Investigating Saudi EFL Female University Students’ Command of Journalistic Writing: An SFL-Based Study on Textual Organization

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Abstract
This study examines written literacy outcomes among Saudi female university students undertaking an EFL journalistic course over fourteen weeks. It specifically aims to explore their competence in the English hard news genre. It, thus, seeks to address the following question: after completing the course, to what degree did students create texts structurally matching the conventional English news report? The significance of this study lies in its integration of media and education, employment of linguistic analysis based on Systemic Functional Linguistics, and use of English expert news reports for comparison with students’ journalistic texts. It deployed the genre-based pedagogy devised within the Sydney School to design the news writing course. Twenty-five students undertook such a course during the 2022 academic year. This study gathered those students’ writing to subject it to linguistic scrutiny, assessing each student over one news report after completing the course. It reports that, after the course, half of the class developed their ability to produce the genre of the standard English language hard news report. Those students created texts that matched the professional news articles in the corpus, thus effectively following the textual features of such a genre.

Keywords: Saudi EFL female university students, journalistic writing, SFL-based study, conventional English news report, textual organization

Introduction

Knowledge of news media has become essential for students at all educational stages. According to Christ and Potter (1998), understanding the media and its implications seems vital for students nowadays. Equally, Signes (2001) notes that teaching students how to examine news media would assist them in improving their practical, intellectual, social, and cultural skills. Accordingly, the news media and its texts have been employed in various disciplines, playing a pivotal role in education and enriching teaching and learning. Iedema et al. (1994) observe that journalistic texts are not only utilized in media classrooms but also all areas of curricula within schools.

The current study drew on the insights offered by the literature advocating the significance of media literacy in education. For example, Hinchey (2003) points out that media products have to be incorporated into students’ education. Similarly, Buckingham (2003) suggests that we should study media because they “are embedded in the textures and routines of everyday life, and they provide many of the symbolic resources we use to conduct and interpret our relationships” (p. 5).

Adams and Hamm (2001) also contend that students involved in media literacy instruction should be critical thinkers to grasp the mass media surrounding them and participate in its production. Iedema et al. (1994), in their Media Literacy monograph, explained news media texts and provided teachers with techniques for explicit teaching of the language of such a genre.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to discover news media literacy outcomes in an EFL university context. It was a combination of the two interrelated areas of media and education. Several studies were conducted focusing on news media and the deployment of its texts in curricula of various educational levels (Buckingham, 2003; Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2003). Nevertheless, no literacy development study in an EFL context has closely explored students’ capacity to write typical news reports from a generic perspective.

The current study investigated Saudi female university students’ competence associated with the generic features of the news story. It precisely examined students’ power to compose typical hard news reports from a structural/textual perspective. It designed a news writing course over one semester based on the genre-based pedagogy approach by Sydney School (Feez, 1998, 2002; Martin & Rose, 2008; Rose, 2007, 2008; Rothery, 1994). It was then delivered at a Saudi university to develop students’ skills in creating texts structurally conforming to the typical English news report. With this objective in view, the study addressed the following question:

• After completing the course, to what degree did students create texts structurally matching the conventional English news report?

As indicated above, this study offered a course that aimed to develop Saudi female students’ ability to create texts in a professional journalistic format. Such students were in their final year of study, and had an advanced level of English. They majored in English language, and took several courses in the four English skills, linguistics, translation and literature. So, they were not involved in any vocationally oriented journalism programs.

The students had no familiarity with journalistic writing, so motivating them to acquire this new type of genre was crucial to this study. The rationale for undertaking a course on producing news media texts was explained to students as follows. Firstly, since the course sought to increase students’ ability to compose texts in a journalistic style, it would potentially supply them with a more intimate sense of the communicative workings of these texts, thereby better understanding the potential of such texts to influence and persuade their readership. Secondly, such journalistic texts promote students’ engagement and enthusiasm by giving them access to an authentic living
language concerned with personal, social and political issues related to their daily lives. Thirdly, focusing on this particular discourse domain would potentially assist students in raising their awareness of how context, purpose and audience play a key role in the choice of language used – i.e., how language varies according to these aspects.

The current study deployed linguistic analysis based on the account of language developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL) to assess students’ written literacy outcomes. Several researchers employed this SFL-based methodology across various educational contexts to examine developments in students’ writing (Kongpetch, 2006; Nagao, 2019; Woodward-Kron, 2002). However, all these SFL-based studies investigated trajectories of literacy development associated with academic writing. To my knowledge, no study of this type has been conducted to scrutinize students’ news media literacy outcomes, with a focus on hard news reporting.

This study also gathered a corpus of published news reporting texts for comparison with students’ news reports. That is, both the reference corpus journalistic texts and the students’ news reports were subjected to the same linguistic examination. This technique was helpful in exploring students’ capability to write news reports by comparing them with the reference corpus texts to determine their generic conformity or unconformity. Some studies of academic disciplines have adopted this notion of comparing students’ texts with ‘expert’ texts (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Crosthwaite et al., 2017). Nevertheless, to my knowledge, no previous studies have utilized such a notion in the context of journalistic literacy development.

**Literature Review**

**Approaches to Examine the Generic Structure of the News Report**

The three main approaches to the structure of the news report are: inverted pyramid structure, van Dijk’s cognitive approach, and the model developed within SFL-based journalism discourse analysis. The current study heavily drew on the insights offered by the systemic functional linguistic approach. So, it will discuss such an approach below.

