ABSTRACT
Many teachers have noted that developing an argument to support a stance in an expository essay is a challenge for students. This problem deserves attention as ability to write adequately supported, focused arguments in various school subjects is the key to academic success. Taking the theoretical view that writing is simultaneously social practice and cognitive activity, this paper examines the extent to which explicit instruction in the genre practices and associated thinking processes that shape expository writing affects argument moves in student writing. Argument moves in 137 pairs of pre- and post-instruction essays
were analysed to determine the presence of stance assertion and stance support moves, and the type of stance support strategies used. Findings showed a pre- to post-instruction increase in stance assertion moves in the introduction of the essay and stance reiteration moves in the conclusion. Post-instruction essays had a larger number of stance support moves. Moves that significantly increased after instruction were explicit statements of support claim, use of personal knowledge as evidence, countering of anticipated opposing views and elaboration of support claims. The pedagogical implications of these findings will be discussed to explore the viability of moving from grammar- and topic-focused approaches to teaching expository writing to a socio-cognitive approach.

INTRODUCTION

In the Singapore education system where student assessment is mediated through written texts such as essay answers and project reports, the ability to write effective expository/argumentative texts is the key to academic success. In this paper, the term expository writing will be used to include any kind of writing, including argumentative essays, in which the writer projects a stance and supports that stance with arguments (Schleppegrell, 2004; Martin, 1989). The Singapore English Language syllabus 2001 recognises the importance of competence in expository writing and lists knowledge use skills and discourse behaviours such as giving “reasons to support a response/point of view” and identifying and applying “strategies used to influence audiences” (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.76) as targeted outcomes for Secondary 4 (the graduating class of secondary school) students.

Although English is the medium of instruction from pre-school to university in the Singapore education system, expository writing is generally acknowledged to be difficult for students (Koh, 2002; Koh, 1993). Teachers interviewed in a research project in two Singapore schools
study, of which this argument move study forms a part, reported that many of their students find expository writing difficult. The teachers tended to attribute ineffective expository essay writing to students’ inability to develop an argument logically, with one of them saying: “most students do not have the ability to … to substantiate [their] points, [and] counter-argue…”

Although teachers recognise that many students are unable to develop good arguments when writing expository essays, instruction in expository writing tends to go no further than activities to generate topic content and the provision of vocabulary lists, followed by teacher feedback on the finished essay pointing out grammatical errors and inadequacies in development. In some English composition classes, teachers may provide general advice on the quality of the finished product (e.g. You must support your thesis with arguments), but students may not have the knowledge and skill to arrive at a thesis or even recognise whether they have a thesis or just a statement of topic area.

The conventional method of providing topic content, vocabulary lists, and general exhortations may be adequate preparation for expository writing for students who, through reading and other forms of exposure to expository/argumentative text-types, are already familiar with the discourse behaviours of the genre. Less privileged students who have limited exposure to expository texts in English may need “an interventionist pedagogy” (Rothery, 1996) that makes tangible the textual practices, meaning making, and language use patterns of exposition.

A belief in an interventionist pedagogy with explicit instruction of genre practices and thinking skills is the starting point of this paper’s study of argument moves in students’
essays. The research question that guided the analysis of argument moves was whether a socio-cognitive approach to intervening in student writing would result in positive changes in stance-assertion and stance-support moves in students’ expository essays. The theoretical framework of the pedagogical intervention will be presented after the term “argument move” has been defined.

Argument Moves

An argument move is a verbal act or series of verbal acts expressing meanings aimed at accomplishing a high level social-rhetorical goal the writer has for the text being written. A writer’s high level goal in expository/argumentative writing is to support the position the writer is taking on the issue of discussion in the essay, since argument is “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). The dominant verbal acts in expository writing are stance assertion and stance support moves, both of which constitute the defining genre practices of the expository essay (Schleppegrell, 2004; Martin, 1989).

