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2015

# The contribution of genre theory to literacy education in Australia

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## Publication Details

Derewianka, B. (2015). The contribution of genre theory to literacy education in Australia. In J. Turbill, G. Barton & C. Brock (Eds.), *Teaching Writing in Today's Classrooms: Looking back to looking forward* (pp. 69-86). Norwood, Australia: Australian Literary Educators' Association.

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# The contribution of genre theory to literacy education in Australia

## **Abstract**

This chapter traces the history of genre theory and pedagogy in Australia, its current status and reflections on future prospects.

## **Keywords**

education, contribution, literacy, theory, genre, australia

## **Disciplines**

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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# The contribution of genre theory to literacy education in Australia

Beverly Derewianka

*This chapter traces the history of genre theory and pedagogy in Australia, its current status and reflections on future prospects.*

Those of us who were in primary school before the 1970s might recall English as a series of discrete lessons. On Mondays we would get out our graded readers (remember *Gay Days* and *The Open Road?*) to enjoy *The Rolling Plum* and *The Little Fir Tree*. Tuesdays were set aside for grammar and vocabulary. On Wednesday mornings we would have punctuation, spelling and dictation. Thursday was 'speech training' and on Friday we would do composition and handwriting.

This comfortable predictability was disrupted in the late 1970s with the emergence of 'process writing'. Rather than timed, one-shot compositions when students were given around 20 minutes to write a final product on demand to be graded by the teacher, students were guided through a recursive process of brainstorming, drafting, conferencing with peers and the teacher, revising, editing and proofreading, and publishing. And rather than writing on a given topic ('What I did on the weekend', 'My favourite toy', 'Our school fair'), students were given the freedom to choose whatever they wanted to write about, discovering what they want to say in the act of writing (Graves, 1983).

Process writing reflected a set of principles embodied in the notion of whole language, where 'language is kept whole, not fragmented into 'skills'; literacy skills and strategies are developed in the context of whole, authentic literacy events' (Weaver, 1990, p. 6). Unlike the English curriculum as a set of discrete skills taught in separate lessons as above, whole language emphasises literacy as the purposeful integration of reading, discussing and writing.

To many, this was a breath of fresh air, a period of liberation coinciding with a focus on *the whole child*, with a valuing of creativity, identity, the

writer's unique voice, self discovery and individuality. Writing was seen as a natural human need for self-expression and reading as the enjoyment of rich, authentic literary texts.

As with most movements, however, process writing and whole language were open to simplistic interpretations and orthodoxies and there were those who started to question *what* was being taught and *how* it was being taught.

### **A concern with content**

While endorsing many of the transformations brought about by process writing and whole language, genre theorists were starting to ask questions about what the students were actually writing. The emphasis on personal experience, self-expression and writer choice had led, in many classrooms, to students writing endless journal entries documenting their daily lives. While process writing was meant to foster creativity, in reality many students were mystified as to what they might write about. Analyses of hundreds of texts written by primary students in the late 1970s revealed a very narrow range of writing – primarily recounts of personal experience and 'observation/comment' texts (Martin, 2009). These were the days when the term 'story' was used to refer to all different types of texts, regardless of their various purposes.

With regard to curriculum content, process approaches and genre approaches originate from different philosophical orientations. Early versions of process writing drew on progressivist notions that it is the active learning from experience that matters, not so much the product (Labaree, 2005). 'Learning to learn' strategies were promoted, with subject matter as a secondary concern. The curriculum was ideally driven by the interests of the learners rather than being imposed from above: 'the kind of child-centred approach that sees education as a "drawing-out" rather than a putting-in of knowledge' (Moore, 2000, p. 20).

Genre approaches in Australia, on the other hand, grew out of Halliday's (1985) functional model of language in social contexts. In particular, the functional approach was concerned with what students were reading and writing and providing access to powerful discourses for students from non-mainstream groups who might otherwise struggle with the demands

of the school curriculum.

In the early 1980s, Martin and colleagues extended Hallidayan theory to describe how the curriculum encompasses a variety of social purposes for using language (e.g. Martin, 1985; Rothery, 1996; Christie & Martin, 1997). Curriculum activities involve students in using language for such purposes as explaining, describing, arguing, reviewing, recounting, and storytelling. Martin sees these as 'genres' – social practices that we engage in to achieve our goals. Each genre unfolds in a relatively predictable way, moving through a series of broad stages in order to achieve its purpose. If the purpose is to recount what happened in an experiment, for example, the typical stages would include: the aim of the experiment, the equipment used, the steps of the procedure, and observations. These stages are relatively predictable because they are functional; each stage (or 'move') plays a particular role in the developing text.

