

A genre-Based approach to implementing PBLA in LINC classrooms

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Introduction

The Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) approach was introduced into English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in Canada in 2010. It serves as a teaching and assessment framework that standardizes the quality and methodology of language instruction and assessment for adult newcomers to Canada. While some instructors perceive PBLA as a positive approach, associating it with an improved understanding of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) and more accurate evidence of students' strengths and weaknesses, others regard it as a cause for increased workload and a need for continuous training (Ripley, 2012).

To organize their LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) lessons in accordance with PBLA expectations, instructors often integrate PBLA with complementary methods, such as the Four Strands Framework (Lee, 2025), the Genre-Based Approach (Burgos, 2025), or the Self-Regulated Learning Framework (Gilbert, 2023). In this article, I will present a Discursive Framework—specifically, a genre-based approach—developed by the French linguist Dominique Maingueneau (2014), which can assist instructors in describing genres. The value of this approach lies in its ease of implementation to meet PBLA classroom objectives and in the fact that it can provide a direction for teachers when preparing their lessons.

To achieve this objective, this article begins with a contextualization of some key concepts in the field of Discourse Analysis, followed by applications to education, and lastly, with an example of how ESL teachers can implement the approach in LINC classrooms.

Discourse analysis and language education

Discourse Analysis is a field of study within Linguistics that examines language in a complex manner, going beyond grammar and syntax. Rather than viewing language as a mere collection of sentences, a discursive approach understands it as an interactive activity organized by social norms and that goes beyond words and sentences; it involves considering the role of context and ideology in the construction of meaning.



From a discursive perspective, language is more than a structured system: It is a complex device that is used to reflect (or repel) other discourses and ideologies in society (Maingueneau, 2008). In other words, “the wording and the structure of a text are not enough to determine what a text intends to mean; each text or message is produced in a certain place, an exact moment and by a specific person” (Sepúlveda, 2017, p. 2). Structure still plays an important role in meaning-making, but it is not the most important linguistic feature—in contrast to Structural Approaches, which prioritize formal grammar elements, such as sentence patterns and the arrangement of words, as the main determinants of meaning (Mareva & Nyota, 2011).

Among the benefits of a discursive approach in the ESL classroom, Sepúlveda (2017) identifies: the creation of a real-life atmosphere in the classroom; the development of communicative skills beyond grammar; and the promotion of critical thinking. An approach that views language (and the meanings it produces) as contextual and interactive, while acknowledging its ideological dimension, may help students develop a more complex, and realistic, understanding of language, one in which having an impeccable knowledge of grammar does not necessarily equate to effective communication.

Having provided this broad contextualization of a discursive approach, the next section will focus on a specific framework developed by Dominique Maingueneau (2014) for describing genres, along with an example of how this can be implemented in the ESL classroom.

A genre-based approach in the ESL classroom

A language teacher’s primary goal is to help students develop their communicative competence. As Dominique Maingueneau (2005) explains, communication necessarily occurs through genres; every time a person speaks, they draw on their repertoire of genres depending on the context and the intended communicative function. Because genres are an integral part of communication, Maingueneau (2005) uses the terminology *genre competence* instead of *communicative competence*; after all, it is not possible to communicate except through genres.

When instructors use the PBLA approach in the ESL classroom, they collect samples of student work as evidence that students were able to complete a real-world task according to expectations. Often, the linguistic ability developed is associated with a genre. Some examples of genres that are frequently taught in LINC classes are small talk, forms, emails, job applications, among others. Genres are an essential part of LINC classes—whether instructors are aware of it or not. However, to teach genres effectively, it is important to understand how they are organized and how they function in a social context.



In Discourse Analysis, more specifically within the French framework, genres are described as communication devices that are activated under certain social and historical conditions (Maingueneau, 2014). Although some variation is expected, genres set expectations for structure, tone, and purpose in different contexts. For instance, a professional email has relative stability in terms of an expected structure and tone, and while the writer has some freedom in how they compose it, significant variation may compromise the communicative function.

