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The Universal Genre Sphere: A Curricular Model Integrating GBA and UDL to Promote Equitable Academic Writing Instruction for EAL University Students

Rosa Dene David*[1] and Carl Edlund Anderson[2]

∼   This paper proposes the design of an instructional model, referred to as the universal genre sphere, for teaching academic writing in a manner appropriate to all learners, but developed especially with consideration for the needs of English as additional language students with or without diagnosed learning differences. Despite growing research on, variously, second-language writing, English as an additional language and learning differences, there has been relatively little work that explores approaches to the intersections of these topics. Thus, the proposed universal genre sphere model is founded on the pillars of universal design for learning and the tenets of the genre-based approach, especially the teaching-learning cycle, to create more equitable and inclusive, as well as effective, learning environments. The universal genre sphere balances inclusive design that draws upon students' interests, while breaking learning into manageable and adjustable segments, thus making academic writing more accessible to a greater number of learners. The combination of universal design for learning and the genre-based approach represents an opportunity to create a shift in second-language writing instruction (and, potentially, in L1 writing instruction) that aligns with the principles of inclusive education by reducing barriers in the classroom and providing students with multiple pathways to participate, which could do much to advance knowledge about more inclusive, equitable and effective writing instruction for all learners.

Keywords: Universal Design for Learning, genre-based approach, second language writing, English language learners, inclusive education

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Univerzalna žanrska sfera: kurikularni model povezovanja žanrskega pristopa in univerzalne zasnove učenja za spodbujanje pravičnega poučevanja akademskega pisanja pri študentih angleščine kot dodatnega jezika

Rosa Dene David in Carl Edlund Anderson

∿   Študija ponuja načrt modela, poimenovanega kot univerzalna žanrska sfera, za poučevanje akademskega pisanja na način, ki bi bil primeren za vse učence, a razvit ob poudarjenem upoštevanju potreb študentov, ki jim angleščina predstavlja dodatni jezik, ne glede na morebitno diagnozo posebnih potreb. Kljub naraščajočemu številu raziskav o pisanju v drugem jeziku, angleščini kot dodatnem jeziku in o učnih razlikah je bilo razmeroma malo študij, ki bi preiskovale presečišča teh tem. Zaradi tega je predlagani model univerzalne žanrske sfere osnovan na postavkah univerzalne zasnove učenja in žanrskega pristopa, predvsem na ciklu poučevanja/učenja, s čimer naj bi se vzpostavljajo pravičnejše in inkluzivnejše, tudi učinkovitejše učno okolje. Univerzalna žanrska sfera uravnoteži inkluziven pristop, ki se navezuje na interese študentov, medtem ko členi navezujejo učenje na obvladljive in prilagodljive odseke, s čimer se naredi akademsko pisanje dostopnejše širšemu krogu ljudi. Ta kombinacija predstavlja priložnost za napredek poučevanja pisanja v drugem jeziku (in morebiti tudi v materinščini), ki je usklajen s principi inkluzivne pedagogike, s tem ko omejuje ovire v razredu in omogoča študentom več poti za sodelovanje. Ravno to lahko bistveno pripomore k napredku znanja o bolj vključujočem, pravičnem in učinkovitem poučevanju pisanja za vse študente.

Ključne besede: univerzalna zasnova učenja, žanrski pristop, pisanje v drugem jeziku, študenti angleškega jezika, inkluzivna pedagogika

Introduction

In classrooms worldwide, the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) have reshaped curricula and instruction to promote more inclusive, equitable and accessible learning environments. However, within the wider realm of English language teaching (ELT), there remains a need to support users of English as an additional language (EALs), especially at the university level (David & Brown, 2020). Developing academic writing skills is often a challenge, not least for university-level students working in an additional language (AL), even more so for learners with disabilities or differences, and there has yet been relatively little research exploring approaches to second-language writing (SLW) that incorporate support for EALs with disabilities (e.g., Firkins et al., 2007; Herbert et al., 2019).

