EFL College Students' Cross-genre Writing Performance: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Whether the writing ability of one genre can indicate another remains an interesting question for teachers, learners and researchers. However, cross-genre writing performance is still relatively under-researched in English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) learning context. This exploratory study aims to examine the general cross-genre writing ability of EFL college students, by contrasting their narrative and argumentative writing performance and investigating the correlation of them. 96 scored essays (48 narratives, 48 argumentative) were collected from a genre-based writing course. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted to investigate individuals' cross-genre writing ability. Unlike prior research on EFL cross-genre writing, a significant difference of writing performance was found between two genres, with argumentative outperforming narrative. There also exists a moderate positive correlation between narrative and argumentative writing performance. The in-depth follow-up interviews with six participants of distinct writing proficiency revealed four major factors that may influence cross-genre writing ability, including: overall writing proficiency, mastery of genre-specific features, frequency of genre practice, and the amount of participatory generic input in writing instruction. The findings suggest that cross-genre writing ability varies across individuals and is difficult to acquire with above-mentioned challenges. Pedagogical implications for genre-based writing instruction in EFL classrooms are finally provided.

1 Introduction

In second language (L2) writing studies, numerous research has been conducted on learners' writing

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ability[1] or instruction for a single genre, like argumentative and academic writing at college level (eg. Cheng, 2006; Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015; Liu, 2013; Wang, 2017). According to existing literature, research on the performance of narrative texts at college level has received much less attention, especially in Chinese EFL context. This limited genre focus might be pertinent to university education in China. Presumably, students have already mastered the narrative genre, which is considered to be easier, when they were in high school. In most Chinese universities, though narrative writing is partly included in some EFL writing courses, the instruction on expository, argumentative, or academic writing has gained more emphasis. In the large-scale domestic English tests for both English and non-English majors (such as Test for English Majors and College English tests), argumentative writing is a frequently tested genre to examine college students' comprehensive language ability (Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Ye & Yan, 2010). Another reason might be the over-emphasis on the writing competence of academic argumentation which is considered to be more important for those who want to pursue further study abroad by participating in a required international English proficiency examination (such as IELTS and TOEFL) (Kaewpet, 2018; Smart, 2019). Surprisingly however, from our observation as college teachers, students generally do not write well in narrative genre compared with other genres. Many students also reported the fact that secondary education has not provided sufficient instruction on narrative writing, nor that they possess higher competence in this genre (based on the communication we had with the students during years of teaching). Thus, it is worthwhile to compare college students' narrative writing performance to argumentative one in order to testify our assumption.

In addition to the unequal genre focus in writing courses, there are few studies contrasting EFL learners' writing proficiency across genres (except for Jeong, 2017; Qin & Uccelli, 2016). In writing across genres, as suggested by Qin and Uccelli (2016), a majority of EFL writers will encounter a dual challenge of distinguishing forms of discourse and meanwhile deploying appropriate linguistic knowledge attuned to communicative contexts, which are usually correlating with the writing quality of genres. Taking the perspective of genre variation, one tends to assume that writers' writing performance of a genre can indicate another. Besides, the above two cross-genre studies mainly focus on textual analysis of students' writing performance. The difficulties and challenges learning agents face in writing process remain insufficiently explored. This is also confirmed in Guo's review (2015) of the development history of English writing research in Chinese context, suggesting the lack of attention paid to individuals' problems they encounter in writing compared to the numerous text-based studies. In this study, we therefore mainly focus on understanding students' writing ability across genres from the perceptive of the writers.

In sum, it is a new attempt to examine EFL college students' cross-genre writing ability by contrasting their overall narrative and argumentative writing performance. It would be interesting as well to explore whether there exists a correlation between writing performance of two genres, one indicating another. By looking at the same writer's writing ability of two genres in cases, insights could be gained to understand individuals' difficulties they encounter in writing across genres, and the reasons why some students can be proficient in writing both genres, while some excel at one but not the other. This study also aims to provide pedagogical implications to genre-based writing instruction in EFL classrooms.

2 Literature Review

In this section, definition and characteristics of genres are first provided to differentiate two common genre types, narrative and argumentative texts. To unpack the complex situation of writing performance across genres, three major factors that impact this competence, namely genre features, writing proficiency and genre-based writing instruction, are identified in research as reviewed below.

2.1 Definition and characteristics of genres

According to Swales (1981), the notion of genre generally refers to "conventionalized or socially recognized ways of using language within certain discourse communities" (as cited in Qin & Uccelli, 2016, p.13). Narrative and argumentative texts are two most common but distinct genres that serve for different socially communicative purposes. From the perspective of organizational principles at a macro level, according to Sanford and Emmott (2012), narrative texts are described as an agent- and people- focused genre that unfold an event in a chronological order. Argumentative texts, instead, are more topic-oriented, requiring claims and arguments logically-organized to articulate writers' ideas in a stepwise hierarchical structure (Grabe, 2002). At a micro level, linguistic distinctions between narrative and argumentative texts are also manifested by their lexical and syntactical features. This has been documented in a number of cross-genre writing studies for native writers (Beers & Nagy, 2009; Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007; Ravid & Berman, 2010). For lexical features, research on native language writers show that argumentative texts display more "structurally complex, semantically abstract and low-frequency vocabulary items" than narrative texts. For syntactic features, compared to narratives, argumentative texts tend to "display more complex structures" (as cited in Qin & Uccelli, 2016, p.4). As two genres differ remarkably, it is believed that in writing across genres, writers' ability to manipulate these demands will influence their writing competence of different genres which need to server for specific communicative purposes (Hyland, 2007, 2009). On the basis of genre distinctions, it is not easy for EFL writers to successfully master the writing of two genres.

