Abstract

Stance-taking and stance-support are two discourse behaviours that define the expository/argumentative essay genre, the mastery of which is the key to academic success in higher education. The aim of this study is to discover the extent to which a group of high school students from a non-native English speaking background are capable of engaging in stance assertion and stance-support behaviours in argument in an online forum, and their repertoire of lexicogrammatical resources for performing these behaviours. Analysis of their online postings revealed that not only do most postings project a stance, a considerable number feature stance-support strategies ranging from assertion of personal belief to rebuttal of anticipated opposing views. Lexicogrammatical structures observed include appropriate forms for realising expression of attitudinal meaning, hypothesising outcomes, and other discourse acts in arguing support. These findings are discussed for their implications for the teaching of expository writing in school.
1. Introduction

Stance-taking and stance-support are defining acts in the argumentative or expository essay, a text type often used as an assessment tool in academic settings. Argument has been defined as “a textual structure characterised by propositions some of which are in the semantic relation of ‘support’ to others” (Shaw, 2000, p.41, citing van Dijk). Adopting and supporting a stance are also defining discourse acts of the expository essay, a genre that requires writers to advance a point of view or thesis and support it with arguments (Martin, 1989; Schleppegrell, 2004). The boundary between argument and exposition being neither clear nor, in the opinion of Shaw (2000), really necessary, we shall use the two terms interchangeably in this paper.

Our interest in stance-taking and stance-support began with a research project to test the effect of a method of teaching expository writing in upper secondary school (Project CRP5/04AC). Initial interviews with teachers involved in the project revealed a common perception that students lack the argumentation and thinking skills needed for argumentative essay writing. The interviews further uncovered a tendency to attribute disappointing argumentative essays to inadequate topic knowledge (*they do not read enough; they are not interested in anything*) and deficient English language proficiency (*they don’t have the vocabulary/grammar to write in the right style*). The teachers’ views raised the following questions: Are 15 to 16-year old students really lacking in argument skills? Don’t they, in everyday argument with friends and siblings, perform the basic argument acts of stating and supporting a position? Or is it a case of their EL proficiency being so poor that stance-taking and stance-support moves in their essays are unrecognisable as such.

If expressing and defending a point of view on a debatable topic is the mark of everyday argument between speakers (Schiffrin, 1985), we would expect secondary school students to be
able to take a position on general topics familiar to them and justify it in, at least, a rudimentary fashion using whatever background knowledge they happen to have on the disputable issue. It is likely that the ability to assume a position and offer supporting propositions is not dependent on having extensive content knowledge, where the disputable topic is within the experience of the speaker. Contrary to our teacher interviewees’ belief in the importance of topic knowledge for expository essay writing, the essay prompts in the English paper for the Singapore school-leaving examination (known as the O-levels) do not require extensive knowledge of extraordinary topics. Most topics in the past three years’ exam papers pertain to areas of experience familiar to the average teenage student (e.g. Should school uniforms be compulsory? Should mothers with young children go out to work?). It seems reasonable to surmise that to produce a 500-word argumentative essay (the O-level examination requirement), the most crucial skills students need to master are the discourse acts of stance-taking and stance-support. To find out the extent of mastery of these acts among upper secondary students in a typical Singapore school, we examined their postings on a school-administered online discussion forum.

Three research questions were formulated to guide the analysis of a collection of online forum postings written by students:

1. To what extent do students engage in stance-taking and stance-support in an online discussion forum?

2. What strategies of stance-support are evident?

3. What lexico-grammatical features are most commonly employed to express attitudinal meanings in stance and to realise stance-support strategies?

Answers to these questions could inform the planning of instructional materials and classroom activities for the teaching of expository writing. Instruction might build on the stance-
taking and stance-support skills already existing in students’ repertoire. For instance, if it is
known that students are capable of stance-taking, instruction might aim at further development
of this skill by teaching the process of arriving at more sophisticated, qualified stance statements.
Findings relating to the lexico-grammar (Research question 3) would provide the basis for
deciding what grammatical features and types of vocabulary to teach so as to equip students with
the linguistic means for expressing stance explicitly and implementing stance-support strategies
effectively.

Stance, being the key concept in this paper, will first be defined before the theoretical
perspective guiding the analysis of the online postings is presented. A report of the method of
analysis and the results then follow.

