additional evidence for the value of the Genre-Based Approach in developing the learning and teaching of academic writing skills to FYP Omani students in the colleges of technology.

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