After clarifying the definition and characteristics of genres, it is important to understand factors which may exert influence on students' ability in writing across genres. The following sections discuss three major ones found in the existing literature, namely genre features, writing proficiency and genre-based writing instruction.

2.2 The influence of genre features on cross-genre writing performance

A body of studies investigating the effects of genres on L1 or L2 writers confirmed that genre-specific features do exert an influence on the quality of students' writing. However, the results of their writing performance of different genres have been mixed. Some researchers indicate that students' narrative writing performance is of higher quality than argumentative (Freedman & Pringle, 1984; Kegley, 1986; Yoon, 2018). While others suggest that students receive higher scores for argumentative or texts with impersonal topics than narratives or texts with personal topics (Jeong, 2017; Qin & Uccelli, 2016; Wiseman, 2012; Ye & Yan, 2010; Yu, 2007). The disparity of writing performance across distinct genres mentioned above demonstrates that writing performance varies across genres and writing performance of a certain genre type does not guarantee another one (Park, 2013; Qin & Uccelli, 2016). The study of Ye and Yan (2010), which examines the effect of different genres on college students' writing performance, reports that there is no correlation between narrative and argumentative writing quality due to numerous genre differences.

Additionally, it has been consistently documented in substantial studies that writing across genres is a highly complex activity requiring distinctive linguistic competence (Beers & Nagy, 2011; Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2004; Qin & Uccelli, 2016) and cognitive loads (Beauvais, Olive, & Passerault, 2011; Xu, 2019). In other words, the competence of writing across genres would be influenced by writers' ability to flexibly use their linguistic knowledge and regulate cognitive process to write a specific genre. For linguistic features of genres, they are frequently examined and some are found to correlate with writing quality. For instance, Kormos's study (2011) finds that less diverse and sophisticated vocabulary are featured in Hungry EFL secondary learners compared to higher-quality writings of native writers. Also, at secondary school level, Qin and Uccelli (2016) (one of the few who investigated cross-genre analysis in Chinese EFL context) report that higher quality of argumentative texts is characterized by more

lexico-syntactic complexity and diversity of organizational markers, while narrative texts by frequency of stance markers. As for cognitive demands, genres are found to influence writers' cognitive process in constructing language, content and structure interactively. Beauvais et al. (2011) note that compared with writing narratives, it takes students longer time to write argumentation because of its more complex and sophisticated knowledge. Xu (2019) also takes a cognitive perspective by looking at the effect of genre on the time students pause in writing. It shows that students pause longer and more frequently in writing argumentation for constructing effective arguments and a logical stepwise structure while they pause in narratives only when they need to search for linguistic expressions to depict the focus.

According to the existing literature, a number of cross-genre studies have concentrated either on L1 writers, or on textual analysis. There is little information about *the same writers*' cross-genre writing ability. Hence, in this study, besides investigating narrative and argumentative writing performance, it is noteworthy to probe into EFL writers' perceptions to understand what they may encounter in cross-genre writing and reveal more meaningful aspects.

2.3 The influence of writing proficiency on cross-genre writing performance

Many studies give rich information indicating genre effects on writing performance, but very few focus on the correlation of language proficiency and genre mastery (except for Jeong, 2017). Jeong (2017) examined the effect of narrative and expository text on writing performance of EFL college freshmen of three levels (novice, intermediate, and advanced), which are self-reported by participants based on listening, speaking, reading and writing ratings. The result suggests a remarkable difference between language proficiency and genre-based writing. It shows that novice students excel in narrative writing while the advanced perform better in expository essays. Informed by some prior research conducted in L1 oral or written language which argue that genre acquisition correlates with age (Bouwer, Béguin, Sanders & van den Bergh, 2014; Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007; Kormos, 2011), this study infers that for L2 learners, genre mastery also correlates with language proficiency. The early studies have stated a conventional belief that for both L1 and L2 learners, developmental writing trajectory is from narratives (personal topics) to argumentation (impersonal topics). Berman and Nir-Sagiv (2007) argue that it is easier for younger learners to produce oral or written narratives than argumentation which always begins at later educational stages. According to Kormos (2011), narration is the first genre exposed to learners when they first learn a second or foreign language at less proficient level. It accounts for the findings of Jeong (2017) that advanced students tend to be more frequently exposed to language resources requiring higher linguistic competence, which enhances writing performance of a more demanding genre. This language proficiency, perceived as an overall language ability, entails overall writing competence itself. It can serve as a potential factor influencing writers' ability of different genres. In writing assessment, researchers have indicated that writing ability is a comprehensive competence that should be evaluated in writing across different genres, not within one (Carlson, Bridgeman, Camp & Waanders, 1985; Ruth & Murphy, 1988). Hence, successful writing across genres requires overall high writing competence.

2.4 The influence of genre-based writing instruction on cross-genre writing performance

L2 writing instruction is another important field related to EFL or ESL writing proficiency. In recent years, genre and its application to language teaching and learning have gained increasing prominence in writing classroom. Genre-based writing approach has been widely investigated for L2 writing (Cheng, 2007; Deng, Chen & Zhang, 2014; Yayli, 2011; Yang, 2011; Yasuda, 2011). The benefits of genre-based writing approach to writing pedagogy have been recognized as follows: 1) "stimulating writers' interest; 2) providing students with explicit and systematic explanations of how language functions in social contexts; 3) improving genre knowledge; 4) strengthening genre awareness" (as cited in Yang, 2011, p.2).