2. Stance and stance support

We use the term “stance” in much the same way as Hunston & Thompson, (2000) use
“evaluation” to refer to a writer’s “attitude…towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities
or propositions that he or she is talking about” (p.5). We chose “stance” because it sounds less
intimidating than “evaluation” to the students and teachers who participated in the pedagogical
research project of which the study reported in this paper formed the first stage.

On closer examination, stance in the sense of “attitude” and “viewpoint” includes one or
a combination of the following strands of meaning:

- The writer’s attitude towards and feeling about an issue, event, or person, referred to
  as “attitudinal stance” in Conrad and Biber’s work (2000, p.57). The dimension of
  feeling is covered by the category of “affect” in Martin and Rose’s “appraisal” model
  (2003, p.22).
• The writer’s evaluation of an issue on the basis of desirability, benefit, or other criteria (e.g. ethics, truth, aesthetics). Evaluation stems from the writer interpreting a phenomenon in a certain way or exercising some form of judgement. The exercise of judgement underpins Halliday’s concept of modality (2004, p.115), and Martin’s appraisal categories of “judgement” and “appreciation”, the latter being an evaluative resource “for valuing objects ‘aesthetically’” (Martin, 1997, p.18). When judgement is based on moral or ethical grounds, the stance may express the meaning of obligation or “modulation” (Halliday, 2004).

• The writer’s degree of commitment to the truth of his/her position and the propositions presented in support of it. Degree of commitment to truth is the writer’s opinion about the certainty or probability of an event or the truth of a proposition, meanings included in Halliday’s “modality”. Degree of commitment to truth may also be expressed by alluding to a source other than the writer himself or herself (reportedly, allegedly), the area of meaning known as “evidentiality” (Hyland, 1999, p.101; Halliday, 2004, p.605). Degree of certainty and the notion of evidentiality constitute “epistemic stance” (Conrad & Biber, 2000, p.57).

As stance involves judging something, it will often incorporate the element of “amplification” expressed through “intensifiers” (Martin & Rose, 2003, p.38), such as very, best, and too (as in too troublesome). Amplification can occur in any of the three strands of meaning listed above, for example: very pleased (attitude), definitely true (evaluation of truth value), will certainly happen (degree of commitment to truth/certainty).

Because argumentation is comprised of claim and support propositions (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1997; Kopperschmidt, 1985), writer stance can be observed at
the macro level of the whole-text claim and at the level of support for that claim. In the case of
online forum postings, the macro level stance is that of a single posting or a number of postings
from the same participant who responds to messages on the same topic more than once. As
Figure 1 shows, the attitudes reflected in support propositions tend to align with the writer’s
macro-level stance.

Figure 1. Stance at macro and support levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Proposition</th>
<th>Stance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macro-level (position in essay) →</td>
<td>Taking part in competitions is definitely more important than winning.*</td>
<td>Writer’s attitude towards topic*. Evaluation of taking part as “more important”. Emphatic commitment to truth of proposition (is definitely)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support level claim →</td>
<td>You learn new things from all the new friends you make in competitions whether or not you win*.</td>
<td>Evaluation of taking part as beneficial (learn new things, new friends). Proposition regarded as ‘truth’ (simple present tense learn).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sentences from a student’s essay on the topic “Taking part in competitions is more important than winning. Do you agree?”

Stance support is a proposition or a collection of propositions assembled into an
argument to serve the rhetorical function of convincing the reader of the validity of the claim that
is the writer’s stance. Supporting a positional claim with reasons, or “claimbacking”, is widely
recognised as a constituent of the genre of argumentative texts (Coirier, Andriessen, & Chanquoy, 1999, p. 8), including everyday argument in face-to-face interaction (Schiffrin, 1985).

Stance support occurs at more than one level. At the macro level of an argument the
writer’s position is supported by different reasons or support claims. In elaborated argumentation
each of these support claims is supported by another proposition, which in turn may be supported
by yet another proposition. The resulting hierarchical organisation (Coirier, Andriessen &
Chanquoy, 1999) is characteristic of argumentative texts.
It may have become apparent from the above definitions that the labelling propositions as stance or support is based on a functional view of language and discourse. As the following section will explain, two theoretical models guided this study: one views the elements in the structure of argumentative texts from a functional perspective, and the other views language use as serving specific functions in socio-cultural contexts.