This paper presents a new curricular model, referred to as the *universal genre sphere* (UGS), that integrates principles of UDL and the genre-based approach (GBA) to demonstrate how these two approaches can work in tandem to support the development of SLW skills for all EALs, including those with or without diagnosed or undiagnosed disabilities or differences. UDL is specifically understood to support inclusion by providing accommodations to learners with disabilities/differences that also support learners without disabilities/differences (Delaney & Hata, 2020; Rose et al., 2006; Torres & Rao, 2019), for which reason we incorporate its principles into UGS. Current research on learning differences, EALs and SLW reveals a need for more equitable and inclusive writing instruction, which is perhaps especially urgent at the university level. Although the GBA to writing instruction has been widely adopted, implementing it through UDL principles could offer more inclusive learning opportunities for a wider range of students. More specifically, we propose combining the stages of the teaching-learning cycle (TLC; Rose & Martin, 2012) and the three principles of UDL (Centre for Applied Special Technology, 2022) to scaffold the process of learning for AL academic learners into more manageable segments, thus reducing classroom barriers by providing students with improved pathways to participation.

Theoretical Considerations

Disability and Inclusion in University Settings

The importance of education for all has been at the forefront of education policies and initiatives for well over twenty years, since UNESCO's *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain,

1994), which called upon governments to make inclusive education (IE) the highest priority within their education systems. This commitment built on the United Nations' (1948) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), which declared that education is a basic human right. IE is broadly understood as a way to reduce potential barriers in the classroom while promoting classroom interactions that provide all students with avenues to participation, including populations of students who are often excluded or at risk of being excluded (Ainscow, 1998; Sapon-Shevin, 2003; UNESCO, 2008). An IE learning environment should essentially enable the participation of each student by embedding instructional design that can be delivered to students of mixed abilities while being responsive to individual needs (Ainscow, 2015; Messiou et al., 2016). Even though IE has received a fair amount of attention in mainstream K-12 education, implementation at the university level remains slow, and, when attempted, it is often beset with challenges (Moriña, 2017; Moriña et al., 2015; Riddell et al., 2004; Strnadová, et al, 2015). These problems of implementation have received attention at the international level in Article 24 of the *Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2007), which calls for universities, vocational training and adult education programmes to ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to education that does not discriminate and provides reasonable accommodations for all persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, there remain many challenges at the university level, including (but not limited to) the elimination of architectural barriers, the development of pathways to accessible curricula and classroom assessment (Morgado, et al 2016). Many scholars (e.g., Bausela, 2002; Li et al., 2021; Morgado et al., 2016) have concluded that, internationally, universities remain among the most discriminatory of institutions, which results in large numbers of marginalised student populations abandoning their studies (Adler, 1999; Creighton, 2007; Horn et al., 1999; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). In many cases, the most common remedies for the university system have been either to rely on disability resource centres or to sprinkle IE into existing courses developed by individual faculty members without developing continuity throughout the entire programme of study (Moriña, 2017).

In the case of higher education and ELT, there has been relatively little research on inclusion and support for EALs from marginalised backgrounds, and this work has tended to focus on students experiencing marginalisation due to race, ethnicity, immigrant and refugee status, or sexual orientation (e.g., Crump, 2014; Paiz, 2019; Taylor & Sidu, 2011). Although the inclusion of students from all types of marginalised backgrounds is of great importance, there is arguably even less work being done in higher education that addresses

the intersection of English language learning and disability (e.g., Young, 2019; Young & Schaefer, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). One of the main obstacles is the lack of training within teacher preparation programmes internationally (David & Brown, 2020; Sowell & Sugisaki, 2020; Young, 2019). However, there is a growing body of research that considers how UDL could be used to promote the advancement of all learners, including EALs with disabilities.

In the subsequent sections, we discuss how ELT educators at the university level can build inclusivity into SLW.