The conceptualization of argument moves was informed by Toulmin’s model of argument structure (Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1984) which provided the tool for identifying stance (writer’s position on an issue), support, and the distinction between the two. A writer’s stance on the topic of argument is, in the language of 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 facts or “grounds”, statements or “warrants” connecting fact to claim, and the source or “backing” to assert the reliability of the “warrant”. Another characteristic feature of argument, refutation of counter-arguments, may be regarded as a
move to bolster support for the writer’s overall claim (stance). 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 or position and sentences that function as stance-support.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this investigation of argument moves draws on the cognitive model of writing as well as the socio-cultural genre view of writing. The cognitive model (Hayes, 1996; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1981) views writing as a problem-solving, decision-making process, which in good writers, is directed by high level rhetorical goal. However, the cognitive activity involved in decision-making during writing must include reference to the social context in which a text is written and in which it will be read because writing always takes place in a social context.

As a social activity, writing is participation in a communicative event or genre (Paltridge, 1997; Swales, 1990) in which writer and reader interact to achieve some social goal. If the writing is effective, the social goal is attained through the performance of a pattern of generic discourse moves or practices recognised as conventional by members of the discourse community that regularly interact with each other through exemplars of the genre. Viewing texts as genre directs our attention to the “social givens” (Kress, 2003, p. 98), that is, the social functions of and the relations between writer/speaker and reader/listener that shape the text. It is this necessity to acknowledge the role of the social dimension in the cognitive processes of text production that points to the wisdom of taking a “socio-cognitive perspective” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995) of writing.
In the case of the school expository essay, a high level rhetorical goal would be the intention to influence the reader to be favourably disposed towards the writer’s stance on the issue of the essay. This intention influences the writer’s decisions about organisation, meaning selection, and language choice. At the same time the writer’s decision-making has to take into account the social context in which the writing and reading of the school expository essay typically occur. Usually written under examination or examination-like conditions, without time for library research, and not expected to exceed 500 words in length, the school essay’s genre practices vary somewhat from the valued practices of the university based academic essay or research paper. Argument moves in the school essay may include the use of personal belief as stance support, a practice likely to be frowned up in the university academic essay.

METHODOLOGY

A test-instruction-test approach was used in this study. A pre-test, in the form of an in-class essay writing task was administered followed by 14 weeks of instruction, after which students did a post-test, another essay writing task on a topic parallel to that of the pre-test. All students involved in the project received the same instruction. There was no control group as the schools involved agreed to participate in the study on the condition that all students were given the same instruction in preparation for a common end-of-semester exam.

The sections that follow describe the participants, the instructional approach and materials, and the method of data analysis.

Participants

A total of 395 Secondary 3 students from two schools in Singapore participated in this research project. The participants were from the Express and Normal Academic (NA)
From the 395 participants, 137 were randomly drawn from eight classes to be in the sample for data analysis. As English is the medium of instruction in Singapore, these students had studied and used the language in school for at least nine years. Most of these students were able to write understandable, though not always error-free sentences. As suggested in an earlier paper (Chandrasegaran, 2006), “their main problem in expository essay writing lay not so much in lack of competence in sentence-level grammar as in unfamiliarity with the discourse practices and communication strategies appropriate for the genre” (p.7).

**Instructional Approach and Materials**

A socio-cognitive perspective of writing informed the writing of the five units of instructional materials used in the project and the pedagogical method recommended to teachers. The aim of instruction was to teach explicitly the key genre practices of the school-based expository essay and the thinking skills underlying those practices (See Table).

Table 1. Instructional materials: Genre practices and cognitive processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Social (genre) practice</th>
<th>Cognitive process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Announce/indicate writer’s stance/position in introductory paragraph</td>
<td>Construct global socio-rhetorical goal of writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Justify stance with support claims (grounds for stance)</td>
<td>Evaluate and select stance support strategies with reference to global rhetorical goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Develop support claims by to convince reader of writer’s stance</td>
<td>Evaluate and select suitable details with reference to global rhetorical goal and stance support strategy chosen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Raise and counter potential opposing views</td>
<td>Anticipate alternative/opposing views; plan countering strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Maintain visibility of stance throughout essay; indicate relation between support arguments and overall stance</td>
<td>Recall global socio-rhetorical goal; relate relevance of supporting argument at paragraph level to whole-text stance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 In Singapore’s education system, placement in the Express or NA stream is determined by students’ performance in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), a national examination taken after six years of primary education. Students in the NA stream, with lower PSLE scores than students in the express stream, are generally regarded as academically weaker. Being in the NA stream, however, does not necessarily mean low English Language proficiency as a student may have been channelled to the NA stream because of low scores in subjects other than English.
Teaching/learning activities took the form of:

- Teacher-guided study of extracts of authentic texts to enable students to observe the genre practices and associated thinking listed in Table 1.
- Group activities requiring students to make composing decisions and articulate justification of decisions with reference to socio-rhetorical goals.
- Role-play activities in which students anticipate and address audience response in specific social contexts.
- Writing exercises providing practice in specific thinking skills, genre practices and associated language use.

**Analysis of Argument Moves**

The 137 pairs of essays in the sample were independently analysed and coded for argument moves by two coders. Coders were not told if the essays they were analysing were pre- or post-instruction efforts. Agreement between the two coders, measured on the Kappa Coefficient, was 0.669 which indicates a good extent of agreement based on Altman’s (1991) guidelines for interpreting Kappa values.

An essay was first rapidly read to obtain an impression of the writer’s overall stance on the issue in the essay prompt. Clauses were then examined to see if a clause performed an argument move with reference to the writer’s intended stance. Clauses that made no meaningful contribution to the projection, support and elaboration of the writer’s stance were excluded from analysis, since “…each move…serves a typical communicative intention which is always subservient to the overall communicative purpose” (Bhatia, 1993).
Argument moves found in the essays were classified as stance assertion move or stance support move. The location of initial stance assertion was noted: whether in the opening paragraph or later in the essay. Concluding paragraphs were examined for presence of a stance reiteration move. Here is an example of stance assertion moves:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Should examinations be replaced by project work?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paragraph 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>It is a good idea that projects shall replace exams…</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance assertion in introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final paragraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…<em>In conclusion, no matter the traditional style of having exams are important, it would be better if it would be replaced by projects which benefit’s students …</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance reiteration in conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Student BX4, unedited post-instruction essay]

Stance support moves were identified by meanings that can be interpreted as being a reason justifying the writer’s stance. Stance support moves were categorised according to the nature of supporting information or the discourse act performed as follows:

- State Support Claim (e.g. *Projects might be a better way of testing students’ understanding of topics than exams.*)
- Support with Personal Knowledge (including personal belief and experience; e.g. *During exams, I may panic.*)
- Support with Fact (propositions generally accepted as ‘true’ in the writer’s and reader’s discourse community; e.g. *The Minister of Education said that students should be taught less to learn more.*)
- Support with Hypothesized Outcome (e.g. *A student may fall sick on the exam day.*)
- Raise/Counter Opposing View (OV) (e.g. *Employers might think that removing exams would cause problems. They use exam results to rank people...*
who apply for jobs. .... Employers should realise that project work results also rank students on the basis of... ... 

- Elaborate Support Claim (e.g. They use exam results to rank people who apply for jobs. [from preceding example])

The number of argument moves in each category of stance assertion and stance support moves was recorded for each essay so that pre- and post-instruction performance could be compared. The McNemar’s Test for Correlated Proportions was used to check for significant changes in stance assertion behaviours after instruction. Paired t-tests were run on the stance-support move data to determine if the difference between the means in each category was statistically significant.

FINDINGS

Differences in pre- and post-instruction essays were observed in the two categories of moves: Stance assertion moves and Stance support moves.

Stance Assertion Moves

A total of 128 students took a stance in both pre- and post-instruction essays. Of these 107 (83.59%) stated their stance in the introductory paragraph following instruction compared to 74 (57.81%) who did so prior to instruction (see Table 2). The increase was found to be significant at the .05 level, McNemar $x^2 = 18.46$. (A McNemar $x^2$ value of more than 3.84 indicates significance at the .05 level, according to Glass & Hopkins (1996).)