3. Theoretical framework

The conduct of this study was guided by Toulmin’s model of argument structure (Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1984) and the social-cultural view of language that sees “all language and literacy [as] social” (Christie & Misson, 1998, p.5). Toulmin’s argument model provided the tool for identifying propositions serving the role of stance and those serving as support. A writer’s stance on the topic of argument is, in Toulmin’s model, a claim asserted “for general acceptance” and therefore “the starting point” of the argument (Toulmin et al, 1984, p.29). The primary purpose of argument is to support claims. In the Toulmin model, support is accomplished by offering “grounds” or facts serving as evidence, “warrants” or statements connecting grounds to a claim, and “backing” to assert the reliability of the “warrant”. Another characteristic feature of argument, refutation of counter-arguments, may be regarded as a further means of strengthening support of the claim. The identification of support propositions by their functional role with reference to a claim in the Toulmin model facilitates the distinction that must be made in argument analysis between sentences that indicate stance and sentences that function as stance-support.

The Toulmin model of argument provides a useful tool for analysing the structure of arguments, and determining, for example, if a claim is supported. But for a close examination of how claims are expressed through the linguistic system, we need a model of language that
acknowledges the relationship between linguistic form and social contexts of language use. Such a model is systemic functional linguistics and the functional grammar that grew out of it (Halliday, 1994, 2004).

The robustness of systemic functional linguistics as a tool for analysing school-based writing has been acknowledged. In her study of “the language of schooling” Schleppegrell (2004), explaining her rationale for adopting a functional linguistics perspective, observes:

Systemic functional linguistic theory provides a means of identifying the grammatical features that make a particular text the kind of text it is, so that the relationship of linguistic choices to the situational contexts in which the language is used can be explained in functional terms (p.19).

Systemic functional linguistics adopts a social view of language wherein every instance of text (such as a posting on an online forum discussion) is “an interactive event, a social exchange of meanings” (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p.11). Written discourse, whether communicated through print or electronic media, is a means of participating in social interaction (van Dijk, 1997) and social action (Miller, 1984). The grammatical forms and lexis that construct a text are therefore a resource for realising social intentions and performing discourse acts like supporting one’s stance on an issue. Systemic functional grammar allows us to analyse the lexico-grammatical features in a text in terms of what the writer intends to do and mean (Halliday 1994). The results of a functional analysis of students’ texts would tell us, for instance, whether a student writer has the lexicogrammatical resources to project a qualified position or only a simplistic one. Observing the link between grammar and discourse function would yield results that could prove to be more useful pedagogically than a merely listing linguistic forms as has been done in some studies of students’ writing (e.g. Hinkel, 2002).
Given that the same or similar social goals motivate written communication recur in recurrent situations with shared circumstances, there are discourse moves and linguistic features that are fairly stable. Regularly re-occurring moves, their organisation, and linguistic exponents are the distinguishing marks of text viewed as genre, with “genre” defined as a representation “at an abstract level [of] the verbal strategies used to accomplish social purposes…” (Martin, 1985, p. 251.). We can therefore expect stance-declaring moves and stance-support strategies to be identifiable across argument genres whether the argument is situated in a formal or informal situation.

Although argument in online forums may be closer to argument in face-to-face interaction than to written argumentative essays, it is the stance-taking and stance support acts that define both as argument. Everyday argument in face-to-face interaction has been described as a discourse genre in which “individuals support disputable and disputed positions” (Schiffrin, 1985, p.45). Taking a position and supporting it are acts intrinsic to the production of written text types commonly set in school (e.g. the letter of complaint, book review, argumentative essay, etc.). The similarity in discourse acts across spoken and written modes will be reflected, to some extent, in the lexico-grammar for expressing attitude, certainty, and other meanings in stance and for signalling support strategies. The dynamics of online discussion may resemble those of face-to-face discussion, but the fact that responses in an online forum have to be written out may give forum postings some of the features of a written argument. Applying a functional grammar analysis should reveal the extent to which the colloquial features of informal speech mark students’ online discussion, and perhaps suggest the formal structures they need to be taught for essay writing.

4. Method of analysis
The data for this study came from 192 online forum postings on 8 different topics from 15-year-old students in a secondary school (high school) in Singapore. As the researchers had no right of access to the school administered forum, the postings were selected by the school’s English department head based on her judgement of their being a representative sample of secondary students’ online discussion. English being the medium of instruction in Singapore, the students who participated in the forum had studied and used English for at least 9 years. Most could write understandable, though not error-free sentences. In the relaxed setting of the online forum, there was a tendency to slip into the local variety of colloquial English (Singlish).

