Between the fragmentary and the intangible. Reading and writing reflective essays at university

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It is often said that the main purpose of the essay is the expression of that which is incomplete, fragmentary, and experimental. It is no wonder then that the genre is quite difficult to define. In fact, several authors have pointed at its mutable, hybrid and intangible character (Arenas Cruz, 1997; Gómez Martínez, 1987; Iozzi- Klein y Cavallari, 2015, among others). The goal of this paper is twofold. Firstly, we aim at a key characterization of the essay which allows us to think, plan and carry out the teaching of the reflective essay in a university context. Secondly, our goal has to do with the teaching practice and the learning experience of the genre. We will present a didactic sequence through which we promote familiarization and development in the context of collaborative, critical and creative work with the use of several texts and multimedia resources. The tasks include the exploration of reflective texts by acclaimed professional authors, and both former and current students of the subject. Based on this diversity of texts and voices and through the use of digital tools, we foster personal reflection in an atmosphere of trust and collaborative work among peers and instructors.

Introduction

This paper proposes a three-stage didactic sequence to be carried out during the Language & Writing class corresponding to English Language 4, a fifth-year subject in the Teaching, Translation and Licentiate degree courses at the National University of La Plata (UNLP). The tasks in the sequence aim at exploring the reflective essay and invite students to produce a reflective text of their own.

As input for the first stage, we work on *The death of the moth,* by Virginia Woolf as a starting point for students to reflect on the definition of reflective essay as a discourse genre, along with its communicative purpose, style, tone, and other typical features. The second stage sets out to analyze two essays written by former students in the context of their Language and Writing class and as part of their coursework in previous years. On the one hand, we look to make students familiar with the type of analytical work required by the course; on the other hand, the activity reveals the diversity and flexibility that the genre can afford as a vehicle for self-reflection and the expression of identity. Finally, following on from the analysis in the previous stage, in the third stage students find inspiration in a poem by Seamus Heaney to write about their own insights as to what reflecting means to them.

Theoretical framework

This paper is grounded in the principles of Genre Theory, particularly in the concepts of *genre rationale* (Swales, 1990), *generic integrity* (Bhatia, 2004), *discourse mode* (Smith 2003) and *genre, text and grammar-based approach* (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). In this presentation we show how we approach the teaching of the reflective essay in English Language 4. The tasks we put forward are meant to help students rank their knowledge and personal experiences, and to encourage them to take stances. Among other aims, they are also intended for them to build an awareness of the claim or thesis of the essay, to tell the different narrative-descriptive, expressive and evaluative aspects apart and to bring into play linguistic resources suitable to the level of complexity of the personal reflection that they seek to capture in their written productions.

The theoretical perspective we have adopted draws on the *teaching-learning cycle* (TLC) developed at the School of Sydney for a genre-based literacy pedagogy (Rothery, 1989, 1994; Martin & Rothery, 1990; Martin & Rose, 2012), and the notion of *genre* as conceived of by Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1985; Martin & Rose, 2006). According to this model, genre connects culture with the communicative situation and register connects the latter with language. This extended genre notion posits that social purposes are tightly interlocked with textual structures (Bawarshi, 2010).

Language practices are socially and historically developed, and they are materialized in "forms of genres" (Denardi, 2017). Therefore, genres can be seen as instruments of mediation to the teaching of textuality, that is, micro and macro

text structures. Based on this view, genre is used as a (mega) instrument (Dolz and Schneuwly, 1997) to act in language classroom situations.

Following John Swales' working definition of genre (Swales,1990) and the importance of communicative purpose as the privileged property for assigning membership to a genre, we understand genres to be far more than linguistic forms. They are forms of life and identity that shape our thoughts and the kind of communications through which we interact. They make up common territories we turn to for creating intelligible communicative actions among the members of a speech community (Bazerman, 1997).