Most importantly, many studies conducted with genre-based approach to writing have demonstrated that it positively fosters learners' awareness of genre which is an important component of different generic competence. Yasuda' study (2011) examines the development of FL writers' genre awareness, linguistic knowledge and writing competence and reports that students' increased genre awareness is apparent in their e-mail writing products which helps improve their writing scores significantly. Similar manifestation of the effect of instruction is also shown in the study of Deng, et al. (2014), who includes a number of texts such as news, academic, job application, and so on. They find that fostered genre awareness after the instruction significantly enhances learners' knowledge and writing competence across genres. Moreover, Yayli (2011) and Cheng (2007) both focus on genre awareness in students' writing tasks within the framework of genre-based writing approach. They report that learners not only can deploy generic features in a writing, but recontextualize genre awareness in the writing of a new genre.

According to Deng et al. (2014), some effective teaching strategies in genre-based instruction could be adopted to foster the genre writing competence, which specifically include: 1) explicit input of genre knowledge; 2) adequate genre-based class activities, including "group presentation of a particular textual analysis, group discussion around the collaborative work and the construction of a certain genre, peer review, and teachers' feedback on a certain genre writing" (p.25–27); and 3) the use of multifaceted writing portfolios.

Thus, the way of writing instruction can indeed impact students' writing performance across genres. In an EFL genre-based writing context at college level, it is meaningful to see whether learners' cross-genre writing competence would be influenced by the writing instruction they receive.

In summary, according to the literature, there are three major factors that may influence cross-genre writing performance: genre features, general writing proficiency, and genre-based writing instruction. However, there may be other factors that remain unexplored. In order to better understand EFL college students' writing proficiency across genres (i.e. narrative and argumentative texts), investigate the correlation of writing performance of these two genres, and explore factors that would influence learners' cross-genre writing competence, this study addresses the research questions specifically as follows:

1. How does the writing performance of EFL college students vary across genres? Is there a significant difference?
2. Is there a correlation between narrative and argumentative writing proficiency?
3. What are the factors that may influence cross-genre writing ability of learners who can excel at writing two genres and learners who can excel at one but not the other?

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants and settings

This exploratory study utilized a mix-methods approach to seek answers to the research questions. Firstly, quantitative data of narrative and argumentative writing performance of 48 college EFL learners were collected. They all major in English Education in a university in Southern China, and received writing instruction (Intermediate English Writing Course) from the same L2 instructor in two academic semesters when they were sophomores. Most students have English learning experiences for at least 12 years as required by the national compulsory curriculum. Additionally, six participants (they were junior students at the time of study) were selected to participate in a one-on-one in-depth interview that served as the qualitative data to triangulate with the quantitative data analysis, which will be elaborated in section 3.2.

The Intermediate English Writing course spanned two semesters, with an 80-minute lesson once a week. It adopted a genre-based approach with an aim to raise students' awareness of different

genres (including narrative, exposition, argumentation, and critique) and encourage them to apply the knowledge to their writings. The instruction of these genres was divided into four separate modules, and each module consisted of about 8 weeks of instruction. The instructor used text analysis (genre analysis) in most lessons, so genre exemplars were selected and analyzed before the lesson. The Detailed Reading in Sydney school genre based-approach (Rose, 2012) was adapted for deconstructing the text. Other discussion tasks were also included. For example, in the narrative module, the major elements of narratives such as characters, setting, plot and theme were introduced, analyzed and discussed through text analysis. In the exposition module, comparison and contrast, cause effect essays were analyzed, where the five paragraph "hamburger structure" together with thesis statement and topic sentences were attended to. In the argumentation module, logical and critical thinking skills were emphasized apart from the text analysis of argumentative essays, and a debate was initiated as an oral preparation for their final piece of writing. Students were instructed to do argument analysis by identifying conclusion and premises and follow the framework of Bowell and Kemp (2008) in evaluating and reconstructing arguments.

3.2 Data collection

The quantitative data was collected from the narrative and argumentative writing scores rated by the same L2 instructor (and later by the researchers for inter-rater reliability) in two sophomore semesters respectively. These students were the same set of students who received the GEW instruction covering both genres from the same teacher. With consent from the course instructor, the writing scores across genres were collected and the correlation was done between narrative and argumentative writing performance. Both types of essays were written by *the same group of students* as after-class assignments. The instructor used two slightly different analytical scoring rubrics designed for each genre. Apart from the shared three dimensions including "language use" (30%), "content" (30%), and "organization" (20%), the instructor added a "reasoning" (20%) dimension for argumentative essay assessment while an "originality and impressiveness" (20%) dimension for narrative. After collecting the essays, the researchers then read all the essays again based on the same grading rubrics to calculate percentage agreement (agree or not with the teacher's grading). The inter-rater reliability of the writing performance turned out to be 88%. The students were also asked to rate the difficulty level (from 1 the easiest–5 the most difficult) of these two types of essay questions and their average scores were 3.8 for narrative and 3.9 for argumentative, with no significant difference.