The online forum from which the postings were taken was a school-administered, teacher-monitored forum opened only to teachers and students of the school. Its purpose was to provide a platform for students to express their views on a range of topics initiated by either teachers or students. The informally frank and lively nature of some of the exchanges was evidence that teacher monitoring was minimal and students did not feel constrained by any thought of a teacher policing their forum. Topics discussed ranged from school life-related issues (whether the graduation party should be formal or informal) to issues of national interest (e.g. which fighter plane the government should purchase).

Postings were first analysed for presence of stance. A posting was identified as having a stance if it contained or implied a claim that can be interpreted as the writer’s position on the named topic of discussion, or a view expressed in response to a previous posting in the same discussion. Postings that carried no stance were not further analysed. These were commonly postings that initiated discussion by raising a question (e.g. *Do you think Singapore Idol is attractive?*). Postings were omitted from analysis altogether if they were purely personal attacks on the writer of an earlier message.
Postings expressing a stance were analysed for presence of stance-support. Propositions were identified as stance-support if they serve the function of reason or “ground” (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1984) for the writer’s position. Identification of stance-support was thus based on the functional role played by an utterance or a part of an utterance in contributing to the construction of the meaning of the larger unit (Paltridge, 1997), the larger unit in this case being the writer’s stance in the entire posting or, where a writer has contributed to the discussion more than once, over all his/her postings on the same thread of discussion.

Stance-support was examined for the strategy that the student appeared to be using to accomplish the goal of persuading other forum participants that his/her point of view was valid. Following van Dijk’s account of discourse as including “mental as well as interactional strategies in the effective…accomplishment of discourse and the realization of … social goals” (1997, p.31), support strategies were described according to the kind of verbal act employed to persuade the reader to accept the writer’s point of view as reasonable.

After stance and stance-support propositions were identified, their lexico-grammatical features were examined to determine the most common structures used by the students to communicate and support stance. Description of grammatical features was informed by Halliday’s functional grammar and took into account the writer’s intended discourse goal.

5. Findings

Of the 192 postings made available to us, 33 were omitted from the study as they either contained no statement on the topic of discussion or were personal attacks on other forum participants. Of the 159 postings subjected to analysis, 137 (86%) contained a stance, and of these 75 (55%) had stance-support.
In the 75 postings that contained stance-support, 120 support moves were identified (some postings had more than one support move). The stance-support strategies observed in the 120 moves fell into 8 categories (listed with explanation and examples in Table 1. The most frequently used strategies were assertion of personal opinion (40 out of 120) and recourse to fact (32), with “fact” defined as a proposition generally accepted as true in the speech community of this group of students. More sophisticated strategies like hypothesising outcomes and anticipating opposing views were also found though less frequent (10 and 7 respectively).

Table 1. Stance-support strategies in students’ online arguments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stance-support strategy</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal opinion</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>... <em>I personally think that 9/10 [9 out of 10] people are forced to sing ...</em> (On whether singing the national anthem loud shows loyalty.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>32</td>
<td><em>For your information, we have very low school fees because the government subsidises our schools ...</em> (On whether students can refuse to listen to teachers.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>... <em>after wearing for few weeks, there were holes on the side of my shoe ...</em> (On the school shoes sourced by the school [part of the school uniform])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized outcome</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>... <em>juz imagine our... [name of country], send a pack of artillery facing us, we will be drowned man ...</em> (On what fighter plane the government should buy.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to emotion</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>... <em>but wun [won’t] it be much more memorable than dwelling in some posh foreign place that holds no memories?</em> (On whether the graduation party should be held in school or a hotel.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Anticipation and countering of opposing view

A potential contrary view or reader objection to writer’s position is raised and addressed.

… sure it costs lots more to buy them and more to maintain compared to the rafale, typhoon and f-15 ... but seriously, nothing can fire as far as the aim-54 phoenix ...

(On what fighter plane the government should buy.)

Analogy

Drawing on similarity with another situation to support claim.

… like that day speech day, at nite have fun, play and take foto betta ...[better for photo taking]

(Student arguing for graduation party to be held in school like the recent speech day was.)