This study believed that the textual/structural aspects of the standard news story would need to be made explicit to students to help them develop their capacity to create texts of such a genre. It also sought to reach insightful conclusions about the extent to which the students’ written texts conformed to the structural conventions of the target genre. Accordingly, the present study drew on the same account of the generic structure of the news story in classroom activities and analysis of students’ written texts. For these purposes, the current study, as outlined above, drew on the SFL-based scholarly tradition of the genre of the news story (Iedema, 1997; Iedema et al., 1994; White, 1998).

**SFL Approach to News Story Structure**

The SFL-based journalism discourse analysis has proposed a systemic linguistic approach that considers the ideational and interpersonal meanings of news texts. As White (1998) states, “news reporting is as much about opinions (interpersonal values) as it is about facts (experiential values)” (p. 69).

A typical modern English news story starts with a nucleus that is comprised of a headline and a lead, followed by a series of satellites that specify the meanings of the nucleus and perform different functions – i.e., the body. This structure is illustrated in Figure One.
White (1998) argues that the lead has multiple linguistic functions as follows: (1) to highlight points of ‘socio-cultural salience’ in which the typical activity sequences are interrupted; (2) to concentrate on moments of disruption in the expected sequence of events; (3) to include additional material, that renders the event at issue newsworthy, selected ‘by reference to a theory of social impact’; and (4) to enhance the sense of social significance by using linguistic values that intensify meanings (White, 1998).

According to White (1998), the body of the news story refers back to the nucleus by a set of satellites with the following types: elaboration, cause-and-effect, contextualization and appraisal. They are arranged orbitally instead of sequentially.

White (1998) notes that some news reports include a closing satellite termed a ‘wrap-up’. This final satellite functions to set out the textual closure of the news report by, for example, the field-based event where the end of the text co-occurs with the final point of the activity sequence ‘naturally”; or by a sudden linguistic movement from documenting the event to evaluating it or putting it in a broader socio-cultural context. Thus, the news story’s textual organization is summarized in Figure Two.

A vital insight of SFL’s orbital model is that it does not operate with a simplistic notion of informational ‘importance’, i.e., the idea that underlies the frequently referenced metaphor of the ‘inverted pyramid’ and which holds that news reports always begin with the most ‘important’ aspects of an event or issue and then continue through progressively less ‘important’ material. This
model operates with a significantly more sophisticated understanding of the role of informational ‘importance’ in conditioning the structure of news items (White, 1998).

Another essential feature of this approach is that it foregrounds the role of interpersonal meanings in the overall communicative functionality and rhetorical potential of news items. Hence, it directs analysts to deal with how journalists might rhetorically adopt what Martin and White (2005) term “a regime of strategic impersonalization” (p. 183). This concept can be defined as an ‘objective’ verbal style where journalists background their subjective role by, for example, attributing material to external sources (for example, experts or witnesses) or indirectly activating attitudinal assessments in their texts (tokens of attitude).

**Approaches to Assess Written Literacy Development**

The three main approaches to writing assessment in the literature are portfolio-based assessment, rubric-based assessment, and SFL-based assessment – i.e., functional language analysis. Since the examination of both professional corpus texts and students’ texts carried out in this study was based on the SFL tradition, it followed naturally that the study also drew on literacy development scholarship grounded in the same theory. Accordingly, the portfolio-based assessment and rubric-based assessment were not employed in this study, and they will not be discussed below. In the following sections, the SFL-based genre theory will be outlined, along with an investigation of how such a theory was adopted to measure written literacy development.

**SFL-based Genre Theory**

As indicated, the writing course devised for the present study deployed the genre-based pedagogy developed by Sydney School scholars. This approach was implemented to deliver the media discourse analysis course to the Saudi EFL students to investigate their command of the textual properties of hard news reporting.

There are, of course, other influential approaches to genre in the literature: the ESP genre approach (Swales, 1990) and the Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) (Miller, 1984). However, these traditions will not be dealt with in any more detail below since the treatment of the concept of ‘genre’ in the SFL-based literature was only foundational to the present study in that the structural arrangement of the typical news story modeled and deconstructed in the course content had emerged from this theory.

The notion of genre within SFL-based scholarship has been developed since the 1980s (Martin & Rose, 2008). According to this school, genres are ‘staged, goal-oriented social processes’:

- staged: because it usually takes us more than one phase of meaning to work through a genre,
- goal-oriented: because unfolding phases are designed to accomplish something, and we feel a sense of frustration or incompleteness if we are stopped,
- social: because we undertake genres interactively with others (Martin, 2009, p. 13).

Sydney School classifies storytelling genres, including the news story, as displayed in Figure Three below.
Pedagogical Approaches Developed in the Sydney Genre School

The Sydney Genre School has formed a robust framework for language teaching and learning and literacy education: what is so-called ‘genre-based pedagogy’ or ‘text-based pedagogy’. Derewianka (2003) notes that such pedagogy has become salient in English language teaching.

This pedagogy promotes the ‘explicitness’ of the stages of various genres by which they are realized (Rose & Martin, 2012). It also enables curricula designers to (1) pay close attention to a specific genre by collecting texts with a similar function, arrangement and audience (Paldridge, 2001), and (2) offer students systematic guiding principles on how to produce passages meaningfully (Kim, 2007).

