APPLYING A SOCIO-COGNITIVE MODEL TO THE
TEACHING OF EXPOSITORY WRITING.

PAPER 1: FROM THEORY TO INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT

The conventional method of teaching expository writing in Singapore schools tends to be limited to suggesting topic content and providing a list of words relevant to the topic. This end-product focused teaching approach has not always been as effective as desired because many students are unable to use the content and vocabulary appropriately in their essay. Two alternative approaches to writing instruction are the cognitive and the social models which, respectively, view writing as a decision-making, problem solving activity (Flower & Hayes, 1981) and as meaning-making social activity (Halliday, 2004; Street, 2001). This paper presents an attempt to integrate the two models in a socio-cognitive framework for guiding the planning of learning activities and the writing of instructional materials in a research project to teach expository writing in two Singapore Secondary Schools. The paper begins by arguing for the pedagogical application of a theoretical view of school-based expository essay writing as a set of genre practices that issue from socio-culturally situated thinking processes. How a social cum cognitive model translates into classroom texts and activities that explicitly teach genre practices and associated thinking processes will be demonstrated with excerpts from the instructional materials written for the research project. The discussion section of the paper addresses some of the problems encountered in realizing a socio-cognitive model in materials design and in aligning teachers’ classroom behaviours with the model.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to “Give reasons to support a response/ point of view” and “Identify and apply strategies used to influence audiences” (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.76) in school-based expository writing is the key to success in the Singapore educational system that relies on the
production of written texts (essays answers, project reports) as a means of assessment. For many teachers, teaching expository writing consists of suggesting topic content, providing a list of words relevant to the topic, correcting grammar mistakes and commenting on developmental flaws in the final product. This topic content- and error-focused approach may help students who, through reading and other forms of exposure to expository/argumentative genres, are already familiar with the ways of language use and verbal behaviours of exposition and argumentation. Less fortunate students may need “an interventionist pedagogy” (Rothery, 1996) that makes tangible the language use patterns, meaning creation, and discourse practices of exposition and discussion in academic settings.

The expository writing research project (Project No. CRP5/04 AC) aims to raise teacher awareness of the need to teach explicitly discourse practices associated with exposition genres by involving a group of teachers in trialling a socio-rhetorical approach to writing instruction. Learning activities and materials will be devised to help students develop formal variants suitable for school-based expository writing. At the same time the cognitive rhetorical processes, socio-cultural verbal practices, and associated linguistic forms of selected expository genres will be explicitly taught. Post-instruction writing will be analysed for evidence of developmental changes in the direction of greater awareness of the discourse and linguistic conventions of expository genres.

The theoretical framework that guided the planning of the instructional materials is a socio-cognitive framework that draws on two theoretical perspectives on writing:

1. The cognitive model of writing.
2. The social view of writing.

The cognitive model of writing sees writing as problem solving, goal setting, and decision making activities that play out in the mind of the writer as he/she plans, translates thought to print, and revises. Flower and Hayes (1981) explain that at the beginning of composing, writers start with defining the rhetorical problem of writing the particular piece of text. With the problem, the writer creates a hierarchical network of guiding goals that help to direct the development of the text. Good writers are directed by high level rhetorical goals (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Hayes, 1996) that “give direction and coherence” to the moves made in writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p.379). Writers also develop sub-goals which give “concrete meaning” (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 381) to their top-level goals. In the case of expository writing, a high level rhetorical goal could be the intention to influence the reader to be favourably disposed towards the writer’s stance while sub-goals could be the stance support strategies that the writers have in support for their stance. If the writer’s overall stance is a reference point for decision making during writing, we can expect the writer to create a hierarchy of high level and sub-goals in his/her mind to guide his/her writing, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: High level goal and sub-goals at three levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High level goal:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To argue that euthanasia should not be legalised</td>
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<th>Sub-goal 1:</th>
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<tr>
<td>To explain that if euthanasia is legalised, the aged sick may be tacitly pressured into opting for death.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Support for sub-goal 1:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence of reported cases in the Netherlands where euthanasia is legal</td>
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The social view of writing sees writing as social interaction. Learning to write is, therefore, a process of socialisation into the cultural norms and practices of the writing community. As a social activity, writing is participation in a communicative event or genre (Paltridge, 1997; Swales, 1990) for the purpose of accomplishing 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.