Appeal to source

Reference to published material or figure of authority as backing for a claim.

Singapore’s main defence is total defence, .... Read your social studies textbook ...

(On which fighter plane the government should buy.)

Total support moves 120

To discover the location of the less common support strategies, we examined strategies in 3 topics that generated postings containing 10 or more support moves per topic. As can be seen from Table 2, the topic with the largest number of support moves and the greatest variety of strategies is “Which fighter plane to buy?”

Table 2. Stance-support strategies in postings on selected topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stance-support strategy/topic</th>
<th>Graduation party: formal/informal?</th>
<th>Which fighter plane to buy?</th>
<th>New school time table</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal opinion</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized outcome</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to emotion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipation + countering of opposing view</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analogy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to source</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To identify the most common lexico-grammatical features for realising stance and stance-support, structures that occurred more than 5 times were noted. In expression of stance, the dominant processes for introducing the writer’s stance were relational and mental, with more than 25 occurrences of each (See Table 3 below).

Table 3. Lexico-grammar for expressing stance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Lexico-grammar</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduce position</td>
<td>Relational process</td>
<td><em>It’s good to have Singapore’s own reality tv ...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mental process</td>
<td><em>I think that we xxx[name of school] should hold some kind of school concert every year.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal process</td>
<td><em>I’m telling ya, da Su-27/30 is da most beautiful fighter of its generation!!</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing attitudinal meaning</td>
<td><em>It</em> as clause subject</td>
<td><em>It’s better to have it at a park ...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ evaluative lexis</td>
<td><em>It doesn’t look nice at all ...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment adjunct</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Overall, I think the main contender must be the eurofighter typhoon ...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>... <em>anyway, I believe that all these main contenders have its good points and bad points ...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>It’s real hideous to be honest ...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing degree of commitment</td>
<td><em>will</em> to indicate</td>
<td><em>No matter how many friends we make, one day when an enemy decided [sic] to attack, no amount of diplomacy will work.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in constructing hypothesized</td>
<td>certainty</td>
<td>... <em>the air force would conduct strike operations ...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outcome)</td>
<td><em>would</em> to indicate</td>
<td><em>our navy would move into the South China Sea...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hypothetical</td>
<td><em>This possible war scenario would be lightning quick...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplification</td>
<td><em>so</em> + evaluative</td>
<td><em>... they would not be so dumb as to sink the whole island with a nuke.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lexis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>really/still</em> + mental</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>process</td>
<td><em>I really hope the govt doesn’t select...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>... I still strongly support the Rafale for RSAF.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The most common ways of expressing attitudinal meaning were through evaluative words (e.g. better, nice) in clauses with subject it, and through comment or modal adjuncts (anyway, actually). Amplification of attitudinal meaning was most often signalled by so, really or still (examples in Table 3). Degree of commitment to the truth of propositions was frequently indicated through the choice of will for certainty and of would to show that the writer was merely hypothesizing.

The two most frequent stance-support strategies—Personal opinion and Fact—were studied to identify common linguistic forms. Personal opinions tended to be introduced by means of a simple present tense verbal process with the propositional content expressed in simple present tense to cast it as presumed ‘fact’ (I think…it [a model of plane] is very agile...). Adjectives (durable, powerful) and comment adjuncts (anyway, ultimately) were regularly used to communicate evaluative meaning in opinion statements. Simple present tense and comment adjuncts were also used to express ‘fact’ as a support strategy. The realisation of ‘fact’ was enhanced by the use of statistics and to back up their claim or propositions. See Table 4 for examples.

Table 4. Lexico-grammatical features in two support strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support strategy</th>
<th>Lexico-grammar</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal opinion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce opinion</td>
<td>Mental process, simple present tense</td>
<td>...I think that it is...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State evaluation</td>
<td>Relational/ material process – simple present tense; Comment adjunct; Adjectives</td>
<td>...suitable for Singapore’s air force as it’s very agile and is very durable. ...technology acts as a powerful ‘force multiplier’ Anyways, u dun [don’t] benefit from not listening to teachers, and ultimately u have the freedom ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some interpersonal functions were realised through speech-like features. Three of these functions are listed with illustrations in Table 5. One characteristic of the speech-like utterances is that, in most cases, the posting begins with the writer commenting on or disagreeing with another writer’s stance without first saying what that stance is. For example, in the “Which fighter plane” forum, one student began his message with “Don’t think so simple boy”. As in a face-to-face speech situation, what the “simple” thinking was could be retrieved by readers (the other forum participants) referring to the preceding flow of talk.