Table 1

Essay Questions and Scoring Rubrics for Narrative and Argumentative Genres

Narrative	Essay questions (choose one from two options):
	1.Write about a significant event in your life that has changed you greatly
	2.Write about an influential person in your life
	Scoring rubrics (100%):
	Content 30%, Language 30%, Organization 20%, Originality and impressiveness 20%
Argumentative	Essay questions (choose one from two options):
	Parent should/should not spank their children for misbehavior
	We should/should not eat meat from live animals
	Scoring rubrics (100%)：
	Content 30%, Language 30%, Organization 20%, Reasoning 20%

3.2.1 Selection of interview participants

Another purpose of this study is to look at the same writers' cross-genre ability and explore the reasons why some excelled at writing two genres and some excelled at one but not the other. The other set of data consisted of semi-structured interviews of selected participants from the pool. The selection criterion is the quantitative analysis of their writing performance.

After ranking each students' narrative and argumentative writing achievements and calculating standardized scores, six interviewees were selected. They are Wu, Yin, Qiu, Lin, Wang and Wei (pseudonyms). Through online contact, they all agreed to take part in the in-depth discussion of their narrative and argumentative writing experiences. Among the six interviewees, Wu and Yin achieved excellent writing performance of two genres, while the other four were outliers who performed better in one genre writing but not the other. Lin and Qiu performed better in writing narratives than argumentative essays. Wang and Wei comparably excelled at writing argumentative essay than narrative. The selection of these six interviewees ensures the diversity of factors which may impact their cross-genre writing ability, and embraces different individuals' perceptions of genres. The details of interviewees' information are shown in the table below.

Table 2

Basic Information of Interviewees

Interview participants		Grade	Narrative writing score	SD	Level	Argumentative writing score	SD	Level
Wu	Junior	93	1.21	High	96	1.02	High	
Yin	Junior	97	2.18	High	95	0.74	High	
Qiu	Junior	90	0.49	High	86	–1.21	Low	
Lin	Junior	91	0.73	High	87	–1.49	Low	
Wang	Junior	83	–1.19	Low	95	0.74	High	
Wei	Junior	85	-0.71	Low	95	0.74	High	

3.2.2 Interview procedures

Semi-structured retrospective interviews were carried out with above-mentioned six informants. Several main questions guiding the interview were prepared in advance, which were based on the results of same writers' cross-genre writing performance. These questions mainly included perceptions of their satisfactory or unsatisfactory writing experiences across genres, understanding of genre knowledge, and writers' views of genre-based writing approach and instructional activities. Meanwhile, some questions were added if they provided worth-discussing responses during the interview.

Interviews were carried out separately online or offline (face-to-face interview) depending on informants' personal schedule and convenience. Before each interview, they were asked to review their written articles so as to refresh their memory about their writing experience and knowledge about genre. To ensure that the interviewees could fully express their ideas, interviews were all conducted in Chinese. Most interviews lasted for about 20–30 minutes and each interview process was audio-recorded and transcribed fully. The participants were informed in advance that the whole process would be recorded solely for research purposes and consents from them were obtained.

3.3 Data analysis

After collecting the data, SPSS Statistics 21 was used to analyze the quantitative data for answering

the first two research questions. Descriptive statistics as well as distribution of writing scores were generated for overall writing quality across genres. Then Pearson correlation was calculated to analyze the correlation between narrative and argumentative writing performance.

Further, the interviews recordings were transcribed verbatim. The data analysis started with multiple readings of the working transcriptions to get familiar with texts. And then the key points and relevant information related to the research questions were selected and classified within each individual and under each main interview question. Similar mentioning of content was grouped under the same theme through the repeated analysis of the database. The preliminary codes were thus drawn from these groupings. Then, they were categorized into a number of sub-codes. We remained open about emerging key themes and kept adding them to the existing framework. To avoid missing or overlapped information, these key themes identified were checked again to serve the research focus. The next section shall report the findings based on the key themes, including the influence of "overall writing proficiency", "the writing instruction", "mastery of genre-specific features" "unbalanced genre practice", and "attitude towards generic input in writing instruction".

4 Results and Discussion

In this section, we firstly present the analysis of overall writing quality across genres and the correlation of writing performance of two genres. And then we unfold the factors which were found to possibly impact EFL college students' cross-genre writing ability.

4.1 Comparing overall writing quality across genres

Essays of two genres were rated by the same course instructor in participants' sophomore year at the range from 0 to 100. The data is normally distributed. Table 3 summarizes the overall writing quality of the two genres. For narratives, the mean score is 87.95 with a standard deviation of 4.21. While argumentative essays show a much higher mean score of 92.35 with a smaller deviation of 3.63. There also exists a statistically significant difference (t(47)=6.85, p=0.012) between the mean scores of two genre writings after conducting a paired-sample t test, different from the results of cross-genre writing research of Qin and Uccelli (2016), and Jeong (2017). Moreover, as can be seen from Figure 1, the narrative writing scores displayed a more spread-out level than argumentative ones which were more centralized at three intervals. These results suggest that overall writing quality considerably varied across genres and EFL college students of this study generally tended to achieve higher argumentative writing performance than narrative one. This tendency is in line with the situation previously found in Chinese secondary and college context (Qin & Uccelli, 2016; Ye & Yan, 2010).