The goal-setting and decision-making activities in writing cannot be divorced from the social context in which a text is written and in which it will be read. The goals a writer sets for unfolding a text is shaped by and has to respond to the writer’s and reader’s social-cultural context (Kern, 2000). The thinking operations that guide the writing have to take into account the socio-cultural norms of the writer and reader. Hence the cognitive theory of writing later develops into one that takes into account the socio-cultural dimension of writing (see Kern, 2000; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Flowers, 1994). This synthesis of the social and cognitive views of writing (in short, socio-cognitive view of writing) thus considers writing not only as goal setting and decision making activities that play out in the mind of the writer as he/she plans, translates thought to print, and revises (Flower, 1994; Flower & Hayes, 1981), but also a social act which involves adherence to conventional practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts (Kern, 2000). This social-cognitive approach is the theoretical ground that informed the designing of the instruction received by the students in this study.
Expository writing instruction based on a synthesis of the cognitive and social views of writing focuses not just on surface features of linguistic and organisational structures but also, and primarily, on the discourse conventions of the expository genre. Teaching the discourse conventions of the expository genre would include teaching the discourse practices (e.g. indicating stance in the introductory paragraph), the ways of thinking that generate these practices, and the language for realising the discourse practices. The aim of such a teaching approach is to raise “students’ awareness of the conventions within which they are expected to write and [help] students to add these conventions to their linguistic and rhetorical repertoires” (Curry and Lillis, 2003, p. 12).

**TRANSLATING SOCIO-COGNITIVE THEORY INTO INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS**

This section explains how a social cum cognitive theoretical view of writing is realised in pedagogical texts and classroom activities for teaching the school expository essay. Five units of lesson materials were written to be used for a semester’s composition lessons. The design of the materials was guided by the objective of encouraging students to engage in goal-directed thinking during writing and to incorporate in that thinking an awareness of the social-cultural context of the writing task.

The basic principle of Flower and Hayes’ cognitive process model of writing (1981), that writing is a problem-solving, decision-making activity directed by a rhetorical goal, provided the premise for instruction, in the first lesson unit, in the setting of rhetorical goals. However, goal setting was taught, not purely as a mental heuristic, but situated in the construction of the social situation of the essay prompt. The concept of rhetorical goal was explained to students as their
personal response, in their role as writer, to the exigencies of the social situation containing the writing task. Exercises to practise goal setting required students to first create the social context by describing possible preceding events that made the writing necessary, the identity, expectations and attitude of the reader, the writer’s persona and relationship with the reader, and so on. Thus, the cognitive and social constructivist models of writing were integrated, as depicted in Figure 1 below, to provide the foundation for teaching socially situated thinking as a first step to improving writing.

Figure 1. Integration of cognitive and social models of writing

Cognitive model:
Writing is response to a rhetorical problem, guided by a rhetorical goal

Classroom activity:
Construct the social context of the essay topic/task; write a goal statement to show your response to the situation

Social constructivist model
Writing as a social interaction activity, shaped by social context.