(Second-Language) Academic Writing

Even in an age of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996), the capacity to communicate effectively through writing remains an in-demand, even essential, twenty-first-century skill (Anderson et al., 2015; National Education Association, 2010; Scott, 2015; Wagner, 2008a, 2008b). At the university level, argumentative writing for academic purposes is not only essential for overall academic success, but also implicitly understood – at least by instructors – as laying the foundations for effective rhetorical communication in students' future professional and civic lives. Thus, university-level work requires students to evidence their construction of knowledge through the creation of products that can be evaluated for the effective application of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS; Anderson et al., 2001; Bloom et al. 1956) to solve complex content-related problems (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2004; Davidson, 2017; Gaebel et al., 2018; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise, 2007). Yet academic writing also requires substantial use of lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) if students are to wrestle successfully with issues such as document and citation formatting, not to mention orthography and grammar. Moreover, academic writing is not merely a medium through which students present what they have learned, but a process by which they make sense of and take ownership of content knowledge (Hyland, 2009). Significantly, however, writing is a modality that must be learned, and communicating effectively through it requires a range of knowledge regarding content, media and genre that challenges even L1 users (e.g., Elander et al., 2006; Graham et al., 2013; Huang, 2013). It can be even more challenging to write effectively in an AL (as in the case of EALs; Benfield, 2006; Flowerdew, 2008; Ma, 2021; Moses & Mohamad, 2019), as well as for those with learning differences (Santangelo, 2014; Simin & Tavangar, 2009; Troia, 2006).

All students – whether working in an L1 or AL, whether affected by learning differences or not – do learn differently and do face different challenges in demonstrating their construction of knowledge in terms of both content

and linguistic/communicative proficiency. Specifically, EALs must learn to convey their ideas in a scripted manner that attends to the expectations of a specific audience, while also learning how to maintain voice and balance their use of functional language and genre knowledge to convey complex ideas through the AL (Tan, 2011). As language abilities are assessed explicitly or implicitly in academic settings, SLW represents a vital tool through which EALs must demonstrate communicative proficiency and achieve academic success. This requires EALs to navigate numerous factors as they seek to express ideas formally within a given genre: they must demonstrate their understanding of given topics using a range of elements from their linguistic repertoires, including a multiplicity of grammatical forms, to express themselves in a coherent manner that also highlights their pragmatic understandings of the AL (Hyland, 2013).

In the case of ELT, much of the research surrounding disabilities, IE and writing instruction is either rooted in the K–12 education system or generally looks at disability from the perspectives of special education, often in bilingual educational settings (De La Paz & Sherman, 2013; Herbert et al., 2019; Jozwik & Cuenca-Carlino, 2020; Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Furthermore, there are still too few studies exploring tertiary EAL students' experiences in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts that focus on their development of SLW skills (Aronin & Spolsky, 2010; Firkins, Forey & Sengupta, 2007), and there are even fewer discussions of practical models that teachers could implement in the classroom. Accordingly, we propose just such a model, arguing that a blend of GBA and UDL principles could both increase student participation and reduce exclusion in educational contexts focused on SLW.

The next section analyses how these two approaches (GBA and UDL) can be combined to help all EALs, including those with disabilities, develop their L2 writing skills.

Genre-Based Approach (GBA)

It must be acknowledged that, for EALs with disabilities, the demand to develop academic writing skills could result in demoralising and debilitating experiences if there is insufficient support built in to the process. In this sense, the GBA has been praised for its capacity to provide a "contextual framework for writing which foregrounds the meanings and text-types at stake in a situation" (Hyland, 2003, pp. 27–28). In line with the tenets of both IE and UDL, GBA provides teachers with a set of tools that can reduce potential barriers by helping students discover how to use functional language to see "a recurrent configuration of meanings", which in turn can help EALs develop their academic voices in an AL (Martin, 2009, p. 13).