To develop the communicative/genre competence, understanding the expectations evoked by genres is essential; hence the importance of organizing LINC lessons in a way that fosters this comprehension among students. According to Maingueneau (2014), there are seven essential elements that characterize a genre:

1. One or more purposes: Every text is produced to fulfill one or more functions, which must be clear to the speaker to employ the appropriate strategies. An argumentative essay, for example, has the purpose of persuading a reader of a specific point of view; to do so, the writer might adopt specific strategies such as presenting facts, data, and logical reasoning. While these strategies can help the speaker achieve the social function of the argumentative essay genre, they are not the same as those that would be employed in a different genre, such as a *recipe*.
2. The statute of legitimate partners: During a discursive exchange, there is a set of unspoken rules related to the roles of the speaker and the audience. These *rules* include who can play these parts and how they must behave. To illustrate, in a lecture, there are at least two different roles: the lecturer, whose role is to deliver information, and the students, who listen and take notes.
3. A legitimate place and time: Some genres can only play their role in specific time and place to be considered legitimate. For example, a class only happens in a specific setting and at certain times; small talk is a type of genre that does not require a specific setting.
4. A mode of inscription in temporality: Some genres happen periodically (i.e. a class), and others have no repeatability expected (i.e. a job application).
5. A medium: Some texts are oral while others are written; some might require a specific medium, such as the use of the Internet, and others might exist in more than one medium. The medium is an important element in the functioning of genres; just as it is not possible to send an *email* on paper, a *text message* cannot be sent without an electronic device.
6. A textual composition/organization: Most genres have a relatively stable textual organization. *It* is relatively stable because some variation is expected in real-world texts, which is an important



feature of a successful text. This element, particularly, is what many teachers think of when they consider genres, whether it is a five-paragraph essay or an email with a greeting, introduction, body, closing, and signature. Language teachers should keep in mind that although organization is very important for a text, it is not the only feature at play during an enunciation.

7. A specific use of linguistic resources: The last element of a genre in Maingueneau's proposal is related to the language style employed by the speaker when they produce the genre to have a successful interaction. Is it formal or informal? Is the vocabulary general or technical? Is the tone friendly or serious? Unlike what more traditional educators might assume, grammar correctness is not the norm in every genre. Adhering to a high level of formality might not guarantee a successful interaction in genres such as text messages or personal emails.

These seven elements co-occur whenever a genre is put into action, and it is essential for instructors to consider them to promote a deep understanding of genres and, therefore, enable students to develop language proficiency for real-world situations, as expected under the PBLA approach. Students do not necessarily need to know all the technical terminology from the field of Linguistics and Discourse Analysis; these can be adapted to help them grasp how the genres are organized.

As an example of how this approach can be implemented, consider the functioning of a genre commonly taught in LINC classrooms, medical prescriptions, which will be examined through the seven elements previously addressed. The purpose of a prescription is to guide a patient's treatment and authorize the purchase of specific medications at a pharmacy. The legitimate partners involved in this process are usually a doctor, a pharmacist and a patient, all of whom play different roles. The legitimate place and time for this genre are both at a doctor's office (at the end of an appointment) and at a pharmacy (after the appointment). Regarding its temporality, a prescription is given only once at the doctor's office and might be used more than once (if given refills) at the pharmacy. Its medium is often paper (printed or handwritten) and sometimes electronic. Its textual composition typically includes information such as the patient's name, the name of the medication, information about the doctor, directions on how to take the medication, and other details. Finally, the specific linguistic resources in this genre include the use of medical terminology, direct language, verbs in imperative, and words to indicate frequency and duration.

This brief description of a prescription illustrates how the framework proposed by Maingueneau (2014) can be easily implemented into classrooms. This proposal is valuable for giving clear guidance to instructors who might fear omitting important information, and, if considered, it should support the achievement of PBLA expectations in LINC classrooms.



Conclusion

This article sought to shed light on a didactic proposal that is not widely promoted in Canada, despite its benefits and its potential to support the implementation of PBLA in the classroom. I encourage educators to consider adopting this framework when planning lessons; doing so will not only guide lesson development but also ensure that lesson delivery reflects the complexity of how language functions in real-world contexts.

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