The content of the curriculum could, therefore, be made explicit not only in terms of topics but also in terms of the genres involved in investigating the topics. In order to identify the genres needed for success in schooling, Martin and colleagues worked with teachers and students in a number of schools to analyse the genre demands of the syllabuses, textbooks, student texts and assignments that students engaged with (see *Language and Social Power Project*, (1986–1990) and *Write it Right Project*, (1990–1995)).

### **A concern with pedagogy**

Genre theorists were concerned not only with *what* the students were learning, but with *how* they were being taught. The rejection of traditional teacher-centred pedagogy in the 1980s made way for progressivist beliefs of child-centred instruction, with the aim of 'unleashing the student's natural impulse to learn' (Labaree, 2005, p. 286). The teacher's role was seen as a facilitator who designed the context for active, self-directed, discovery learning. The student was seen to be in control of the selection of task, topic and time-frame, with the teacher encouraging, modelling, and responding to needs. Learning was seen as a natural developmental progression which would flourish given the appropriate conditions.

Of course, in reality, teachers are rarely neither wholly 'traditional' nor 'progressivist'. Genre theorists argued that teachers and students take on a

variety of roles over the course of a day. They proposed a teaching/learning cycle that applies Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding (e.g. Gray, 1985) where students are provided with support from a more experienced 'other' in the context of shared activity in order to achieve outcomes that they would otherwise not be able to achieve on their own. In the early phases, the teacher takes a more direct role in developing the necessary knowledge and skills, with the learners in an 'apprentice' role. As the learners develop greater control of the genre, the teacher gradually withdraws support and encourages learner independence.

The cycle is also based on sociocultural learning theory. Rather than seeing learning as only something that takes place in the learner's brain, Halliday (1978, 1985) and others emphasise that learning occurs through social interaction – between parent and child, between teacher and student, and between peers. At a broader level, learning occurs as the learner engages with the texts, artifacts and practices of the discourse community. The focus thus shifted to the context and how the teacher could design productive contexts for learning.

Genre theory aims to make the language of learning visible and accessible to all students. In doing this, it draws on Halliday's model of language in context (Rothery, 1996). At the broad level, we have seen that the context can include the various purposes for which we use language: the *genres* of a culture such as a school discourse community. Embedded within the teaching/learning cycle is an explicit attention to the genre/s relevant to a particular task or unit of work. Key stages include:

- *deconstruction of the genre*: using a model text, the teacher draws students' attention to how the text is structured to achieve the purpose of the task and to some of the relevant language features of the genre
- *joint construction*: the teacher and students collaboratively write a text in the target genre, with the students contributing their ideas while the teacher demonstrates how they might be shaped up into an effective, well-structured text, incorporating insights about language offered by the model text
- *independent construction*: when students feel confident about what

is required in completing the task, they are then in a position to independently write a text similar to the model text using the same genre, though with a slight change in the field. If, for example, the task were to compose a life cycle explanation, then the model text might deal with the life cycle of a butterfly while the student task might involve writing about the life cycle of a frog.



Figure 1. Key stages in the teaching/learning cycle

At a more specific level, each time we participate in a particular situation, our language choices and patterns of meaning change along with the *register*. Halliday describes the register of a situation in terms of three factors: the *field*, the *tenor* and the *mode*. As the register varies, so too do the patterns of meanings we find in a text. Each of these variables plays a critical role in the teaching/learning process.

The *field* refers to the subject-matter being developed in a particular context (e.g. an aspect of history, mathematics, English, geography, science). To succeed in schooling, learners need access to the specific language resources required in order to develop control over the various fields of educational knowledge. Language choices will vary depending on the nature of the field. Over the course of the teaching/learning cycle, the field will be built gradually from the language of more particular, familiar, everyday, concrete experience towards the more generalised, unfamiliar, technical, abstract language needed for academic success.