GBA provides students with different avenues to understand how certain kinds of texts are grouped, so that they can first recognise and then reproduce the features that a given group of texts share (Hyland, 2009). Specifically, GBA introduces EALs to rhetorical structures and foregrounds the need for clear organisational patterns that serve the social purpose of communicating through written text. Additionally, GBA differentiates writing instruction by emphasising the analysis of a whole text; EALs are walked through a series of activities through which they learn to recognise and replicate features of the genre in which they are working (Herazo-Rivera, 2012). In this way, EALs learn to write through sets of tasks that can be scaffolded and differentiated for learners depending on their abilities and needs, while simultaneously providing multiple ways for students to interact with a writing exercise before embarking on the writing of an actual essay. A *genre* in this sense can be understood simply as a staged, goal-oriented social process (Martin, 1984, p. 25). GBA breaks down the writing process into manageable segments, which can potentially help EALs increase their literacy skills while interacting with their AL in written form (Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 8).

The Teaching-Learning Cycle (TLC)

The Teaching-Learning Cycle (TLC) outlined in GBA offers both students and teachers an instructional sequence for constructing meaningful texts in alignment with the norms of a given genre (Martin & Rose, 2012). The three main stages outlined in the TLC – deconstruction, joint construction and independent instruction – provide a balance between explicit instruction and opportunities for EALs to demonstrate what they have learned in different ways. The TLC thus offers a learning experience that is deeply entrenched in the principles underlying IE. Rose and Martin (2012) discuss the three main stages of the TLC:

- *Deconstruction:* The teacher introduces students to the genre that students will be constructing through a series of teacher-led activities in which students reconstruct the message behind the given genre. For example, the teacher can model the specific text and help students organise the different components of the text. By participating in the deconstruction phase, EALs can look critically at the model and identify the metalanguage and patterns embedded in the given genre. This process helps EALs identify what they understand and provides pathways for the teacher to assess what students still need to learn.

- *Joint Construction*: In this stage, teachers have ample opportunities to differentiate writing instruction. For example, students can work

independently, in groups or alongside the teacher to become more familiar with the genre through a series of writing activities that focus on the joint construction of ideas. The premise behind this stage is to support EALs as they "practice using the structure of the model to scaffold a new text, and to discuss as many relevant language features as possible" (Rose & Martin, 2012, p. 210). Hyland (2009) observes that "scaffolding is closely related to the idea that learners develop greater understanding by working with more knowledgeable others" (p. 118), which highlights the importance of differentiating classroom activities. Hence, at this stage, EALs are deeply engaged in a process that provides further support for any who may need additional reinforcement of the overarching learning objectives.

- *Independent Construction*: In the final stage, students participate in a series of sub-stages to achieve the goal of writing an essay. This stage can include writing the text, participating in peer feedback, and/or receiving formative feedback from the instructor. Again, the teacher has the flexibility to hone in on what individual students may need for success in the writing process.

Together, GBA and the TLC create opportunities for all EALs to participate in classroom activities and increase their participation in the writing process. IE underscores the importance of reducing exclusion by providing avenues for all learners to be able to demonstrate what they have learned.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) initially emerged from the field of architecture as an approach to ensuring individuals with physical disabilities would have equal access to public spaces (Brown, et al., 17; David & Brown, 2020). Subsequently, UDL was transformed into an educational framework to provide learners with better access to classroom curricula. UDL has played a key role in the advancement of IE in educational settings around the world by building on the notion that educators should approach curricula and instruction from an asset-based framework rather than placing the onus of inability on the student (David & Torres, 2020; Meo, 2008).

The UDL framework intentionally and strategically supports all learners – including learners with unidentified and identified disabilities, as well as students from other marginalised communities – through the implementation of four core guidelines that uphold the understandings that each student is unique and that learner variability is the norm (David & Torres, 2020; Rao

& Meo, 2016). For educators serving diverse student populations, one striking tenet of the UDL framework is that "learners with disabilities are often best served by accommodations that can benefit the entire class" (Delaney & Hata, 2020, p. 84). The three principles of UDL are multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (Centre for Applied Special Technology, 2019):