The Sydney Genre School has suggested some teaching-learning models – e.g., Rothery’s seven-stage model (as outlined in Rose & Martin, 2012); Feez’s five-stage model (1998); and Rose’s Reading to Learn model (2007, 2008). The present study adopted the teaching-learning model put forward by Feez (1998) since it was most suited to the objectives of the study. This model is shown in Figure Four, and will be discussed further in the methodology section below.
Some SFL-based Studies of Literacy Development

Woodward-Kron (2002) conducted a study of three years duration to measure progress made by Australian undergraduate students towards their academic writing. Data were gathered from sixteen students and four tutors using interviews, questionnaires, and written assignment samples. The researcher employed qualitative and quantitative approaches to track signs of development in students’ texts, and assess what was implied by improvement in some textual features from a communicative perspective. For example, Woodward-Kron (2002) tracked students’ writing to determine literacy development outcomes associated with generic structure, reasoning and explaining technicality and abstraction, and grammatical metaphor. This notion of ‘tracking’ involved comparing students’ early written texts with their final attempts. A rise in students’ use of such resources was a sign of literacy development in their writing. The researcher found that students made progress with their writing since their texts incorporated technical and abstract terms, more reasoning, and instances of grammatical metaphor to organize arguments.

Kongpetch (2006) also undertook a study over a semester length (15 weeks) to examine the effect of genre-based pedagogy on developing the facility of Thai students for composing the Exposition genre in an EFL tertiary context. The study’s data comprised written texts created by 42 students across the course. However, their post-course texts were merely subjected to scrutiny to investigate their power over the textual organization of Exposition, as well as other linguistic aspects such as their deployment of participants, processes, passives and conjunctions.

Kongpetch (2006) employed a qualitative approach and found that students’ ability to show control over the target genre concerning both the structural arrangement and language had been enhanced due to the genre-based pedagogy. That is, students’ final texts conformed to the typical generic properties of Exposition, and included linguistic features appropriate to the given genre.

Srinon (2011) also carried out a study over twelve weeks to explore signs of development observed in the English academic writing of six Thai undergraduate students. Such a study was concerned with improving students’ skills in the genres of Exposition and Discussion. It employed quantitative and qualitative approaches to trace students’ written literacy development pertaining to both how their essays were structured, and their use of resources for indicating inter-clausal relations.

Srinon (2011) compared students’ written texts composed at the commencement of the course with those produced across the course. He found that students in their final texts had increased their use of parataxis and hypotaxis, construing inter-clausal relations, cause-and-effect and counter-expectations, construing relations of consequentiality and referencing other sources and voices.

Nagao (2019) conducted a study over a 15-week semester that was directed at examining signs of literacy development in the academic writing of Japanese EFL students. Such a study was concerned with exploring students’ capability to gain control over the Discussion genre in terms of its textual organization and lexico-grammatical aspects. It deployed the genre-based pedagogy, particularly the teaching/learning cycle model developed by Fezz (1998, 2002). Data were collected from twenty-seven students who had an intermediate English level through discussion-type essays and self-reflection written texts composed at different stages in the course.

Nagao (2019) implemented quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore students’ written literacy development in the Discussion genre concerning the generic structure and the use of some linguistic properties such as reporting verbs, modality, and modal auxiliaries. She found
that students had developed their competence in the structural arrangement and the deployment of modal verbs of the target genre.

Another study over a 15-week course was also carried out by Nagao (2022) to investigate the impact of employing genre-based pedagogy to instruct descriptive report writing in an EFL Japanese tertiary context. It was directed at examining students’ competence in the target genre in terms of structural arrangement, and ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings. It adopted the teaching-learning cycle by Feez and Joyce (1998) to teach the descriptive report genre. Data were gathered from twenty-three students at a Japanese university who majored in international studies. Three reports from each student were collected before, during and after delivering the course.

This study deployed a mixed analytical framework of both quantitative and qualitative analyses. It found that students had exhibited an enhanced understanding of the generic structure, the ideational meaning concerning content and background information, the interpersonal meaning in terms of the social relationships between readers and writers, and the textual meaning concerning coherence.

**Method**

**The Study’s Data**

**Dataset 1: Corpus of Professional Journalistic Texts**

The study gathered a corpus of English journalistic texts published by some Middle Eastern news organizations. This collection was to offer a reference point with which the students’ journalistic texts could be compared. This corpus, combined with the account provided by SFL literature on the news story as a genre, allowed comparisons to be made in terms of the degree to which the generic structure observed in students’ post-intervention texts matched that of professional hard news reports. It was also introduced to students within in-class text modeling and deconstructing to give them a detailed account of what these professional texts typically entail concerning their structural arrangement.

The reference corpus comprised some instances of ‘event stories’ (White, 1998) – i.e., crimes, civil unrest, accidents, warfare, and natural disasters; and some cases of ‘issues reports’ (White, 1998) – i.e., political issues. These model texts were used for analysis purposes and as a guide to conventional journalistic writing with respect to genre. They were drawn from some freely accessible news platforms that are widely popular in the Middle East, such as Aljazeera and Alarabiya. Their journalistic domains and content are presented in Figure Five below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil unrest</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warfare</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime and murder</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural disaster</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5. The content of the texts in the corpus*

Twenty accident news stories out of these reference corpus texts were subjected to a thorough linguistic examination in terms of genre-related features. The rationale behind this was that an accident news report had been assigned to the post-instructional writing task. Therefore, it was straightforward to draw a comparison between students’ texts and the reference corpus texts.
Dataset 2: Students’ Written Texts

The study’s primary data consisted of news reports produced by twenty-five female students over a 14-week semester. As with the methodology employed by Kongpetch (2006), as outlined previously, the students’ texts in this study were only assembled after completing the course. That is, one news report was collected from each student – i.e., 25 texts in total.

It would seem to be a well-considered methodological option if students were asked to create news reports before the start of the course in order to report on their literacy development. To clarify, their pre-intervention texts would have been collected, analyzed, and compared with their post-intervention texts. As discussed above, this choice was typically the case with some linguistic-based studies conducted in EAP contexts. However, it was not possible in the current study for the following practical reasons.