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Genre Writing Scores

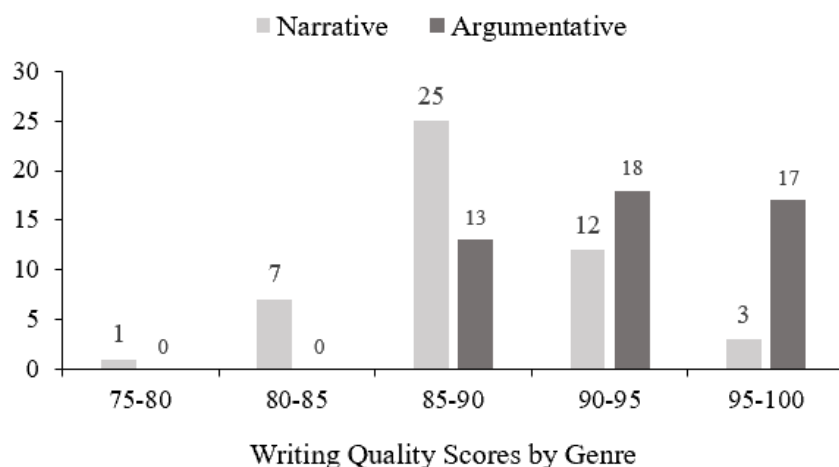|	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Narrative	48	77	98	87.95	4.21
Argumentative	48	85	98	92.35	3.63
Valid N (listwise)	48				

Figure 1

Distribution of Writing Scores by Genre

Table 4

Correlation of Writing Performance of Two Genres

		Narrative	Argumentative
Narrative	Pearson Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	48	
Argumentative	Pearson Correlation	.360[*]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	
	N	48	48

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.2 Correlation of writing performance of two genres

As shown in Table 4, although moderate, there exists a statistically significant positive correlation between narrative and argumentative writing scores (r=0.36, p=0.012). This correlation is significant only at 0.05 level. It indicates that 36% students approximately shared a similar writing proficiency of narrative and argumentative writing, performing well at writing two genres or not so. Most students, instead, did not achieve the same writing performance across genres, suggesting that a higher proportion of students' writing proficiency of one genre cannot indicate another. Interestingly, this result is not in accordance with the findings of Ye and Yan 's research (2010) who examined the effect of genres on EFL college students' writing performance and found no correlation between narrative and argumentative writing scores. These results intrigued us to probe into some writers' individual cases, to find out the reasons why some of them excelled at writing two genres and some excelled at one but not the other.

4.3 Factors that may influence cross-genre writing ability

Based on the interviews with six informants, four main factors were identified as affecting students' cross-genre writing performance. For students who had similar writing quality of both narrative and argumentative genres, 1) perceived overall writing proficiency and 2) constructive and participatory generic input in writing instruction were summarized as the main reasons for their good wring performance. For students who achieved relatively much better writing performance at one genre than the other, 1) mastery of genre-specific features, 2) unbalanced genre practice, and 3) attitude towards

generic input in writing instruction were found as the factors which may influence their unequal cross-genre writing performance. Since all participants considered the methods used in genre-based writing instruction as a crucial element in cultivating their argumentative writing ability, this factor is synthesized to report its influence on their writing performance. In the following, the factors mentioned above are reported in detail.

4.3.1 Overall writing/English proficiency

Students who could perform well at writing both narrative and argumentative essays, generally regarded their overall writing proficiency (self-report) as one major factor that indicated their successful writing performance across genres, apart from their knowledge of differences in genres.

Wu and Yin both believed that satisfactory writing proficiency largely contributed to their success in writing across genres to some extent. Their beliefs are illustrated in the following:

> I was aware of writing style and appropriate use of words in each genre. I think I master two genres well. It partly lies in my quite satisfactory language and writing proficiency. Though there were less chances of writing narratives, this kind of genre is familiar to me which we learned earliest. While argumentative writing has been a focus in writing practices all the time, I have plenty of opportunities to sharpen my writing skills. (Wu).

> I think I have a quite high level of English proficiency. It is due to the fact that my English writing competence has been strengthened since senior high school. The useful writing techniques and vocabulary the teachers taught benefited my future writing a lot. In addition, my English writing proficiency has also been improved greatly after I took an IELTS course two years ago. It taught me how to write logically and I was equipped with adequate writing knowledge of different genres (Yin).

Students' overall writing proficiency is related to one's writing ability of different genres. As Schoonen et al. (2011) state specifically, "proficiency in writing requires knowledge of the language sufficient to formulate the propositional content of the intended message in appropriate linguistic forms and to perform the correct 'writing act' (p.32)." Students' high language and writing proficiency helps them make good use of the linguistic and discourse knowledge required in different genres and facilitates cross-genre writing performance. As Yin mentioned how her writing proficiency improved, she regarded the knowledge she gained as an indispensable part for her future writing success. The successful manipulation of two genres requires writers' appropriate usage of linguistic and discourse devices according to its discourse community where the genre is situated. (Beers & Nagy, 2011; Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2004; Qin & Uccelli, 2016). Furthermore, based on the result of the correlation analysis, learners' reported overall writing proficiency could better account for a moderately positive correlation of writing performance of two genres. In the following, more factors will be revealed by students who could excel at writing one genre but not the other.

4.3.2 Challenges in Mastering Genre-specific features

For students who excelled at writing one genre but not the other, overall writing proficiency cannot fully explain this unequal writing performance. Some features of a genre were considered as main challenges to tackle and thought to influence their writing ability.