Another recurrent speech feature observed in postings on every topic was the use of backchannels (Drummond & Hopper, 1993; and Heinz, 2002). In face-to-face interaction, backchannels are verbal or non-verbal messages (e.g. *uh huh*, *yeah*) or head nods and head movements used in conversational interactions (Drummond & Hopper, 1993). In the forum postings, backchannels often appear at the beginning of messages to indicate the writer’s acknowledgement of and, sometimes, agreement with an utterance in an earlier posting.

Table 5. Speech-like features in forum postings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse function</th>
<th>Speech/ speech-like feature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative comment on opposing view</td>
<td><em>Don’t think so simple boy</em>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging stance in a preceding posting</td>
<td><em>You pay? Have you seen the receipt?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backchannels – acknowledgment of another participant’s comment/stance.</td>
<td><em>Uh huh</em> ... <em>so we owe singapore a loving</em> ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Yeah, pity about that</em> ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

... *After all* we [Singapore] *are only so small* ... 

... *the f-14 is capable of* *supersonic* *travels of mach 2.2* *which is definitely a better speed for air to air interception* *compared to the f-16’s mach 1.8.* 

... *considering over 10,000 applications sent in.*
To summarise, the majority of the forum postings contained a stance while about half of those expressing a stance showed stance-support. The most frequent stance-support strategies were personal opinion and the use of fact as evidence. Discourse acts in stance expression and stance-support were realised through a number of recurrent lexico-grammatical structures that included mental and relational processes, adjectives, modals, and comment adjuncts, as well as speech-like features.

6. Discussion
The primary question that motivated this study was whether students engage in the argument acts of stance-taking and stance-support. The answer with respect to stance-taking is definitely in the affirmative, going by the 86% of postings that contained a stance. The answer with respect to stance-support is less emphatic as only about half (55%) of stance propositions were supported. The difference may be attributed to the ‘naturalness’ of stance-taking in social interaction, and the relative ease of stance-taking compared to the cognitively more demanding move of stance-support.

It would appear from the high percentage of postings projecting a stance that stance-taking in writing comes effortlessly to students in a non-threatening situation where participation in argument is not related to a formal classroom composition exercise. Stance-taking is probably a natural discourse act in peer-to-peer social interaction where differing views on an issue are possible, so natural that even children younger than twelve are capable of writing texts in which they adopt and justify a point of view (Piolat, Roussey & Gombert, 1999). Students who appear to their teachers to be unable to adopt a stance in expository essay writing may have the problem of bridging the divide between their capabilities in social practices and the demands made on similar capabilities in school writing. Other literacy researchers have drawn attention to the need
to find ways to bridge from students’ capabilities in everyday social practices into less familiar
classroom activities (McNaughton, 2004; Lee, Spencer & Harpalani, 2003). Teachers who are
aware of their students’ social knowledge might capitalise on students’ stance-taking behaviours
in informal social interaction and show them how similar verbal skills are applicable to formal
essay writing, which is a form of social interaction too.

Unlike stance-taking, stance support appears to be more cognitively demanding for the
students who participated in the forum. The informal setting of the online forum does not explain
the relatively low incidence of stance-support (only 55% of postings with a stance), because
studies of face-to-face, everyday argument show that even in friendly interaction where one or
more participants declare a position, evidence from personal experience is advanced to support
the position (Schiffrin, 1985). It is more likely that the absence of stance-support in so many of
the students’ postings is due to the interplay of three related factors: insufficient engagement
with the issue of discussion, inadequate topic knowledge or inability to utilise available topic
knowledge for a support function, and inexperience with the discourse acts of argumentation
such as problematizing and hypothesising.

Stein and Bernas (1999) propose that a desire to achieve personally significant goals
impels the moves in argument. A personally significant goal may be to gain the other party’s
approval or, at least, his/her understanding of one’s position. To engage in an argument, Stein
and Bernas theorise, one must care enough about the relationship with the other party or about
the topic of discussion to want to make the mental effort at generating and organising
propositions to support one’s position. The brevity of postings on most topics and the absence of
stance support in our study suggest a lack of engagement on the part of the students with the
topics raised for discussion. For some reason, the issues, although initiated by the students
themselves, did not stimulate enough interest to spur students to respond with elaborated positions. There was one exception, however, that underlines the role of personally significant goals in the planning and communication of stance support.