Table 2. Location of stance statement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position of stance</th>
<th>Pre-instruction (n =128)</th>
<th>Post-instruction (n =128)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of students</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>57.81</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Later in essay 54  42.19  21  16.41

Reiteration of stance in the conclusion also increased after instruction (see Table 3). Of the 128 students with a stance in both pre- and post-instruction essays, 103 (80.47%) had a stance reiteration move in the concluding paragraph in their post-instruction essay, a significant increase from the 79 (61.72%) before instruction, McNemar \( x^2 = 11.52 \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stance reiteration in conclusion</th>
<th>Pre-instruction (n =128)</th>
<th>Post-instruction (n =128)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of students</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance reiteration present</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>61.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance reiteration absent</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>38.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Stance Support Moves

There were more stance support moves in the post-instruction essays. A paired samples t-test showed a significant increase in all stance support moves from a pre-instruction mean of 10.77 to a post-instruction mean of 14.59, \( t = -6.688, \) df = 136, \( p<.001 \) (see Table 4). The eta squared value (0.25) indicated a large effect size\(^2\). As shown in Table 4, the following support moves were significantly more frequent in post-instruction essays:

- State Support Claim
- Elaborate Support Claim
- Support with Personal Knowledge (i.e. personal beliefs and experience)

\(^2\) Effect sizes give an indication of the strength of the relationship between the instructional approach and the parameter being measured. Effect sizes here and throughout this paper are determined in accordance with Cohen’s (1988) guidelines for interpreting eta squared values, with .01 being the cut-off point for a small effect, .06 being the cut-off point for a moderate effect and .14 being the cut-off point for a large effect.
Raise/Counter OV (opposing view)

Moves that explicitly stated a support claim rose from a pre-instruction mean of 1.58 to a post-instruction mean of 2.04. Moves that raised and addressed anticipated opposing views rose from a mean of 1.45 (pre-instruction) to a mean of 2.24 (post-instruction).

Table 4. Stance support moves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stance support moves</th>
<th>All students (n = 137; df = 136)</th>
<th>Pre-instruction mean</th>
<th>Post-instruction mean</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>eta squared value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All stance support moves</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.77</td>
<td>14.59</td>
<td>t = -6.688***</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Support Claim</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>t = -2.972**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with Personal Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>5.96</td>
<td>t = -5.498***</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with Fact</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>t = -1.948</td>
<td>+NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with Hypo Outcome</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>t = -.231</td>
<td>+NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise/Counter Opposing View</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>t = -2.781**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborate Support Claim</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>6.94</td>
<td>t = -6.427***</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p ≤ .05
** p ≤ .01
*** p ≤ .001
+ No eta squared value because of non-significant difference

Table 5. Stance support moves by stream

Normal Academic (NA) stream students showed improvement comparable to, and occasionally slightly better than, that of Express stream students (Table 5). The increase in the number of Support with Fact moves was significant in the NA group but not in the Express stream group. The degree of post-instruction increase in all stance support moves and in elaboration moves was a little higher in the NA group, possibly because the pre-instruction counts for all support moves tended to be lower for the NA stream (see Table 5).
The higher degree of improvement in the NA stream was more obvious in School N where the teachers were more positive about attending regular discussions with the researchers. As can be seen in Table 6, NA students in School N showed significant gains in State Support Claim and Raise/Counter OV moves. Both of these moves did not register a significant increase when the data for NA stream in both schools were combined (Table 5). The mean number of Raise/Counter OV moves for NA students in School N, for instance, rose significantly from 1.63 (pre-instruction) to 3.40 (post-instruction) with a large effect size of 0.24, whereas the increase was non-significant in the NA group as a whole.