For students who achieved comparatively better performance in narrative than argumentative writing, they perceived that evidence-based arguments and a typical stepwise hierarchical structure of argumentative texts were challenging to master when composing argumentation. From their perspective, when writing narratives, they could generate more personal ideas or details to describe the agents and

narrate an event, which were more based on their subjective beliefs. While in argumentation, they could not make their claims and arguments convincing enough as they considered it difficult to provide adequate supports which could not be based solely on their personal experience and emotions. In this aspect, they might fail to achieve a good argumentative writing performance. Their perceived difficulties in processing argumentation are evident in the following:

> The way how we deliver attitudes and ideas in this genre can be more subjective than in argumentative. I did not need to prepare too much when composing narratives as I could display and narrate my story according to my own personal experiences. However, in writing argumentation, it was difficult to come up with adequate supports of my claims. I remembered that my first draft of argumentative essay included lots of overly *personal opinions without supports*. When I asked a friend to read it, she doubted the authenticity of my arguments largely due to inadequate supports of claims in my writing (Lin).

The following is an example of how Lin used "personal opinions without support" in her argumentative essay draft on the effect of AI:

> "As AI replaced the human in many ways, it leads to a huge change in a social framework. It seems that *only the technical people survive* out of the more stringent requirements of intelligent work."

In addition to unconvincing arguments, Qiu added that compared with narration, she was comparatively less capable of composing a stepwise hierarchical structure in argumentative texts. This structure is one characteristic of argumentative writing, typically with a five-part hamburger structure (introduction-body with three paragraphs and conclusion) to organize arguments coherently. However, it was quite interesting to see that she regarded narrative-like texts allowing for more flexibility to plan plots and narrate an event in a longer text form compared with the prototypical structure of argumentative texts. It shows that the different text structure had an influence on her, who was more confident in writing narratives fluently but incompetent in dealing with argumentative texts. She said:

> For me, my abundant imagination offers me advantage of planning plots and narrating stories. The structure of narratives leaves more flexibility for me to fully express myself. On the contrary, there is a prototypical five-part hamburger structure in argumentative writing, which I think relatively constrain the amount of my expressions. In usual practice, I was used to writing long essays, therefore, contracting the article in a relatively more rigorous format was difficult for me (Qiu).

Different from the mentioned features of argumentation, for students who were less proficient at writing narratives, the lack of lexical diversity was recognized as leading to their unsatisfactory narrative writing performance. They reported that narrative writing requires a wider variety of words to depict the focus in an event or story, but they considered it uneasy to construct the language to unfold a vivid or attractive story in this way. Their illustrations are as follows:

> I think the way how a writer constructs a language is important in narration. Narrative writing requires a wider variety of words with sensory image to describe feelings and characters in a story. Probably due to the lack of vocabulary accumulation, when writing narratives, it's difficult for me to narrate a vivid and attractive story. Usually, I think what I wrote was plain and boring. In writing narrative, you need to be very observant in daily life, keeping record of those moments with emotional ups and downs or the details in life. I don't have that habit of recording life with daily English vocabulary. Those vocabulary is more frequently exposed to in native countries, for example, what we eat, wear, even home appliances and actions in daily conversations. (Wang).

> For some people, narrating their emotions and stories is easy and pleasant. But for me, I found it difficult to write down my inner feelings and show my story using a variety of vivid and emotional words. I was not capable of doing this. This may be one of the reasons why I could not write narrative as well as argumentative essay (Wei).

To illustrate what Wang means by "plain and boring" writing, a short excerpt from her essay is shown below where she wrote about a classmate of hers who is very "persevering," and not afraid of failure. She wrote:

> "Worst still, things were not going so smoothly as she expected. Mary still got a C in the second try after one month's practice. However, Mary was not desperate and got out of it quickly." (No specific details were provided to further illustrate how "she got out of it")

Regarding what has been reported by writers who excelled at writing one genre but not the other, their distinct ability of deploying certain discourse or linguistic knowledge of genres leads to inconsistent writing performance. Genre theorists note that narrative texts are agent-and people- oriented to chronologically unfold an event (Sanford & Emmott, 2012), while argumentative texts are more topic-oriented, with claims and supports coherently- and logically-organized in a stepwise hierarchical structure (Grabe, 2002). Students who were able to describe characters and feelings to narrate a good story considered it more demanding to produce effective evidence-based arguments. This disparity of genre mastery is consistent with other researchers' view that writing performance is expected to be influenced by writers' competence of flexibly switching between accurate linguistic and discourse forms attuned to different communicative purposes (Hyland, 2007, 2009; Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002).

In addition, students who had outstanding argumentative writing performance found it difficult to use *a wider range of* words in narration. This perception seems to be different from the results of genre research at the lexical level which report that argumentative writing contains "a higher proportion of structurally complex, semantically abstract and diverse vocabulary than narratives" (as cited in Qin & Uccelli, 2016, p.5), whereas narrative texts display more personal pronouns and words with sensory images (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2004, 2007). Nonetheless, from our students' perspective, the lexical diversity in descriptions posed more difficulty to them than the so-called "abstract" and "academic" language in argumentative writing. They are less exposed to words describing various daily activities and emotions, so they are unable to construct language with sensory image to narrate beautifully without consulting dictionaries. Similar problem is also reported in Xu's study (2019), who found that compared with argumentative writing, students paused longer in the middle of narrative writing process due to the consideration of language expressions with sensory image to narrate vividly. In addition, not living in a native environment and less exposure to daily vocabulary is a typical hindrance by most EFL learners in China who were not exposed to this category of vocabulary in textbooks and conversations in class. Some were even more familiar with sophisticated academic vocabulary than daily vocabulary.

In sum, the challenges students perceived in writing two genres suggest the effect of mastery of genre features attuned to particular genres has on their writing ability. This cross-genre writing ability also varies from individuals, although they received the same writing instruction. Nonetheless, the report also shows that they possessed adequate genre awareness. They were aware of the genre features which are particularly required in genres, though they were less able to master them individually.