Along the lines of Australian genre-based pedagogy, we seek to identify the genres that prove most relevant to our students. In that sense, the reflective essay exhibits certain properties that fit our educational purposes. We understand this type of essay as a reflective method that underlies the text and intimately connects the writer's worldview and their unique way of expressing it (Montaigne, 1580, 1948). A hybrid space between the expressive and the referential is thus created, which, through the expository-analytical genre (Iozzi-Klein, 2015), or reflective essay (Alexander,1967), permits a personal approach to a topic, according to the form chosen and to the individual perception in which the reflection is materialized. As a pedagogical approach, it fosters a critical, fair-minded attitude to the world, it develops the capacity to express a thought concisely, clearly and precisely, and it broadens self-awareness and a sense of identity.

Didactic sequence

We conceive a didactic sequence as a set of classroom planned activities that aims to construct oral and written knowledge and focuses on a specific genre (Dolz; Noverraz; Schneuwly, 2004). Such a sequence is characterized by presenting non-additive continuity. Instead, tasks are interrelated, progressively structured in such a way that one activity complements and expands the previous one and is, in turn, projected onto the next. The sequence will always be oriented towards the kind of generic competence (Bhatia, 2005) students need to achieve to become effective essay writers and, in our particular case, to meet the passing requirements of the subject English Language 4.

Stage 1

The first stage of our didactic sequence includes a set of four activities that allows students to act on the object of study: a professionally written essay and a professional review on the genre through reflection questions to activate their prior knowledge and generate the conceptual and empirical bases that give way to deepening content. The activities are arranged in such a way that "knowledge advances in extension and depth, (...) allowing the combination of increasingly rich, well-connected, well-structured and more functional conceptual networks" (Del Carmen, 1996).

These first tasks require students to act on the object of study in order to make knowledge articulation possible within the students' social practices. In other words, we aim to generate conceptual and empirical bases that give way to deepening content. Stage 1 begins with an extract introducing Virginia Woolf's characterization of the essay as a genre. This is followed by more specific work on one of her own essays. Then, through a video, students learn about her sociohistorical context, which leads them to reflect upon their own contexts and identities as writers.

Activity 1: The reflective essay as a genre

Students discuss the following question in pairs: **Virginia Woolf is celebrated as one of the pioneering writers of the 20th century. Have you read any of her works?**

After a short exchange on their previous experiences with the work of Virginia Woolf, students are presented with the following task:

> Widely considered one of the finest essayists of the 20th century, Woolf composed "The Modern Essay" as a review of Ernest Rhys's five-volume anthology of Modern English Essays: 1870-1920 (J.M. Dent, 1922). The review originally appeared in The Times Literary Supplement, November 30, 1922, and Woolf included a slightly revised version in her first collection of essays, The Common Reader (1925).
>
> **In small groups,** read the first paragraphs of Woolf's review. What points does she make about the nature of the English essay?

The Modern Essay by Virginia Woolf

As Mr. Rhys truly says, it is unnecessary to go profoundly into the history and origin of the essay--whether it derives from Socrates or Siranney the Persian--since, like all living things, its present is more important than its past. Moreover, the family is widely spread; and while some of its representatives have risen in the world and wear their coronets with the best, others pick up a precarious living in the gutter near Fleet Street. The form, too, admits variety. The essay can be short or long, serious or trifling, about God and Spinoza, or about turtles and Cheapside. But as we turn over the pages of these five little volumes, containing essays written between 1870 and 1920, certain principles appear to control the chaos, and we detect in the short period under review something like the progress of history.

Of all forms of literature, however, the essay is the one which least calls for the use of long words. The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation; we may soar to the heights of fantasy with Lamb or plunge to the depths of wisdom with Bacon, but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world.

In answer to activity 1, students will probably point out that Woolf highlights that essays are particularly varied and quite different from each other in terms of topic, length, tone, style and that their main aim is to entertain the reader.

Activity 2: A celebrated reflective essay by V. Woolf

In this activity students read and listen to an audio version of *The Death of the Moth*, one of Woolf's most acclaimed essays and a classic of the genre.

Read and listen to the essay paragraph by paragraph. After each paragraph, answer this question: What do you notice? Take some notes to share with the class.

The length of the essay and the lyrical style of the writing invite an interrupted reading of individual paragraphs. As students read and listen to one paragraph after another, they enter the world of the speaker as she sits with her book, gazes out the window, notices a moth, watches the insect, reflects upon its life, and realizes it is dying. After each paragraph, students are asked to write simply "what they notice" so that they may begin to appreciate the subtle progressions in Woolf's language, feel comfortable with free association, and/or identify with the speaker/character.