- *Multiple Means of Engagement* (MME): Often referred to as the *why* of learning, as MME is deeply connected to students' motivations for learning (Rose & Myer, 2002). Simply put, MME seeks to connect to learners' interests, while also providing the appropriate amount of challenge to keep them motivated within an educational setting that is non-threatening and welcoming to students of all abilities (Edyburn, 2010).
- *Multiple Means of Representation* (MMR): Often thought of as the *what* of learning, as MMR provides students with numerous ways to acquire and interact with classroom information. For example, students can be given the option of whether to listen to an audiobook, read a text or watch a video (all with similar content) to learn about a given topic. Additionally, the teacher could use visual stimuli to connect with the content. By providing access to such content in a variety of complementary ways, students are less likely to be excluded from the learning process.
- *Multiple Means of Action and Expression* (MMAE): Often referred to as the *how* of learning, as MMAE offers students choices about how they demonstrate what they know. For example, students could be given the option to record a video, write a paper or create a diagram to illustrate what they have learned about a given topic. Providing learners with alternatives for demonstrating their knowledge can help students rely on their strengths, making it easier for them to participate in classroom instruction and assessment.

The implementation of these three principles of UDL at the university level would shift the traditional college setting from what Freire (2000) described as the "banking concept of education" (pp. 72–80), in which students are treated as empty vessels that need to be filled, to an arguably more dynamic approach in which students are actively engaged with their learning processes and direct their own learning. This shift in participation fosters student agency and the collaborative nature of active learning, while providing students with alternative accessible content and formative assessments (Boothe et al., 2018).

In the subsequent section, we explain how UDL can work in tandem with GBA through a model dubbed the *universal genre sphere* (UGS), through

which teachers can reach a larger number of EALs, including those with identified or unidentified disabilities, who may otherwise be at risk of exclusion from the writing process.

Model Proposal: Universal Genre Sphere (UGS)

As discussed in the preceding sections, both UDL and GBA have the potential to reduce barriers for EALs from marginalised backgrounds, including EALs with disabilities, while also increasing classroom participation as a whole (Delaney & Hata, 2020; Rose et al., 2006; Torres & Rao, 2019). However, when UDL and GBA are used in tandem, SLW instruction can create a pedagogical shift that is adaptable in ways that can meet the needs of all EALs in the SLW acquisition process. Comparing and contrasting GBA and UDL shows how the two approaches to teaching can work together to help both EALs with and without disabilities achieve intended curricular outcomes. GBA offers students explicit, step-by-step instructions that break the writing process into manageable segments. Each step of TLC offers opportunities for teachers to differentiate classroom instruction while providing students with ample opportunities to negotiate meaning. A central tenet of UDL is to ensure that students have the support they need to acquire knowledge and demonstrate what they know. Often EALs with learning disabilities have issues retaining large amounts of information, organising their ideas into manageable pieces, and remembering sentence structures and paragraph sequences (Kormos & Smith, 2012). When educators focus on a specific genre and break learning into manageable segments, while simultaneously providing students with choices, different ways of interacting with classroom materials and different ways of demonstrating what they know, then the learning environment is rooted in IE. As David and Brown (2020) emphasise:

> When practitioners in applied linguistics bring UDL principles into their teaching and training, students have options in terms of materials, and piece by piece scaffolding is provided to all learners to help them complete all assignments (p. 299).

By combining GBA (which focuses on writing) and UDL (which seeks to make educational outcomes accessible), learning can become circular – and, thus, a greater number of ELLs, including those who are often left behind, can succeed.

Figure 1

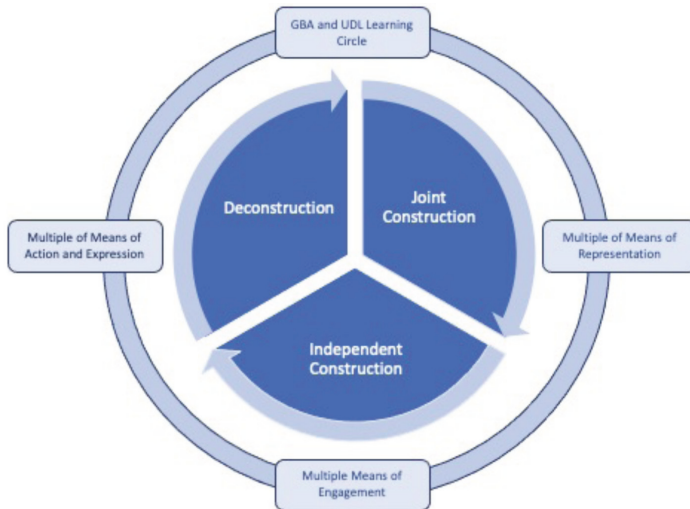*Combining the TLC (GBA) with UDL principles: The Universal Genre Sphere (UGS)*