Table 6. Stance support moves: Normal Academic students in School N

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stance support moves</th>
<th>Pre-instruction mean</th>
<th>Post-instruction mean</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Eta squared value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All stance support moves</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>16.53</td>
<td>t = -4.970***</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

### Table 6: Stance support moves: Normal Academic students in School N

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stance support moves</th>
<th>Express Stream (n=70; df=69)</th>
<th>Normal Academic (n=67; df=66)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-instruc</td>
<td>Post-instru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All support moves</td>
<td>12.24</td>
<td>15.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Support Claim</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with Personal Knowledge</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>7.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with Fact</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with Hypothesised Outcome</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise/Counter OV</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborate Support Claim</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>7.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p ≤ .05  
** p ≤ .01  
*** p ≤ .001
State Support Claim 1.63 2.33 t = -2.041*  0.13
Support with Personal Knowledge 2.53 4.40 t = -2.234*  0.15
Support with Fact 1.907 2.948 t = -1.758 +NA
Support with Hypo Outcome 2.43 3.87 t = -1.613 +NA
Raise/Counter OV 1.63 3.40 t = -3.012**  0.24
Elaborate Support Claim 4.30 7.50 t = -4.983***  0.46

* p ≤ .05
** p ≤ .01
*** p ≤ .001
+ No eta squared value because of non-significant difference

DISCUSSION

The increase, post-instruction, of incidence of stance assertion in the introduction section of essays, stance reiteration in the conclusion, and certain support moves suggests an enhanced awareness of the argument/persuasion requirement of school expository essays following instruction in thinking strategies associated with the main genre practices of expository writing. The gains are significant enough to merit a closer look at how a socio-cognitive approach to writing instruction might modify students’ composing behaviours could have led to improvement in students’ arguments. Since the instructional materials used in the project taught thinking operations underlying genre practices in expository writing, this discussion will focus on what the findings may indicate of the students’ mental and attitudinal posturing during the writing process. Based on the changes in stance assertion behaviours (such as reiteration of stance in the conclusion) and the gains in stance support moves like State/Elaborate Support Claim and Raise Opposing View the writing process appears to have been more goal-directed in the post instruction essays. At the same time, these same findings suggest that instruction in the main discourse practices of the English essay genre has
contributed to some success in the learning of essay genre practices such as stating writer stance in the introduction, reiterating it in the conclusion, and addressing anticipated opposing or alternate views.

The higher frequency in post-instruction essays of certain stance support moves may indicate the presence and influence of a rhetorical goal in the students’ composing process. A rhetorical goal, in the context of the school expository essay, is an intention at the global level of the essay to argue a position, employing supporting evidence with the aim of persuading readers to accept that position as valid (Schleppegrell, 2004). Research in the cognitive processes of writing has demonstrated that the composing process of skilled writers is driven by high level goals which influence the choice of content such that coherence in the text is achieved (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Atwell, 1980 cited in Kucer, 2005). The students in our project learnt in the very first unit of the instructional materials to form a rhetorical goal stating their response to the issue in the essay topic and its social context. In subsequent lessons they did exercises to practise using rhetorical goals to decide on support strategies and to justify selection or rejection of information content for an essay. It is highly likely that this training in goal-directed thinking resulted in students writing with more conscious attention to arguing their position. The possibility of heightened awareness of a rhetorical goal in post-instruction composing is borne out by the significant increase in State Support Claims moves from a mean of 1.58 in pre-instruction essays to 2.04 post-instruction.

The gains from explicit instruction in goal-directed thinking accord with the results of other studies on the effect of teaching cognitive operations in writing (Yeh, 1998; Chandrasegaran & Yeo, 2006). In Yeh’s study, middle-school students who were explicitly taught heuristics for thinking about the process of argument construction showed higher gains in argument
development and voice than students who were not the heuristics. Chandrasegaran & Yeo (2006) report improvement in narrative writing following explicit instruction in rhetorical goal setting and the use of the rhetorical goal as a reference point in the selection of meaning and language for character depiction. The improvements resulting from the teaching of thinking processes in Yeh (1998) and Chandrasegaran & Yeo (2006) give reason to believe that the increase in stance support moves in the post-instruction essays in the current study can be attributed to the instruction.