As a next step, students' attention will be turned to a quote taken from *The Modern essay* and asked to respond to it by making reference to *The death of the moth*.

"It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation (...) but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world."

Activity 3: Close reading

In this activity, students are offered a guide to explore different meanings and trace the development of some techniques employed by the writer.

In small groups, answer these questions:
1. What is the setting of the essay -season, time of day, speaker's literal position, town or country?
2. How would you describe the speaker's attitude in paragraph 2?
3. In what ways is the third paragraph the center of the essay (apart from being the third in a series of five)?
4. Why does the speaker lay the pencil down at the end of paragraph 5?
5. What examples of sensory detail do you notice throughout the essay?

Through peer-to-peer discussion, students are expected to focus on the speaker (her position in the window, the type of comments and observations she makes, shifts in attitude), and identify conflicting feelings, images of combat, life and death.

Activity 4: Socio-historical contexts (Woolf's and ours)

So far, the activities have centered on the analysis of texts. Now, the focus is shifted to the process of knowledge construction from contextual relations. This *involves* exploring the physical and socio-subjective parameters of text production, or *historicism* (Denardi, 2017).

In what ways did the essay provide Virginia Woolf with a mode of writing well-suited to her position as a critical, professional, woman writer? Watch the video and fill in the chart below[1].

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[1]Video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1W7wqXD_b0

The social changes which marked her time.	
Some biographical information.	
Her work between WWI and WWII	
Three lessons we can learn from her	

After watching the video, which presents Woolf´s context, interests and pursuits, students are invited to reflect upon the here and now and their own positions as essayists.

Considering what you have studied about this genre so far, how does the reflective essay tie in with your own reality? Think about the points that appear in the chart and make notes. Share your views in small groups.

The social reality of our time.	
Your previous experience as a student.	
Some aspects of your personal history/ your personality.	
What you think you might gain by exploring this particular genre.	

Stage 2

Stage 2 focuses on the reflective essay in the context of our coursework. The activities in this phase aim to reflect the breadth and depth with which the content will be covered, taking into account our local context. We link the content to be learned with students' language practices, thus making content meaningful and challenging them to build a representation of the communicative situation of the activity.

Reading the work of acclaimed writers is an interesting introduction to the essay as a genre. However, we also deem it necessary (and valuable) to work on

essays written by current and former students of the subject. With this aim in mind, students are referred to a document containing two essays written by former students of the subject. The class will be divided in half with each group reading and exploring a different essay.

Activity 1:

Read your essay and take down notes on the following questions:

Can you identify the thesis of the essay?

What are the main ideas that contribute to the discussion of the topic?

Does the text develop a clear line of reasoning?

How would you describe the style?

Can you spot any instances of humor?

What effects are achieved by the examples in the essay?

Does the essay present smooth transitions from one section to the next? Find examples.
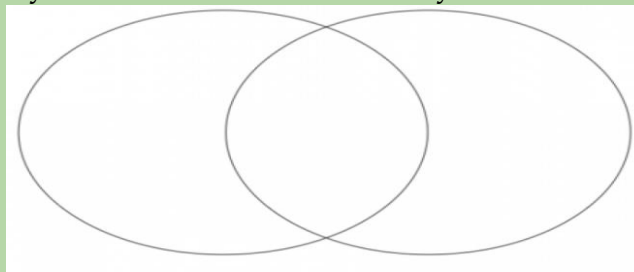
After analyzing their essay, students will mingle and work with someone who has read the other essay.

Activity 2:

Find someone who has read the other text and share. Together, make a Venn diagram. Based on your answers to the questions above, what do you find the essays have in common? Where do they seem to differ?

Essay 1   Essay 2

Activity 3:

> Now, read the other essay and make any necessary changes to your diagram. As a final step, scan through both essays and reflect on the thesis, tone, use of humor, the vocabulary, modality and tenses used, and on the traces of the speaker's subjectivity you may find.