The researcher himself conducted unstructured interviews with students at the beginning of the course to inspect their control over hard news reporting. Those informal discussions disclosed that none of the students were interested in reading complete news reports, neither in Arabic nor in English. More specifically, a few students reported that they only skimmed Arabic online newspapers to receive local news. The vast majority, in contrast, stated that they just browsed breaking news headlines through social media platforms. The discussions also revealed that the students had not got any experience in creating – English or Arabic – news reports in a journalistic style, nor had they undertaken any prior courses in news writing of any type.

Accordingly, students had minimal, or perhaps no, competence in such a genre. Hence, at the start stage of the course, they were not invited to produce news reports of any type. It was anticipated that they would have composed very minimal texts with elementary meaning-making potential, and thus might not be appropriate for effective comparisons with their final written texts.

Students’ names were ordered alphabetically and then numbered as follows: S1 (student 1), S2 (student 2), S3 (student 3), etc. to individually refer to a student and/or her writing throughout the investigation.

The final writing task occurred when the genre-related features of hard news reporting had been thoroughly modeled and deconstructed. That is, the students had performed several tasks of joint construction of news reports, and they were ready to undertake independent construction of such texts. In the classroom, the students responded to a writing task inviting them to produce a hard news report using information introduced by a series of interviews from observers of a news event composed by me in a casual spoken style, not a journalistic one. The provided task is given below in Figure Six.
A reporter is interviewing some observers of a road traffic accident. Imagine that you are the reporter and write a news report based on the information collected from the following series of interviews.

### Interview with eyewitnesses

**Reporter:** hi, can you tell us what happened?  
**Eyewitness 1:** well, yesterday, me and a couple of my friends were going out for a walk and saw a group of youngsters in a pickup car hitting a power pole on king Salman road in Taif.  
**Reporter:** can you give us more detail about what you saw?  
**Eyewitness 1:** you know, it was showering and all of a sudden the car skidded on some water and crashed into the power pole. It was a massive crash cause the power pole went down and we lost the power.  
**Reporter:** Ok, thank you.  
**Eyewitness 1:** anytime.

**Reporter:** hi, can you tell us what you saw?  
**Eyewitness 2:** I was driving my car - off to work - and saw a u/e passing me and carrying a group of teenagers, five in the bed. I also saw the driver using his mobile phone, trying to screenshot I guess. He was driving fast on a wet road and then his car went into a skid, went up a pavement and ploughed into a stobie pole. What a distressing scene!  
**Reporter:** Ok, thanks for this information.  
**Eyewitness 2:** glad to help.

### Interview with a spokesperson for the police

**police spokesperson, Naif Alharthi:** well, in the morning, 10 boys from years 16 and 17 left Hawazin high school cramming into an unregistered u/e to go to Alhada park, but a few kilometers later the car slammed into a power pole on king Salman road. Oh, what total chaos! I haven’t seen an accident like that before and, actually, it was the worst one this year.  
**Reporter:** what was the main reason for the accident?  
**police spokesperson, Naif Alharthi:** well, the driver was obviously careless. You know our record showed that he was fined for speeding and using a mobile phone.  
**Reporter:** was this the only crash happening yesterday?  
**police spokesperson, Naif Alharthi:** unfortunately, no. There was another crash between two vehicles on Taif-Riyadh highway. It killed 4 people, including two children, and injured 3 others. Sorry to say that road accidents are frequent in our society.  
**Reporter:** Ok, thanks for being with us.  
**police spokesperson, Naif Alharthi:** it’s my pleasure

### Interview with an ambulance crew member

**Ambulance crew member, Faris Alotaib:** a citizen called us at 7 a.m. to report it.  
**Reporter:** what did you see when you got there?  
**Ambulance crew member, Faris Alotaib:** oh, a horrendous incident. The car was ripped in half and the engine part flipped over and burst into flames! Imagine that!  
**Reporter:** how many people were killed and injured in this accident?  
**Ambulance crew member, Faris Alotaib:** well, sadly, the accident killed 6 boys - including the driver - and injured 4 others. The injured were taken to King Faisal hospital.  
**Reporter:** Ok, thanks for giving us this information.  
**Ambulance crew member, Faris Alotaib:** you’re welcome.

### Interview with a nurse from the hospital

**Nurse:** Remarkably, 2 escaped with non-life-threatening injuries, only cuts and bruises, and I couldn’t believe that they survived this horrifying accident - it’s a miracle. The other 2 are still in a serious condition and, unfortunately, one of them will need to have both his legs amputated below the knee. Honestly, I couldn’t stand how severely he was injured.  
**Reporter:** Ok, thanks for that and good luck with your work.  
**Nurse:** thank you.

### Interview with an official from the General Directorate of Traffic

**General Directorate of Traffic official, Khalid Alkhrash:** let me tell you, Saudi Arabia has the world’s highest number of deaths from road accidents.  
**Reporter:** oh, really?  
**General Directorate of Traffic official, Khalid Alkhrash:** yes. This was reported by the World Health Organisation, and believe or not, road accidents in Saudi Arabia kill hundreds of people yearly. They also cause damages worth more than SR 87 billion! Imagine that!  
**Reporter:** Ok, thanks for that and wish you all the best.  
**General Directorate of Traffic official, Khalid Alkhrash:** same to you!

*Figure 6. The post-intervention writing task*
Participants

As outlined above, this study was conducted over fourteen weeks in an EFL context. The participants were twenty-five fourth-year female undergraduate students. They were studying English, rather than Journalism, at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia. They had studied English for more than ten years at different stages in the Saudi education system. They were recruited from a core advanced course in their program comprising three credit units on discourse analysis and delivered during the 2022 academic year.