The exception is the question of which fighter plane the government should buy, which drew 50 postings, a relatively large number considering that a topic like “Singapore Idol” – a television talent contest – attracted only 11 postings. The fighter plane topic generated such enthusiasm in a group of students that not only did stance support flow, supporting arguments displayed sophisticated ways of thinking and arguing not seen elsewhere in the forum. Support strategies ranged from the marshalling of facts for use as evidence to more complex support moves involving hypothetical scenarios and dismissal of anticipated challenges as in this example (minimally edited) excerpted from student WL:

We should really invest in the f-14 in my opinion. Sure it costs lots more … compared to the rafale, typhoon and f-15… but seriously, nothing can fire as far… The f-14 is capable of supersonic travels of mach 2.2 which is definitely a better speed … Some argue about the factor of agility, but let it be known that the f-14 is known for winning dogfights in close air to air combat and long range interception. … supposing the enemy intends to control our air-space, they are not going to charge in loaded with short range air to air weapons.. Personally, I feel that the rafale and typhoon are new designs… they’re too new for use. What we need is a fighter that is combat proven. However, being new has its advantages, for example the new variant of the rafale … is capable of launching … Nuke missiles … which the f-14 is not configure to fire. This ability gives the new variant a fighting chance… but it definitely can’t live up to the f-14 air intercept standards.

The elaborated stance support moves in the “Fighter plane” thread of discussion suggest that avid interest in an issue and some amount of topic knowledge are factors that promote
sophisticated argument moves including the qualifying of claims, problematizing by raising potential objections to one’s own position, and creating hypothetical scenarios to prove a point. Interviews with 3 of the students who posted lengthy messages on this topic confirmed their interest in the topic of defence and war planes, an interest that they pursued by reading printed and internet sources on the subject. We might conclude that avid interest on a disputed or disputable topic spurs greater effort in argument construction, which may be accounted for by Stein and Bernas’ (1999) theory that the desire to achieve personally meaningful goals (e.g. to persuade others to accept one’s position) impels decision-making in argument.

The more complex support moves displayed in the “Fighter plane” discussion suggests that 15-year old students’ social repertoire include argument strategies such as hypothesising, anticipating and partially conceding opposing positions, and so on. The absence of these strategies in the other topics of the forum may be due to their not being activated because these other topics failed to arouse as much interest as the “Fighter plane” topic did in a group of mainly male students. If we can demonstrate to students, through a study of the students’ own successful arguments in online postings, that they are capable of stance support strategies appropriate for developing arguments in essays, their confidence as writers of expository essays might be raised. Student awareness of the applicability of their social interaction skills to formal school writing would allow teachers to build on students’ existing cognitive and genre processes to facilitate the transfer of these processes to classroom writing tasks.

Although the technical knowledge displayed in the impressive support moves in the “fighter plane” forum may suggest the importance of topic knowledge in argument, it may not be pedagogically sound to interpret it as a cue to teachers to load students with content knowledge of various topics as a pre-writing exercise. Firstly, it is not topic knowledge so much as
rhetorical deployment of knowledge that creates stance support. The student may have to engage in the cognitive processes of knowledge-transforming (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), moving repeatedly between content space and “rhetorical problem space” (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) in the work of re-selecting and re-organising relevant knowledge into a form readily recognised by the reader as stance support. Secondly, in-depth topic knowledge may not be crucial for stance-support in arguments between friends on everyday topics such as those set in general English writing classes in high school. Schriffin’s (1985) study of everyday argument shows stance-support constructed of personal experience glossed as evidence of the arguer’s position. For writing on everyday topics, what students need to be taught may be the cognitive processes that underlie the selection and transforming of personal knowledge or experience to perform stance support functions. The higher incidence of personal opinion as a stance support strategy (40 occurrences in all analysed postings) compared to personal experience (16 occurrences) suggests missed opportunities to exploit knowledge from personal experience for use in supporting arguments.