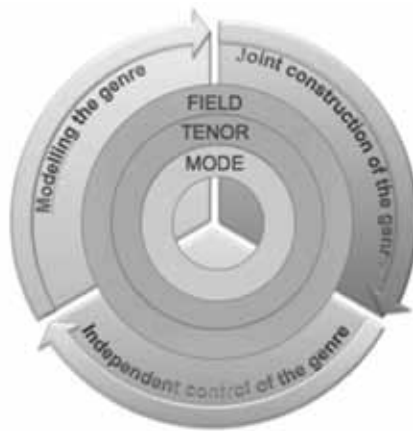


Figure 2. The teaching/learning cycle incorporating the register variables of field, tenor and mode

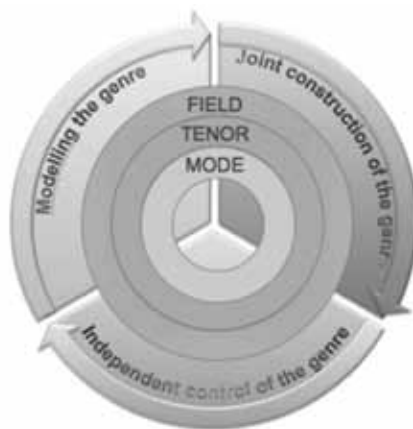


Figure 3. Developing students' knowledge of the field as they move through the curriculum cycle

The *tenor* in any particular context refers to the roles taken up by the various participants and the relationships between them. At various points in the teaching/learning cycle, the teacher will adopt roles such as: expert, guide, collaborator, responsive mentor, and provider of input. Students would similarly take on various roles: apprentice, explorer, active participant, independent learner, and so on. The nature of relationships in the classroom also contributes towards the quality of the learning environment as students learn to participate in pair, group, or whole class



discussions. The tenor of the classroom involves values that are promoted in most schools: respectful discussions, empathy, confidence building, inclusivity, and so on. The tenor of each encounter is created by particular interpersonal language choices: the language used in participating effectively in interactions, in positioning oneself and others, in evaluating and critiquing, in negotiating increasingly subtle interpersonal stances, in making judgements, in projecting confidence, in persuading others to your view, in varying the degree of commitment to a proposition, and so on. These interpersonal choices underpin effective learning and in many cases will need to be taught as students are inducted into new ways of interacting in school contexts.

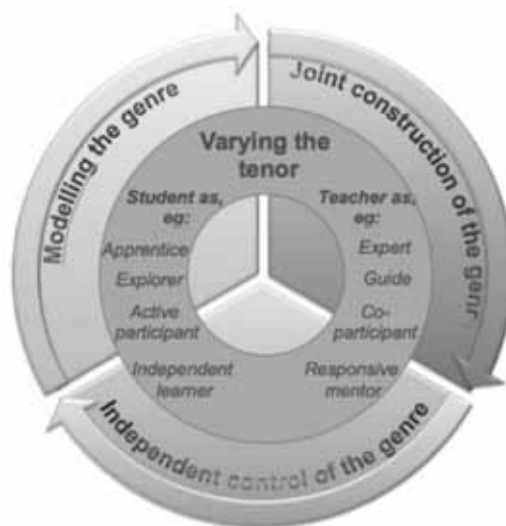


Figure 4. Tenor variations across the teaching/learning cycle

*Mode* refers to the channel of communication in any situation – oral, written, or multimodal. Each of these modes plays a different role in the learning process. Mode is often seen as a continuum. At one end, oral interaction fosters the free-flowing, exploratory exchange of ideas. At the other end, the written mode (including visuals) allows for more reflective, considered meaning-making, where deeper connections between ideas are made, threads pulled together, and gaps in understanding revealed and filled. As students move through school, they will need to comprehend and compose increasingly dense, complex texts in the written mode that use

language very differently from the more familiar oral mode.