The goal of the first activity is to make students compare and contrast two essays which reflect on reflecting itself in two different ways: the first one as a purely mental activity that catches us off guard and the second one as a part and parcel with writing. The scanning activity on the other hand seeks to draw their attention to the token of reflective essay writing: subjectivity in the enunciation, the use of present tense, mental and modal verbs, a variety of vocabulary resources to express a line of reasoning. To close this stage, students are asked to share their findings with the rest of the class.

Stage 3

After working on the essay as a genre and reflecting on essays written by others, stage 3 of this sequence invites students to write their own reflective texts. When it comes to writing, art is a special source of inspiration. With this idea in mind, we introduce a poem by Irish poet and Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney, arguably one of the 20th century greatest poets.

Activity 1: Digging

We share a video[2] which offers a rendering of the poem Digging. Students watch the video and do the following task:

> **Read and watch Heaney´s rendering of his poem and answer these questions:**
> 1. What does digging refer to in the context of the poem?
> 2. What kind of feelings are associated with the father in the poem?
> 3. The poem draws on an analogy. Can you identify the different elements of the analogy?
> 4. What do the images in the video contribute to the experience of reading/ listening to the poem?

Students discuss their answers in small groups before having a whole class discussion on the poem.

Activity 2: Writing is like…

As a next step, students do the following task individually.

> Seamus Heaney compares writing to digging. What is writing like for you? Come up with an analogy of your own.
> For me writing is like…

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[2]Video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIzJgbNANzk

Try to identify different elements in the analogy and map the correspondences between the literal and the metaphorical planes of your analogy.

Students work on their analogies while the teacher monitors and walks around the class helping students develop their ideas. Once students have come up with some preliminary ideas about their analogies, they discuss them in small groups. Discussing the analogies and sharing them with their classmates will clarify their ideas and put their analogies to the test.

Activity 3: Digging up our own voices

After outlining and discussing their outlines with the class, students write their own reflective texts in answer to the following rubric:

- What is writing like for you?
- What can writing be compared to?
- What do writing and (*activity of your choice*) have in common?

Develop your analogy in a reflective text of no more than 200 words. Share your texts on padlet: https://padlet.com/doloresaicega/3bcjc6no5j1gaiqt

Through the activities in this stage, students have consolidated knowledge by reflecting on what they have learnt and applying it to their own writing. So far, our sequence has included collaborative tasks to analyze the genre, the communicative situation and organization, and now students are ready to write their first reflective piece on the topic of reflective writing.

Students jot down ideas and write their first drafts in class. They will keep working on their own and will share their reflective pieces on a collaborative wall on Padlet, which will be shown and discussed in further classes. The final productions allow teachers and students to observe students' improvement and, thus, serve as an instrument for summative evaluation.

Final remarks

Consistent with genre-based literacy pedagogy, our didactic sequence seeks to familiarize students with the reflective essay and to motivate them to elaborate their first reflective texts within the context of the subject. The sequence encompasses a collaborative stage phase (stages 1 and 2) and an autonomous phase (stage 3). Analyzing and emphasizing the communicative purpose of the genre and its main characteristics allows students to see it as a generator of meanings coming from the personal viewpoint and experience of a reflective voice which dictates lexical, grammatical and rhetorical choices.

The first stage focuses on a professional essay and a review on the genre itself. Through a series of activities the communicative purpose is analyzed and the style is understood as a result of the constraints imposed by the context. In the second stage, students read and analyze two essays written by former students

of the subject in an attempt to familiarize students with the kind of writing task that is required in the context of the subject and to highlight the value of these student productions. The activities aim at comparing and contrasting the essays collaboratively to then scan through them to highlight features of style. In the final stage, students start drafting their own reflective pieces based on a poem and the material used in the previous two stages. With this final task we expect them to reflect independently, albeit with some help from their peers, on what reflective essay writing means to them.

With this teaching intervention geared at a metareflection on reflection, we hope to spark genuine interest in the genre in our students and to enlighten our journey of the teaching of the genre. After all, a didactic sequence can also be an instrument of teacher development (Denardi, 2009) as it contributes to the construction of their knowledge (Richards, 1998) of contextual, linguistic, and pedagogical dimensions.

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