English not being the home language of many of the students participating in the forum, it may be tempting to attribute their failure to exploit the stance-support potential in personal experience to language problems. However, the fact that we could, with no difficulty, identify position statements and stance-support moves in most of the postings is ground to conclude that the students have sufficient linguistic resources to use their available knowledge to serve stance-support functions. The problem is more likely their not knowing the cognitive operations for selecting and manipulating experiential knowledge for a rhetorical purpose in argument. While the need for remedial grammar lessons to reduce errors in form and usage must be acknowledged, there is probably a greater need for lessons in the thinking processes and
discourse practices of argument, lessons that extend students’ know-how from social practices in
friendly argument to the more formal context of the expository essay. Some of the surface
structure errors may resolve themselves when language choice is driven by the socio-rhetorical
goal of convincing others of the validity of one’s position. In the “Fighter plane” postings we
observed evidence of ability to pick appropriate meaning-making lexicogrammatical forms to
realise complex stance support moves when writing was driven by a felt intention to advocate a
stance.

As expected in a mode of communication that resembles oral talk, speech-like features
abound in the postings. Two of these are discussed here for their implications for the teaching of
expository writing. The first is the reliance on preceding postings to provide the context that
enables the reader to make sense of a new posting. The dynamic nature of an online discussion
gives readers access to statements made in earlier postings to which a participant is responding.
For example, utterance 2 in the exchange below is comprehensible because the reader can easily
scroll to utterance 1.

1. We pay to study and we should have the freedom to choose [not to listen to teachers]
   …coz we pay.

2. You pay? Have you seen the receipt for your fees? [low, subsidized fees]

The writer of utterance 2 disagrees with the previous posting’s view that students can choose not
to listen to teachers because students pay to study. The disagreement can be expressed without
the writer having to call up the opposing view first, thereby simplifying the process of stance-
support through the countering of an opposing position. In the written argumentative essay,
however, the writer bears the responsibility of articulating a potential challenge to a favoured
stance before the rebuttal move. The teaching of expository writing may have to include
instruction in anticipation, articulation, and countering of opposing views, and the linguistic structures for performing these moves.

The second speech feature is the use of imperatives and minor clauses to express interpersonal meaning (*Don’t think so simple boy.* / *So what if you have the best weaponry in the world?*). While the meanings are entirely appropriate to the students’ intention to counter argue, their linguistic exponents point to the lexicogrammatical structures that students need to learn to express similar meanings in counter-argument in essay writing. Since “grammar has to interface… with the social processes we engage in” (Halliday, 2004, p.24), the structures should ideally be taught in conjunction with their discourse functions in the context of written argumentation, or they may not be easily retrieved when needed. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ interpersonal meaning</th>
<th>Structure to teach</th>
<th>Discourse function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t think so simple boy.</td>
<td>It is + evaluative lexis (<em>simplistic</em>) to + verbal/mental process (<em>to think/say</em>) + that-clause (stating opposing view)</td>
<td>Comment on opposing view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Call up opposing view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So what if you have the best weaponry in the world?</td>
<td>Noun group as clause subject + material process (indicating negative evaluation) (<em>Having the best weaponry in the world will not save us.</em>)</td>
<td>Refer to opposing view as ‘thing’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dismiss opposing view as untrue/unreasonable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The speech features in the postings underline a key finding in our study: that students have in their social repertoire the stance-taking and stance-support practices characteristic of expository essay writing. If teachers build on students’ capabilities in these practices by teaching their deployment and linguistic realisation in the written essay they may see more focused arguments in students’ essays.

7. Conclusion
The study reported in this paper investigated the stance-taking and stance-support capabilities of a group of upper secondary students participating in an online forum. The results provide reason to conclude that stance-taking and stance-support are a part of the average high school students’ repertoire of social interaction skills. Stance projection acts observed include evaluation of issues, expression of attitudinal meanings, of degree of commitment to the truth of claims, and amplification of evaluative and attitudinal meanings. Students are capable of a range of stance-support strategies though they tend to rely heavily on the “personal opinion” and “fact” strategies. More sophisticated strategies, like countering anticipated objection through hypothesized outcomes, appear to be activated by students’ enthusiastic interest in an issue about which they have some topic knowledge. One implication that may be drawn from the results is that students’ knowledge of social practices in everyday argument can be harnessed in writing lessons to initiate them into the less familiar discourse practices of the expository essay. For students whose dominant language is not English, there is a need to conduct instruction in the stance-taking and stance-support moves of written argumentation in tandem with instruction of the linguistic structures for realising the moves.

References