4.3.3 Unbalanced genre practice

Unbalanced genre practice and a fixed mindset of a certain type of genre were reported to have a negative impact on cross-genre writing performance of students who were incapable at narrative production but proficient at argumentative writing.

Higher-frequency practice and training of writing argumentative texts contributed to their higher

argumentative writing proficiency than narrative one. This unbalanced genre practice with more emphasis on argumentative writing than narrative lies in two respects. On one hand, in post-secondary education, argumentative writing has been considered as a crucial L1 writing genre to cultivate students' critical thinking and problem-solving ability under the reform of curriculum and college entrance examination. On the other, given that high-stake English tests for college students at home and abroad mostly include the evaluation of argumentative writing, this genre has received much more attention and training practice in EFL classroom. As a result, the excessive writing experience of this genre has formed a fixed thinking mode and writing habits, affecting their ability of constructing narratives with a different text structures and organizational principles. One student's report is presented as follows:

> I had been so used to writing genres like argumentative essay or book report as I practiced writing these genres a lot since freshman in college. Besides, it was a popular tested genre in senior high school. With more writing opportunities and practice, I am more familiar with this genre and has gained better writing proficiency of it in Chinese or English. I felt more confident to writing argumentative than narrative texts.

> However, gradually I would have a fixed writing mindset of a five-part hamburger format to illustrate my ideas. When I write narratives, this mindset hinders me from thinking about a good structure to organize a narration. As a result, I would deliberately use some descriptive statements to make it more like narratives rather than a story-like argument (Wang).

Based on a view of language learning (Qin & Uccelli, 2016), the acquisition of a specific discourse repertoire depends on the opportunities to learn. Sufficient training of argumentation ensures that students are frequently exposed to this genre and builds up students' confidence in writing. Interestingly, although narrative writing ability appears earlier for L1 or L2 learners than argumentative writing competence which usually develops at later educational contexts (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007; Kormos, 2011), less instruction and lower-frequency of exposure to narratives might have led to poor narrative writing proficiency. The insufficient narrative writing experience, both in Chinese and English, cannot guarantee students' mastery of it in future advanced foreign language writing. This unequal genre practice also explains the variance in the overall scores in writing performance of two genres.

4.3.4 Attitude towards constructive and participatory generic input in writing instruction

The last but the most crucial factor, writing instruction (which all students mentioned), was perceived to exert huge influence on their writing ability. The way how L2 instructor fostered EFL learners' genre awareness in class played a significant role in their writing ability of genres. Students who participated in the debate held before argumentative writing, highly recognized its benefits as a well-planned genre-based class activity. They became more aware of how to approach audience, follow a logical structure and present rigorous arguments. Their increased genre knowledge and awareness served as facilitators in argumentative writing performance. The benefits of genre-based class activity can be further confirmed from students in the following:

> The debate was very effective as all group members collected information of the topic together, and focused on how to articulate claims and supporting evidence to make effective arguments, which helped us write argumentative essay more easily (Wu).

> Before the debate, two groups discussed a lot and prepared many materials seriously. After the debate, the instructor gave us feedback and pointed out the unclear arguments or unconvincing evidence, which was helpful to justify an argument in writing (Yin).

> When I engaged in debate, I knew how to present my points and argue with others, during which I could generate more new ideas. Our instructor also guided us the ways to find out weak

> arguments from the other side. The whole process was beneficial in later writing as well. I think it's really mind-blowing. Before writing, I would evaluate different evidence we have collected from the two sides and see if they are logical and convincing through argument analysis the teacher has guided us to do. (Wei).

> This activity is very innovative compared with other traditional writing class. Through debate, it deepened my understanding of genre knowledge of argumentative writing and how to think deeply of a topic. The experience enhanced my upcoming argumentative writing (Wang).

This constructive and participatory debate experience serves as meaningful generic input in instruction. Students' participation in this activity helps increase their understanding of the debate, similarly, the argumentative texts as well. The features of debate convey considerable similarities of argumentation, including identification of an issue, consideration of different viewpoints and presentation of rigorous arguments with convincing evidence and logical analysis. The use of debate is effective to teaching writing skills (Dickson, 2004; Green & Klug 1990; Yeh, 1998). Genre researchers (Deng et al., 2014) also argue that the utilization of socially interactive genre-based class activities is a constructive and effective way to boost writers' genre awareness which can greatly contribute to their generic writing competence. The debate input embedded in genre-based writing instruction not only encourages students' collaborative learning in class, but also fosters their genre awareness of augmentation, enabling them to transfer similar skills of debate to their argumentative production. Moreover, the integration of critical thinking with the collaborative activity is considered to be a facilitator of learners' subsequent writing. Critical thinking involves the ability to analyze, synthesize, infer and evaluate information (Norris & Ennis, 1989). It is reported that all informants appreciated the continuous generation of inspiring ideas and the training of rigorous analysis of arguments in the debate process, which are believed to produce their argumentation more smoothly and clearly. Researchers contend that a good writing is not only essentially linked to the exertion of correct "writing act" (Schoonen et al., 2011), but also the regulation of cognitive process which can be extended to good thinking itself (Preiss, Castillo, Flotts & San Martín, 2013). A number of studies also suggest that writers' critical thinking ability positively correlates with their writing ability (Dong, 2017; Soodmand Afshar, Movassagh & Radi Arbabi, 2017), and also the intervention of critical thinking in writing instruction can exert huge influence on enhancing their writing performance (Dong, 2017; Fahim & Mirzaii, 2014; Hu, 2017; Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Miri & Azizi 2018). Thus, the implementation of critical thinking also applies to genre-based writing instruction, where students' critical thinking helps them identify flaws in arguments and form their own independent judgment.