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how the TLC would look if UDL principles were built into the fabric of its implementation. Note that the outer circle (in Figure 1) connects the three pillars of UDL to denote movement between the pillars of GBA. The outer circle illustrates flexibility in design and instruction, acknowledging the need for curricula to shift in support of student variation at each stage of writing. During each phase of the TLC, teachers can incorporate elements of MME, MMR and MMAE to ensure students have choices about how they engage with classroom materials, and also about how they demonstrate their learning before writing a complete essay.

During the first phase of the TLC, known as the *deconstruction phase*, students begin the learning process by working alongside the teacher to look critically at the specific genre in which they will be writing. Students need to learn to recognise the patterns along with the metalanguage embedded in the given genre in which they are working. EALs are often engaged in activities that look at the social function of the genre along with its schematic features (Callaghan & Rothery, 1988). Through modelling, students can develop an overall understanding of the purpose of the text. To facilitate understanding of the genre, curricula can incorporate MMR into classroom materials, which in turn can build in different modalities so that students have more than one avenue to develop an understanding of the genre with which they are working.

Additionally, in this first phase of the TLC, MME can hone in on students' individual interests, giving them choices about the particular topic that they will be exploring through the given genre. Finally, MMAE can be used to assess the ways that students demonstrate their learning through a series of different formative assessments that may not rely solely on writing as an output. For example, students could give a live presentation on aspects of the given genre's structuring or produce a short video on the same topics; students could even create diagrams that outline key components of what they are learning.

At the joint construction (or practice) phase of the TLC, UDL principles can serve as a guide in the practice, planning and implementation stages of joint negotiation of the text. To focus on choice and student interests, MME and MMR can be used simultaneously to guide EALs into contact with the given genre in various ways, which can be grouped according to the EALs' needs and interests. For example, students could work in groups or individually to make meaning out of classroom tasks and support one another as they research their given topics. Moreover, in this joint construction phase, students provide each other with support through peer review to look critically at what they already know and what they still need to know (Rose & Martin, 2012). Deconstruction provides students with multiple avenues to engage with potentially multimodal and multisensory classroom materials, thereby appealing to a wider student population. Additionally, MMAE can be used to segue toward the final stage of the writing process by helping students think about how they will demonstrate what they know through writing.

In the final stage of the TLC, known as the independent construction phase, students write their own texts. However, each section of an assigned essay can be broken into manageable segments that build in feedback and support before students assemble the complete essay. Students should have choices about how they demonstrate their learning. They can use visual aids to support the organisation of their writing and, additionally, as technology continues to reshape learning, they can incorporate elements of MMR by using speech-to-text software to help them compose. As discussed, UDL offers flexibility in the sometimes rigid writing process by placing an emphasis on asset-based learning rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach to writing instruction.

Conclusion

This paper fills a gap in the need to design instructional models that provide inclusive additional-language writing instruction for all students by exploring the intersection of IE, ELT, disability and SLW. We show how GBA in

combination with the TLC and UDL can provide additional support for EALs from marginalised backgrounds, including those with disabilities. By combining GBA and UDL to create a shift in L2 writing, the principles of IE would be upheld, specifically through reducing barriers in the classroom and providing students with ample pathways to participate. Future studies should design and test specific implementations based on the theoretical model proposed in this paper; this is something in which the authors are already engaged, but a wider range of practical implementations and relevant results would be obtained if other researchers participated in congruent projects of their own. Such a constellation of empirical endeavours could do much to advance knowledge about more inclusive, equitable and effective writing instruction for all learners.

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