Stance support moves that showed notable gains after instruction were: State Support Claim, Elaborate Support Claim, Support with Personal Knowledge, and Raise/Counter OV (Opposing View). The increase in the frequency of these moves suggests that identifying genre practices and their underlying thinking processes for explicit teaching can result in effective learning of those practices, which then produces improved writing. The thinking processes taught in this study were the mental heuristics for selecting support strategies and details, and for anticipating and addressing potential opposing or alternative views. Since the activities for practising thinking skills were always situated in social contexts that were plausible to Singapore students, the social interaction dimension of writing could have been an influencing factor in the post-instruction writing, thus accounting for the increase in the support moves listed above. Mere imitation of the expected moves could also lead to an increase. However, imitation without real learning can be discounted because the pre- and post-instruction essay topics did not figure in any of the exercises for practising thinking. Students had to apply the thinking skills to generate the expected discourse moves for a writing prompt they had not written on before. The literature on genre-based approaches to teaching writing tends to view the discourse practices of a genre as patterns which students are expected to reproduce after observing such behaviours and their linguistic realisation in
the deconstruction stage of the teaching-learning cycle (e.g. Veel, 2006). Students are assumed to be capable of the cognitive operations involved in generating the patterns and associated lexicogrammar. The gains observed in the current study may be the case for advocating the teaching of thinking alongside the teaching of genre practices and generic structure of texts.

It is noteworthy that the NA (Normal Academic) stream students participating in this study showed as much improvement as the express stream students. For some argument moves, the improvement in the NA stream was more pronounced than in the Express stream especially in School N where the teachers maintained a positive attitude towards a socio-cognitive approach to teaching writing. NA students in School N made significant gains in nearly all stance support moves, with particularly impressive improvement in Elaborate Support Claim and Raise/Counter OV moves (Table 6). NA stream students are generally perceived as less academically inclined and less successful than their Express stream counterparts. The higher gains achieved by NA students in elaboration and counter-argument moves in this study suggest that lower achieving students may benefit more from explicit instruction of genre practices and thinking skills. Lower achieving students probably have a greater need for explicit description of genre practices and cognitive operations for performing those practices because their out-of-school literacy environments offer few opportunities for contact with and participation in academic-like expository genres. Lower achieving students’ need for explicit instruction in school and workplace genres was the premise for the “explicit approach to describing text” and the resulting genre-based pedagogy in the “Write it Right” project and the Disadvantaged Schools Program in Australia (Veel, 2006). Previous research has found that lack of adequate exposure to genres like letter and story results in inability to identify and produce characterising features of those genres among children (Spinillo & Pratt, 2005). It is
likely that lower achieving students like the NA students in our study begin a writing programme with a smaller store of genre knowledge and less developed thinking skills than their higher scoring schoolmates. Hence, explicit instruction in genre acts and thinking would benefit the latter to a greater extent.

The positive changes in stance assertion and stance support moves in the post-instruction essays provide ground for belief in the value of articulating for students the criterial genre practices and thinking processes involved in producing the school expository essay. That the gains in argument moves were achieved after about 4 months of weekly lessons is reason to expect that the results are likely to be better with a longer period of sustained, systematic instruction in genre practices and the cognitive strategies for producing those genre practices.

CONCLUSION

The question posed at the beginning of this paper was whether a socio-cognitive approach to instruction would positively affect secondary school students’ construction of arguments in expository essays. The research findings revealed a significant improvement in the organisation and enactment of argument moves in essays written following the programme of instruction. There was a significant increase in number of students announcing their position in the introduction and reiterating it in the conclusion. Improvement in supporting arguments was indicated by increased frequency of explicit statement of support claims, elaboration of claims, and the support strategies of employment of personal knowledge as ground for claims and the countering of anticipated opposing views. These encouraging results suggest that teaching topic-independent discourse practices and thinking skills may be a more effective means of preparing students for expository essay writing than the usual pre-writing activities of topic-content generation and listing of topic-related vocabulary.
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