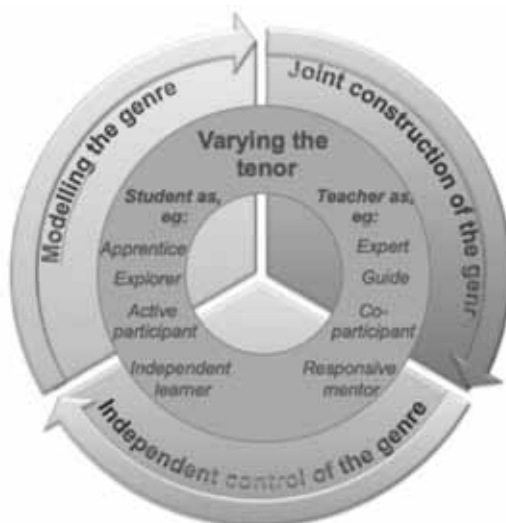


Figure 5. Shunting between the modes throughout the teaching-learning cycle

These three factors – the field, tenor and mode of any context – help us to predict the nature of the language resources students will need at various points in the teaching/learning cycle in order to achieve the outcomes of the unit of work. As students move through the cycle, they will need to develop increasing control not only over the genre, but over the more academic, technical, abstract language needed to build *field* knowledge. At different points in the cycle, they will need to employ a variety of interpersonal *tenor* resources in their interactions with the teacher, classmates, and the texts that they read and write, growing from their role of novice towards increasing expertise and independence. And typically, students will shunt between the oral and written *modes* as they move from the more conversational towards the more carefully designed language of the written text. (See Humphrey, (2013) for a practical example.)

The three register variables – field, tenor, and mode – are reflected in the language strand of the *Australian Curriculum: English*<sup>1</sup>.

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1 The Australian Curriculum: English: <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/content-structure>

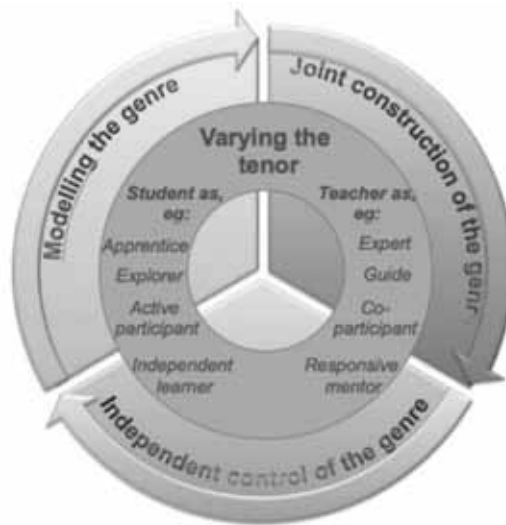


Figure 6. How the register variables inform the language strand of the Australian Curriculum: English

Genre/register theory proposes that we can't assume that all students will 'pick up' such resources through exposure and immersion. The language of schooling is different from the language of the home and community and should be taught explicitly depending on the identified needs of the students. The teaching/learning cycle provides an environment within which such teaching can take place in the context of real tasks using relevant, authentic texts.

### **Contributions of Genre Theory**

Over the past thirty years or so, genre theory has made a distinctive contribution to education in Australian schools. It offers a comprehensive model of language in use, encompassing meaning-making activities from the level of the whole text through to the sentence level and below. It describes how our language choices will differ depending on certain aspects of the context. And it suggests a pedagogy that looks outward to the social dimension of learning.

### *Equity*

Genre theory aims to provide the potential for all students, regardless of background, to have access to the powerful discourses of the culture. It does this through the explicit teaching of the language needed to achieve the learning outcomes of the school curriculum.

### *Language as a meaning making resource*

Whereas language was often dealt with only at the surface level of 'the basics' such as spelling, punctuation and vocabulary, genre theory sees language as the primary resource for meaning-making and the foundation of learning. Rather than dealing with discrete instances of language, there is a recognition that meaning accumulates and evolves over a stretch of text.

### *Language in context*

Genre theory has helped to clarify the relationship between language choices and context.

- At the broad cultural level of context, it has identified typical *purposes* for which genres are employed in educational discourse communities. It has described how genres are organised differently depending on their social purpose.
  - At the more specific level, genre theory aids an understanding of how the *register* of a particular situation is related to certain language choices:
  - how the various *fields* of knowledge across the curriculum employ different language resources in building and connecting ideas
  - how the *tenor* of the classroom varies as the participants take up different roles and engage in different relationships, making interpersonal language choices that can foster or detract from learning
  - how oral and written *modes* play different roles in the learning process through the different language resources used in oral interaction and written composition.

- As designers of the context, teachers are now in a position to identify the language demands of curriculum tasks and to attend to them explicitly.