This study was also conducted formally, receiving approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Taibah University. Students were advised of the nature of the study and its prime objective. They were also notified that their identities would be anonymous, and all participating students submitted their written consent.

Course Design

As already outlined, the course was designed to improve students’ power over the genre properties of hard news reports. The pedagogy employed in such a course drew on the model devised by Feez (1998, 2002). In introducing students to the discourse of news reporting, the teaching-learning cycle was conducted as follows.

Field-building

The initial lessons in the course primarily focused on ‘building the field’ and provided an overview of journalism and its social practices. They gave a general introduction to the key types of news genres and the social purposes they served, including hard news and soft news. They also included a detailed discussion of various event stories, issues reports, and human-interest stories. However, particular attention had been paid to hard news stories since students were required to produce such texts at the end of the course.

A typical example of a field-building activity is provided in Figure Seven below. This was a reading comprehension task designed to build students’ knowledge of news media by reading some texts and then answering questions about them. The texts were concerned with the significance of the media and the major role it plays in education. They also shed light on the different types of news media and related features. Due to space constraints, only preliminary notes are given.

Students were first instructed to:
Read the texts and then answer the questions below.
They were then asked to answer the following questions:
Answer TRUE (T) or FALSE (F) to these statements about the texts.

1. Forms of communications, including newspapers, TV, radio and the internet have connected individuals as never before in civilisation. T or F
2. Through the media any section of the public can be closely targeted T or F
3. Media outlets are only used as a means of information exchange. T or F
4. The growth of the internet has led to a decline in the use of traditional media. T or F
5. The internet tends to be very expensive. T or F

Select either (a) or (b) according to the texts, which do you think is right?
a. The traditional media has been totally replaced by the internet.
b. The traditional media has withstood the challenge of the internet.

a. The internet provides individuals with the ability to surf through different news sites at any moment.
b. News on the internet can be made live, but only accessed once.

a. News can be obtained faster via the traditional media.
b. The electronic media fulfills audiences’ desires in terms of the immediate accessibility.

Figure 7. A typical example of a task for field-building
Text Modeling and Deconstruction

Lessons in this stage explicitly deconstructed the structure of the news story with the help of model texts taken from Middle Eastern news services. They paid particular attention to nucleus-satellite structure devised in SFL-based journalism discourse analysis. They looked at the opening structural element of nucleus. They specifically introduced the definition, purposes, and structure of the headline and lead, along with their functions and grammatical and linguistic features.

A typical example of an activity for modeling the generic structure of a news story is offered in Figure Eight below. The activity was designed to build students’ knowledge of how a typical news story begins, not by providing answers but by allowing them to brainstorm and find answers themselves. Students were provided with an authentic model text, and were then asked to identify the information included in the lead.

In the following English news report of accident, the lead has been indicated in bold.

Read through the report carefully and consider the following questions:

1. Does the lead describe the first step in a sequence of events which resulted in a violent death? Yes/No
2. Does the lead provide information on what caused or led up to the event with which the report is concerned? Yes/No
3. Does the lead provide background information on where and when the event took place and who was involved? Yes/No
4. If so, is that all the information it provides, or does it provide additional information?
5. Does the lead provide a summary of the events with which the report is concerned? Yes/No
6. Does the lead focus on those aspects of the event under consideration which are likely to be seen as most significant, most disturbing or as having the most impact on the reader?

Joint Construction

Lessons in this stage were concerned with modeling and deconstructing the second phase of the news story structure. They introduced students to the body of the news report according to the orbital model. They then demonstrated the process of writing a news story, and allowed students to work collaboratively with their teacher to produce their texts.

Figure Nine below shows a typical example of a joint construction activity whereby teacher and students together wrote a news report of an accident based on information offered in a format of multiple interviews.
Figure 9. A typical example of a task for joint construction

**Independent Construction**

Lessons in this stage concentrated on the independent construction of students’ news reports. They allowed students to revise the orbital structure of the news story, including the headline-lead nucleus and the body. They then guided them to produce their texts by researching the context and using processes such as drafting, conferencing, editing, and publishing.

The writing task set for this stage of independent construction was very similar to that designed for the stage of joint construction, in which students were asked to write a news report of an accident based on some information given through a series of interviews. However, in this stage, students constructed their own texts individually and without any scaffolding from the teacher. This activity was offered in Figure Six above.

**Linking to Related Texts**

In this stage, students were asked to read, comment on, and critique each other’s work. They were also given feedback from their teacher, who held discussions with them about their overall genre competence.
Research Procedures

The researcher first selected the twenty accident news reports from the corpus to subject them to close linguistic scrutiny concerning generic properties. He then delivered the journalistic course to students, and referred to the generic features of the twenty expert accident news stories. He then collected students’ journalistic texts after completing the course, and subjected them to the same linguistic analysis applied to the twenty professional accident news reports. He finally compared the journalistic texts produced by students with the twenty accident reference corpus texts to examine their competence associated with the textual patterns of the English news story.

The Analysis in Detail

As indicated above, the analysis conducted in this study primarily focused on the students’ texts in connection with the extent to which they were generically similar to or different from the expert reference corpus journalistic texts and, at the same time, to the customary news story as described in the relevant SFL-based literature.