The integration of cognitive and social views of writing was applied in group activities requiring students to practise goal-directed thinking to select meanings for performing the genre practice of elaborating and justifying the writer’s position in the essay. Goal directed thinking was taught
for selection of support strategies (e.g. Use Fact, Cite Authority, etc.) and selection of meanings for stance development. For example to teach goal-directed thinking in meaning selection, groups of students were given a list of information items on a topic and instructed to select items that could be used to support a given position statement (See Figure 2). In the class discussion following the group activity, groups were called upon to justify their group’s decisions with reference to the rhetorical goal reflected in the position statement. This activity trains students in the cognitive dimension of the writing process. In commenting on the group’s decisions, the teacher would repeatedly draw student attention to the writer’s whole-text intention with respect to the reader (rhetorical goal) and features of the social context that would influence choice of meaning. To nudge students towards an understanding of writing as socially situated, teacher talk would guide student thinking to considerations of appropriateness or otherwise of students’ choice of meaning with reference to the target reader’s potential response, writer role, social function of the text, and so on. The pedagogical objective was always to develop systematic thinking processes that include awareness of the social-cultural dimension of a writing task.

Figure 2. Group activity for practising goal-directed thinking

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<th>Activity 3.2 Does it support my position?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Essay topic: Should wearing the school uniform be made voluntary and not compulsory?</td>
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Your group will get a position on the above topic and two items of information. Discuss:

1. Should W (the writer) choose each of these items to support her position in her essay?
2. If the group’s answer is ‘Yes’, explain the function of the item. How will the item persuade R (the reader) to agree with W’s position?
   
   If your answer is ‘No’, explain why the item should be left out. Practise the goal-centred method of thinking you learnt above.
   
   Write your answers down. Your teacher will ask you to share your answers with the whole class.

[An example is given to illustrate above instructions]

…..  …..  …..
[Each group will get one of the following positions:]

Position A: Wearing the school uniform should be compulsory because it creates a sense of identity and is convenient.
Position B: Wearing the school uniform should be voluntary because it stifles creativity and can be inconvenient

[Each group gets two items of information like these:]  
1. ...saves time... no need to spend hours deciding what to wear, ... what top to match with a pair of pants or a skirt  
2. ... students of different races can wear clothes of their ethnic group... Students learn about other races ...  
3. ... etc. ...

The thinking skills of rhetorical goal setting and goal-referenced meaning selection were taught with the aim of enabling students to perform the main genre practices of school-based expository essay writing. These genre practices were presented to students in the instructional materials as:

- State writer’s position on the issue in opening paragraph  
- Support writer position  
- Develop support with relevant detail  
- Raising and countering opposing views  
- Maintain visibility of writer’s position in body paragraphs  
- Reiterate position in concluding paragraph.

These genre practices were not merely explicitly described to students through deconstruction of texts, as recommended in the literature on genre-based pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Following deconstruction, in which teacher questions directed student attention to instances of a genre practice in authentic texts, learning activities were conducted to train students in the thinking processes and mental posturing involved in enacting the genre practice. For countering
of opposing views, for example, role play activities had students assuming the writer role and various roles in the target audience and articulating views opposed to the writer’s position. The thinking processes involved in the role play included anticipation of audience response and prediction of potential resistance to writer’s message. Imagination was also called into play as students in a role had to consider if an objection or opposing view suggested in their group was plausible for their role (e.g. whether a national service man or a Singaporean mother of teenage daughters would be more likely to object to national service for girls on grounds of safety). Strategies of countering opposing view were presented to students with labels that reminded them of the thinking they should engage, for example: Imagine what would happen if…; True, but it’s not relevant; Can we trust the person who said this? etc.

While a genre-based approach to teaching writing equips students with knowledge of the discourse behaviours, organisation schema and language features for generating an instance of a genre, students also need instruction in the ways of thinking responsible for the realisation of those discourse behaviours. The cognitive dimension of writing was perhaps never meant to be omitted in the sociocultural genre view of writing. The sociocultural perspective of language use, according to Kostouli (2005), “may be traced back to Vygotsky’s (1978) work, which asserted the inseparability of language, cognition, and context”(p.3). The instructional materials described in this section demonstrate one way of marrying the genre and cognitive models of writing to produce learning activities for developing competence in expository essay writing.
REFERENCES