### Recent developments in genre theory and practice

Genre theory is not static. It is constantly evolving as the theory interacts with practice and as collaborative research between educational linguists and teachers reveals new insights into the language of schooling.

#### *An extended repertoire of genres*

In contrast to early days when only a handful of basic genres were recognised, continuing research has identified a much broader range of genres in both primary and secondary schools. The following figure outlines some of the more common educational genres:

	genre	purpose		
Stories	<b>recount</b>	recounting events	English	Society and environment
	<b>narrative</b>	resolving a complication in a story		
	<b>exemplum</b>	judging character or behaviour in a story		
	<b>anecdote</b>	sharing an emotional reaction in a story		
Text response	<b>personal response</b>	reacting emotionally to a text		
	<b>review</b>	evaluating a literary, visual or musical text		
	<b>interpretation</b>	interpreting the message of a text		
Arguments	<b>critical response</b>	challenging the message of a text		
	<b>exposition</b>	arguing for a point of view		
	<b>discussion</b>	discussing two or more points of view		
	<b>autobiographical recount</b>	recounting life events		
Factual stories	<b>biographical recount</b>	recounting life stages		
	<b>historical recount</b>	recounting historical events		
	<b>historical account</b>	explaining historical events		
Explanations	<b>sequential explanation</b>	explaining a sequence		
	<b>factorial explanation</b>	explaining multiple causes		
	<b>consequential explanation</b>	explaining multiple effects		
Reports	<b>descriptive report</b>	classifying & describing a phenomenon		
	<b>classifying report</b>	classifying & describing types of phenomena		
	<b>compositional report</b>	describing parts of wholes		
Procedures	<b>procedure</b>	how to do experiments & observations		
	<b>procedural recount</b>	recounting experiments & observations		

Table 1. An overview of some of the more common school genres (Rose, 2006)

### *Recognition of genre diversity*

Whereas introductory descriptions of genres tended to emphasise their more predictable, typical features, in real life we come across texts that play with those features. Longer texts in particular often include more than one genre. These are referred to as 'macro-genres'. A science textbook chapter, for example, will typically comprise an information report describing the topic, an explanation of how something works, a procedure for carrying out an experiment, a biography of a key scientist in the field, and so on.

### *Phases within stages*

Traditionally, genre theory has described the typical stages through which a genre moves in achieving its purpose. The stage descriptions were deliberately left broad, indicating those key elements without which the genre wouldn't work. A procedure, for example, wouldn't work without a sequence of steps to tell you what to do. A narrative wouldn't work without a complication to make it entertaining. More recent research, however, has identified a range of phases within these broader stages.

Within the Orientation stage of a narrative, for example, we might find phases that introduce the main character, or that describe the initial setting, or that hint at the Complication. As the narrative moves on, we might find phases of dialogue where the characters' personalities are revealed through the way they interact. Or there might be phases where we get to know the characters by how they react to a minor problem, or reflect on what is happening, or participate in an event (Rose, 2006).

It is the phases that give the genre its flexibility and potential for creativity. They are relatively optional and can be combined in a variety of ways. The phases also help to predict the grammatical features of the text. In an anecdote phase of an exposition, one might expect the use of the past tense, proper nouns referring to specific people and places, perhaps a touch of humour, and the characteristics of spoken language. Such knowledge about phases enables the teacher to identify those language features that are relevant to the genre and that could become the specific focus of a lesson.

### ***Reading into writing***

Whereas the focus of the teaching/learning cycle has typically been on the production of an effective written text, until recently the teaching of reading has received less attention. Genre based programs such as *Reading to Learn*<sup>2</sup> (nd) and *Accelerated Literacy*<sup>3</sup> (2012) have now placed greater emphasis on reading. In such programs, there is a strong link between the text/s being read and the text to be written (known as 'reading into writing'). Rather than simply modelling how the text is organised, students are taught how to strategically read such a text.

### ***The language of the disciplines ('field')***

Recognising that language varies depending on the subject matter, it becomes obvious that generic skills such as spelling and punctuation are not sufficient for academic literacy. In response, a great deal of research has been undertaken into identifying the language of the different disciplines such as history (Coffin, 1997), science (Halliday & Martin, 1993), mathematics (O'Halloran, 2000) and English (Christie & Derewianka, 2008).