According to the SFL-based journalism literature, as already outlined, the typical English language hard news report is structurally arranged around ‘an orbital structure’ (Iedema et al., 1994; White, 1998). Under this organization, the news report features three stages with multiple functions in terms of overall communicative objectives. It begins with a headline and a lead constituting a nucleus, followed by a discontinuous series of satellites. This textual nucleus comprehensively summarizes the event at issue and foregrounds some of its newsworthy aspects. Therefore, in several instances, it involves intensified linguistic values, which are termed ‘upscaled’ FORCE in the system of GRADUATION of the APPRAISAL theory (Martin & White, 2005).

The subsequent set of satellites then discontinuously specifies the newsworthy point of impact presented in this nucleus by elaborating on it, offering its causes and consequences, appraising it, and contextualizing it. Such satellites typically refer back to the nucleus, and enter into closer linguistic links with it than they do with adjacent satellites. Hence, they are ‘orbitally’ organized rather than ‘chronologically’. Also, the satellites immediately following the lead tend to focus on the crisis point introduced in the opening by entering into a linguistic relationship of ‘elaboration’ with it. These satellites in the body are then followed by a ‘wrap-up’ satellite, signifying the text’s end through different semantic resources.

The conducted linguistic analysis revealed that the 20 reference corpus texts structurally conformed to the conventional news story as described above. They operated with the same orbital model. This textual organization will be illustrated in the following section.

To come to insightful conclusions about the degree of similarity in terms of the structural arrangement between students’ texts and conventional hard news reports, reference was made to the account outlined in the SFL-based journalistic literature, as well as to the results of the analysis of the professional reference corpus.

Findings

The students’ post-course texts could be divided into three groups according to how they were close or far from the standard English language news report regarding textual organization. These groups were as follows:

1. Texts that involve all the textual properties of the conventional news story, thus generically matching professional news reports.
2. Texts that include some of the structural elements of the usual news story, thus partially resembling the professional texts of this genre.

3. Texts that do not conform to the structural organization of the standard news report story.

**Texts Matching the Generic Conventions of the Typical News Story**

Twelve students out of twenty-five – S3, S4, S6, S9, S12, S16, S17, S19, S21, S22, S23, S25 – composed texts very similar in textual organization to professional hard news reports. They closely matched the generic aspects of the typical English language news story as delineated by both the SFL-based news media literature and the analysis carried out on the journalistic texts in the reference corpus. They were arranged according to the lead-dominated orbital structure, having three stages: an opening nucleus, a subsequent discontinuous set of satellites and a wrap-up satellite. They also involved all the genre-related properties of such an arrangement. To illustrate, the genre-structural analysis of S17’s news report is provided in Figure Ten below.

(It must be noted that the analysis and its associated discussion below do not attend to the grammatical correctness of this text and other students’ texts. For instance, there were some improper choices regarding using presuming and presenting references. However, the student’s capacity to create a text generically in line with the typical English language news story is still apparent.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nucleus – headline + lead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 people killed and 4 others injured in terrible collision in Taif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 people were killed and 4 others were injured in a terrible accident when a speeding pickup car hit a power pole yesterday on King Salman Road in Taif.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 1: Elaboration – details of collision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faris Al-Otaibi, the ambulance crew in Taif, said that “at 7 am we received a call from a citizen informing us of a car collision with a power pole on King Salman Road.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 2: Appraisal + Elaboration – the accident appraised by an emergency member + further details of collision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al-Otaibi said that it was a terrible accident as the car was torn in the middle, the engine part turned over and caught fire, adding that 6 boys, including the driver, were killed and 4 others were injured who were taken to King Faisal Hospital.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 3: Elaboration – more details of accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police spokesman Nayef Al-Harithi said that 10 boys from 16-17 years old left Hawazin High School to go to Al-Hada Park, colliding with an electrical pole.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 4: Elaboration + Appraisal – further details of crash + the crash appraised by an eyewitness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An eyewitness stated that the driver was driving his car on a wet road, then the car skidded and climbed onto the sidewalk and hit an electric pole. He described the scene as a massive crash.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 5: Cause-and-effect – consequence of the accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The nurse said that only two survivors sustained cuts and bruises, but two others were still in serious condition, and one of them need to amputate his legs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 6: Contextualisation – introduces a similar event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It was reported that 4 people were killed, including: 2 children, and 3 others were injured in another collision of two motorcades on the Taif-Riyadh highway.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 7: Contextualisation – places the accident in a wider context and treats it as a social issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Road accidents are very common in Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 8: Wrap-up – puts the incident within a broader context of trends in fatal vehicle collisions in the region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The official of the General Directorate of Traffic, Khaled Al-Qurashi, said that car crashes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia kill hundreds of people annually causing more than 87 billion riyals in damages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10. Genre-structural analysis of S17’s news report

It is observed that S17 began her text with an opening nucleus comprising a headline and a lead. Her headline reiterated some of the material provided in her lead – e.g., terrible collision, killed, injured, Taif. Thus, it signposted what meanings to be presented further in her lead. It was also very similar to typical headlines in hard news reporting with respect to grammatical construction.
For example, it did not include articles and finite verbs and hence did not specify when the accident occurred (Mardh, 1980). These features were attended to in classroom tasks when deconstructing model texts for students.

S17 produced a ‘maximal’ lead since it (1) comprehensively summarized the event containing its key newsworthy aspects; (2) encompassed material intensifying the event’s point of impact, i.e., the use of the emotive word terrible; and (3) enhanced the event’s newsworthiness by indirectly giving prominence to alleged human wrongdoing, i.e., negligence of traffic rules by the driver – a speeding pickup car. In the set of interviews supplied as a prompt for the writing task, this material was attributed to a police spokesperson: our record showed that he was fined for speeding..., but S17 chose to present it in the lead to intensify the sense of the incident’s seriousness, thereby enhancing its newsworthiness. This notion of how news value is heightened when ‘blame’ is assigned was discussed in detail in White (1997).