Compared with narrative writing instruction, however, there were less impressive teaching sections reported by informants which could apparently foster their narrative production. Most students mentioned the conventional textual analysis of narrative texts to be useful prior to writing. Textual analysis is also an effective way to lead students to gain more genre knowledge of different genres and improve generic writing competence (Deng et al., 2014), but probably some students thought it would be less engaging and participatory. Thus, different writing instruction of each genre forms a comparison which may affect students' writing performance across genres. This also accounts for the distinct overall writing quality of these two genres.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Major findings

This exploratory study is a new attempt to investigate Chinese EFL college students' cross-genre writing performance. The major findings can be summarized as follows: Firstly, the present study reveals a statistically significant difference in students' overall narrative and argumentative writing performance.

Secondly, there is a moderate correlation between narrative and argumentative writing performance, indicating that a small proportion of students share similar writing performance of two genres. Furthermore, four factors are reported by the informants to influence cross-genre performance, including: 1) overall writing proficiency; 2) mastery of genre-specific features; 3) frequency of genre practice, and 4) the amount of participatory generic input in genre-based writing instruction. The overall writing proficiency may predict writers' cross-genre writing performance as a whole, which partly suggests a correlation of writing performance across genres. The other three aspects affect EFL learners' writing ability of different genres interactively, resulting in students proficient in writing one genre but not the other.

5.2 Pedagogical implications

The results and findings in this study could shed some light on genre-based pedagogy. Firstly, L2 writing instructors should understand students' diverse needs they may encounter in communicative contexts, and diversify genre teaching according to its linguistic and cognitive demands on students. As Qin and Uccelli (2016) note, "learning one set of discourse practices relevant for a particular context does not guarantee language performance in other contexts (p.15)". A big contrast between students' narrative and argumentative writing performance informs L2 instructors that writing proficiency of a genre cannot be equally functional in another. Students' perceived difficulty in deploying certain linguistic or discourse knowledge reflects their needs to achieve an authentic communicative purpose. Therefore, L2 instructors could consider these demands on students and make careful pedagogical decisions regarding what language resources to provide, which discourse to practice and the amount of practice in genre-based writing classrooms.

Secondly, it is crucial to incorporate class activities as meaningful generic input in genre-based writing classroom. The debate reported by the participants in this study is considered to be very effective in teaching argumentative writing and develops students' genre awareness. Collaborative genre-based activities can build a pedagogical link between student-teacher or student-student cooperation and communication and learners' acquisition of genre knowledge. Thus, constructive class activities should be taken into great consideration to make genre-based writing teaching more effective. Moreover, the integration of critical thinking is indispensable in teaching L2 writing, including but not limited to argumentative genre. Critical thinking has been identified as one of the main goals of foreign language education by the Chinese Ministry of Education, and stated in The National Teaching Syllabus for English Majors (2000). The value of critical thinking related to L2 writing ability, which is mostly investigated in argumentative production, has received great emphasis in higher-education context, especially when it comes to foreign or second language learning (Dong, 2017; Fahim & Mirzaii, 2014; Hu, 2017; Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Miri & Azizi, 2018; Soodmand et al., 2017; Xu, 2019). Xu (2019) also argues that critical thinking may affect L2 writing competence when composing different genres. As writing across genres requires distinct linguistic knowledge and cognitive demands, writing activities should combine linguistic input of genres with meaningful cognitive and metacognitive input as well. Critical thinkers are believed to construct writings with more in-depth insights suited to different genres.

Lastly, it is also important to note that, as narrative is a less emphasized genre in the educational system in China, it is worthwhile for EFL teachers to be equipped with more interactive ways for engaging students in the learning of this genre too.

5.3 Future directions

With limited number of participants and writing dataset (it is not feasible for the instructor to conduct writing tests on the same group of learners more than twice on two different genres), the results of this

study should be taken with caution. Future researchers can adopt a larger written samples of designated writing prompts to investigate EFL college students' narrative and argumentative writing performance. It would be more insightful to conduct textual analysis with lexical, syntactic and discourse measures to examine predictors of writing quality across genres, which could supplement perceived factors affecting individuals' cross-genre writing ability at different levels. Moreover, practitioners could design pedagogical approaches to explore how to effectively teach language resources expected in different communicative contexts in order to promote EFL learners' writing performance.

Note

1. In this paper, "writing ability", "writing performance" and "writing proficiency" are used interchangeably as similar concepts which mean how well the students write as shown in their assignments.

Appendix

Semi-structured interview prompts based on research questions.

Q1: In genre-based writing course, what do you think of the teaching content and teaching approach of narrative and argumentative writing? Did it facilitate your genre knowledge and writing ability? How and Why?

Q2: How do you define narratives and argumentation? What do you think of the difference or similarities of these two genre writings?

Q3: What challenges did you encounter when you write across genres, linguistic or cognitive ones? How do you usually deal with them?

Q4: What do you think of your narrative or argumentative writing performance? Why do you think…is better or worse? What may impact your writing ability of different genres? (with reference to their actual performance and scores by the teacher, ask them to explain)

New questions will emerge in the process of interview.

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