### ***The language of attitude ('tenor')***

The relatively neglected area of interpersonal resources has been fleshed out further with a focus on the nature of evaluative language, referred to as Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). Appraisal theory provides students with tools for exploring the expression of attitudes: the sharing of feelings, appreciation of the qualities of things, and judgement of human behaviour. An awareness of how attitudes can be articulated in various ways, can be strengthened or weakened, and can be expressed directly or indirectly can support students in their writing and in their critical reading of texts, in particular in relation to genres such as narrative, exposition, discussion, and reviews. Appraisal theory also deals with how language can be used to engage with others, to project one's own voice, to entertain alternative perspectives and possibilities, and to foster dialogic classroom interaction (e.g. Jones, 2010).

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2 *Reading to Learn*: <https://www.readingtolearn.com.au/>

3 *National accelerated literacy program*. Commonwealth of Australia: <http://nalp.edu.au>

### ***Multimodal analysis ('mode')***

A Hallidayan model encompasses not only the oral and written modes, but also the full range of multimodal resources that abound in contemporary media. It provides us with a visual grammar: tools that help students and teachers to analyse, interpret, critique and compose still and moving images such as photographs, illustrations, maps, diagrams, graphs, videos, and animations (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The grammar of visual design, based on Halliday's model of language, has been developed further for use in the classroom (see Callow, 2013). Applications of this work include how to read images, introducing students to grammar through the analysis of images, and understanding the interaction between the visual and verbal elements of a text.

### ***Mapping learner pathways***

On-going analysis of hundreds of texts produced by students ranging from Foundation years to upper secondary has provided insights into typical pathways of language development (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Lewis, 2014). By examining the range and type of genres that students engage with at different levels of schooling and by identifying the increasingly complex language features that they employ in their writing, we are able to make informed suggestions as to what might be expected of students at different levels of proficiency.

### **Issues**

Genre theory has had a considerable influence on Australian literacy education over a number of decades. It has drawn our attention to the need to identify the language challenges students face as they move through schooling and helps teachers in their lesson planning, teaching reading and writing, assessing students' literacy development and supporting students in meeting the challenges of academic learning. Inevitably, however, there are issues that have arisen over the years. Two such issues are now discussed.

### ***Reductive views of genres***

In many cases, genres have come to be taught simply as 'items' in the



curriculum. Rather than starting with the purpose of a task (to explain, to review, to argue), students are often simply taught the name and stages of the genre. The stages are taught prescriptively – structures imposed upon a text rather than moves arising naturally because of their functionality. By focusing instead on a text's social purpose in a given task and on the job that each stage is doing, students are able to understand why the text unfolds in a particular way, rather than just 'following the recipe'. Criticisms of genres as formulaic straight jackets also ignore the fact that, while the main stages are relatively predictable because of their function, the less predictable phases within the stages provide scope for flexibility and choice.

Despite the identification of a greater range of genres and macrogenres, it is still often the case that only a small handful are taught across the years of schooling. In addition, the various subtypes are often not recognised, so it might be assumed, for example, that just because students have learnt to write a recount of personal experience, they are capable of writing an historical recount, which calls for the ability to stand back from individual events and synthesise stretches of time.

### ***Register and grammar***

While the notion of genre has been readily taken up in Australian schools, it is generally divorced from the complementary notion of register. Without taking register into account, genres are simply 'empty shells'. Together with the genre, each curriculum task will involve developing the language of the topic (field), the language needed for effective interpersonal interaction (tenor), and the language and visual resources needed to compose texts that hang together well (mode).

It is important for teachers to come to understand how genre and register work together in order to identify the language demands that students need to master the various curriculum tasks they engage in.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past few decades, genre theory has had a considerable and on-going impact on literacy education and EAL programs in Australian primary and secondary schools, adult migrant English teaching and on

academic literacy teaching. Its influence has been spreading internationally as educators in countries as diverse as Singapore, South Africa, USA, Hong Kong, UK, China, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, and Thailand are employing genre-based approaches in developing their syllabuses, materials and curricula (Brisk, 2011; Gebhard & Harman, 2011; Hyland, 2003; Schleppegrell, 2004).

A functional model of language and literacy is rich and multi-faceted. In an era when teachers are overwhelmed with curriculum change, slogans such as 'sizzling starts' and 'the hamburger paragraph' become attractive, but they are no replacement for sound theory on which to base decisions.

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