S17 then turned to produce a body where she focused on the heightened crisis point set out in the textual nucleus via subsequent discontinuous satellites. That is, she began by offering details about the collision’s time and location from an ambulance crew member’s point of view. She then presented details of casualties and damages involved, and how the crash occurred based on an eyewitness account. This use is compatible with what was observed in the journalistic articles in the reference corpus, in which their opening satellites tended to establish an ‘elaboration’ relationship with the headline/lead. – i.e., to elaborate on the newsworthiness point of impact introduced in the nucleus. S17 then continued by providing further details of the incident, reporting an appraisal of it, contextualizing it by introducing a similar event and placing it in a broader context.

Finally, S17 supplied a ‘wrap-up’ satellite to offer a sense of conclusion to her text by outlining the wider social context of the given incident and casting it as a serious ‘issue’. This feature was found in several published English news reports as outlined by White (1998).

To demonstrate this typicality further, by way of comparison, Figure Eleven below shows a generic analysis of a professional news report from the reference corpus that involves a similar incident. (Aljazeera, 11/11/2011).

**Figure 11. Genre-structural analysis of a text from the reference corpus**
Figure Eleven above displays that this typical news report contains a ‘maximal’ lead, which is very similar to that of S17’s news report with respect to offering (1) a complete summary of the activity sequence, (2) an intensification of values to heighten its significance – i.e., the country’s second deadliest mining accident..., and (3) an enhancement of its newsworthiness via foregrounding human wrongdoing on the part of the mine operators – i.e., an illegally operated coal mine....

The body of this professional journalistic text also closely resembles that of S17’s news report with respect to featuring satellite/s which (1) elaborated on the event’s impact at an early stage to maintain the focus on its newsworthiness; (2) described the incident’s causes and consequences; (3) supplied some commentary on the activity sequence or its participants by utilizing quoted/reported sources; (4) placed the event in a wider social context; (5) and served to indicate a completion to the text: wrap-up.

Texts Partially Resembling the Organizational Patterns of the Typical News Report

Eight out of twenty-five students, S1, S2, S7, S8, S10, S13, S14, S20, wrote texts that were in some resemblance to the customary English language news story in relation to the generic features. Such texts, for instance, involved leads that summarized the event as a whole but did not heighten its salience and, or foreground its points of high impact. They also failed to include satellites assessing the event through quoted/reported material, and placing it in a temporal, spatial or social setting. By way of illustration, the news report produced by one of those eight students – i.e., S1, is offered in Figure Twelve below, along with an analysis of its textual organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nucleus – headline + lead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 boys involved in a power pole accident collision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 boys were killed and 4 others were injured today in a pickup car colliding with an electric pole on King Salman Road in Taif.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 1: Elaboration – details of collision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Police spokesman Nayef Al-Harithi said that 10 boys between the ages of 16 and 17 were involved in this accident when they left high school and were crammed into an unregistered Ute going to Al-Hada Park.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 2: Cause-and-effect – causes of the accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to an eyewitness at the site of the accident, the driver of the car using his mobile phone and driving at high speed on the wet road, then the car skidded and hit the power pole.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 3: Elaboration – more details of accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faris Al-Otaibi, a member of the ambulance crew, added that at seven in the morning they received a call from a citizen reporting the accident which led to the killing 6 boys and wounding 4 others, who were transferred to King Faisal Hospital.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 4: Cause-and-effect – consequence of the accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The nurse said two of the injured were in serious condition, while the other two survived with light injuries.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 5: Cause-and-effect – consequence of the accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ambulance member Faris Al-Otaibi described the car as being torn in the middle and then set on fire.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 6: Wrap-up – puts the crash in a wider social context and casts it as a main cause to death in the country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many deaths in Saudi Arabia are due to traffic accidents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12. Genre-structural analysis of S1’s news report

As noted, S1 composed a headline which failed to both fully summarize the lead – i.e., not mentioning the accident’s location – and omit articles (Mardh, 1980; van Dijk, 1988). She also produced a ‘partial lead’ which performed a summarizing role for the whole event, but it did not involve meanings to heighten its severity. In this respect, the material presented in the first satellite
could have enhanced the lead’s significance if S1 had used it there: *crammed into an unregistered Ute* – i.e., implying negligent behavior involving some social impact. Accordingly, S1 developed some competence in the functionality of the textual nucleus in completely summarizing the event, but not intensifying its newsworthy aspects.

S1 also created a body that specified the nucleus through a set of discontinuous paragraphs. That is, she included satellites which offered details about the accident’s time, location and victims. She also involved satellites that described causes and consequences of the accident according to some observers. However, she failed to incorporate satellites that reported an appraisal of the activity sequence and contextualized it. Finally, she provided a wrap-up satellite where the given event was located in a broader context – i.e., it was considered a social issue that led to a large number of deaths.

**Texts Generically Different from the Standard Hard News Report**

Five out of twenty-five students – S5, S11, S15, S18, S24 – created texts demonstrating no command of the hard news genre properties. More precisely, these news reports failed to supply leads, sufficient elaboration of the event’s crisis point, evaluation of the event by an external quoted source and a concluding wrap-up satellite. To show this generic atypicality, the writing of S11 is examined in Figure Thirteen below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nucleus – headline + lead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No headline and lead were produced.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 1: Elaboration – details of accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teenagers road accident in Taif city today At 4:00 PM the weather was raining and the car skidded out of the road and crashed into the power pole.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 2: Elaboration + Cause-and-effect – details of casualties + consequence of the accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the Ambulance crew member Fahad alali said “we arrived in the good to help the boys, were their 5 boys 2 of them were in a Critical condition”. “we take them to the hospital and the others thanks god were in a good condition.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 3: Elaboration + Cause-and-effect – specifies accident’s location + causes of the accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The police spokesman Ahmed Alanzi said a group of youngsters in a pickup car hitting a power pole on king Salman road because of the water in the road and the driver was on his phone and in fast speed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 4: Contextualisation – locates the collision in a broader context and considers it a problem in the society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>road accidents are frequent in our society. I hope all the drivers observe of the Driving instructions for save themselves.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satellite 5: Cause-and-effect – reiterates the causes of the crash</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ambulance arrived quickly and helped them, all the accidents today were because of the bad weather and of course the phone was a reason here.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 13. Genre-structural analysis of S11’s news report*

What stands out in Figure Thirteen above is that S11 produced a news report which was generically atypical in many ways. That is to say, she did not offer a headline-lead nucleus to be specified in the following body and hence did not establish an orbital dependency relationship. She began her news report immediately with material which provided details about the activity sequence in question, serving as an orbital satellite of elaboration. Such material did not concisely summarize
the whole event, nor did it maximally give prominence to its crisis point. Therefore, it could not be regarded as an opening lead.

S11 composed a body which was also not developed optimally. To exemplify, she offered satellites which neither elaborated on the incident by emphasizing its significance nor assessed it by using quoted/reported sources. She also failed to include a final wrap-up satellite functioning to construe the whole event or to place it in a broader socio-cultural context.

**Discussion**

Analysis of students’ post-teaching journalistic texts demonstrated that half of the class had shown evidence of their competence in the genre norms of the news story. They produced texts that generically matched the typical English-language news report. This finding was in line with those reached by Kongpetch (2006) and Nagao (2019, 2022), who reported that their students’ final written texts structurally conformed to the standard textual features of Exposition, Discussion, and descriptive report respectively. By contrast, the other half of the class either wrote texts that were structurally dissimilar to hard news reporting, or texts that could be classified as being in partial resemblance to the textual conventions of this genre.

The SFL-based linguistic analysis employed in this study effectively provided valuable insights into the students’ genre competence throughout the course. Such an analytical framework provided a complete understanding and concrete evidence of students’ ability, or inability, to produce conventional hard news reports. A vital aspect of this methodology was the deployment of the reference corpus, which was subjected to the same detailed textual analysis as the students’ texts to have a point of comparison. This examination offered an accurate account concerning degrees of similarity or difference between students’ texts and what is customary in published news reports in terms of genre.

These findings are significant for researchers interested in journalistic literacy since they present evidence that only half of the participating students demonstrated a facility for composing generically conventional news stories. They suggest that further research is needed into how the key textual properties of the news story might be modeled and deconstructed in activities associated with stages of joint and independent constructions. A more micro analysis would be required to explain why not all the students showed a command of these generic features. A closer examination of classroom modeling tasks and students’ engagement in such tasks would be helpful in this regard.

They also indicate that some adjustments to course design or content might need to be made and, or a revised approach to scaffolding might be required to allow a higher proportion of the class to develop their genre competence. For instance, it might be useful to integrate a bilingual approach into genre-based pedagogy to increase students’ engagement and deepen their understanding. That is, a course might entail bilingual aspects to develop students’ first language skills to ensure that their linguistic performance in the second/foreign language is maximized. As a result, including students’ L1 and L2 (Arabic and English in the case of this study) in a journalistic course might encourage them to take advantage of their preceding skills with written language to develop their foreign language, and promote their progress in media literacy.

These findings are also important for researchers concerned with written literacy development. They offer insights into how a close textual analysis can (1) enhance teaching and learning around a particular genre and assess the associated outcomes in a principled way; and (2) specifically observe how students are able, or unable, to meet the given genre expectations. They
also imply that such an analysis substantially assists in identifying generic properties that need further support in students’ writing. To exemplify, some students struggled to create a headline and a lead in the case of this study. This detailed understanding allows us to make careful planning, sound decisions and proper instructional strategies, that would supply students with rectification of their written literacy issues.

Conclusion
This study sought to contribute to research on literacy development, particularly in the context of media education, by teaching an EFL genre-based pedagogy course in journalistic writing to Saudi tertiary students. It aimed to discover students’ competence in the news story genre. That is, it attended to signs of development in students’ ability to compose news reports, that textually matched the typical English language news story. Typicality in this study was determined by the insights offered by the journalistic discourse analysis literature of SFL, and the analyses conducted on the reference corpus of journalistic articles collected for this study.

The key finding of this study was that half of the class had developed their competence to create journalistic texts that closely resembled the expert news reports in the reference corpus, thereby complying with the conventions of such a genre.

Despite the strengths discussed in the previous section, this study has some certain limitations. The first relates to its narrow focus on students’ ability to display a command of journalistic writing from a generic perspective. Scrutinizing students’ control over the register properties of hard news – i.e., resources of lexi-co-grammar – would have been a worthwhile line of inquiry. Nevertheless, it did not receive close attention in this study.

The second is associated with the assessment of students’ news writing. The study’s methodology did not consider texts from students at the beginning of the course. It only assessed each student’s writing over one news story at the end of the course. Accordingly, it was impossible to draw definitive conclusions about students’ written literacy growth because no comparison had been drawn between their initial texts and outcomes – i.e., no tracking of their writing progress over the course was undertaken. However, by comparison with the expert texts in the reference corpus, it was possible to make strong claims about their ability to write typical news stories from a textual perspective.

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