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Enhancing Thinking Skills in Reading and Writing

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GENRE ANALYSIS AND ITS USE AS A TOOL OF INSTRUCTION

Genre analysis is a technique of identifying conventional aspects of language use within a text. For pedagogical purposes, it is useful to identify the various genres that students are likely to encounter in their reading and writing. In addition, it is also useful to highlight specific lexico-grammatical features/structures and expressions associated with each genre for instructional purposes (Bhatia 1993). These genres (Swales 1985, 1990) or text patterns are usually highly structured with constraints on:

- the communicative purpose(s) that it is intended to fulfil;
- a conventionalized internal structure that is known to specialist members of the professional or academic community that use these genres and
- the use of specific lexico-grammatical features/structures and expressions typically associated with it (Bhatia 1993).

Genre analysis can serve as a useful tool of instruction if teachers are aware of the various genres that are inherent in the print and non-print materials that their students are likely to encounter in their everyday life and their academic studies. Analysis of the demands of the type of reading materials students normally encounter and the requirements demanded of their writing tasks demonstrate the need for various genres, namely, narrative, descriptive, expository or argumentative. (See Paulston & Bruder 1976 for Lafene's classification of the major types of writing.)

In narrative discourse, students are usually required to relate a sequence of events in chronological order. In descriptive writing, they are required to describe an object, a place, a person or an activity. In expository discourse, they are required to make an explanation of some sort and may do so by means of definition, classification, interpretation or evaluation. In argumentative discourse, the speaker/writer generally

attempts to present a case and to persuade the listener/reader regarding his/her point of view. It is to be noted that overlaps between genres may occur. For example, descriptive writing may include some narration or even exposition. Whatever the overlap, the speaker's/writer's main purpose is clearly identifiable.

Research has shown that students' reading comprehension and writing skills are enhanced by teaching them about top-level rhetorical organization of text or genre analysis. Meyer (1982) and Carrell (1984) demonstrated that students' recall of the contents of texts (including main ideas and supporting details) and their comprehension of reading passages improved when they made use of text structure in their recall. Five different types of expository text structure which affected reading comprehension were identified, namely, causation, comparison, problem/solution, description, and time-order (Meyer 1982).

Reppen's (1994/1995) pilot study of an ESL instructional unit which combined integrated language arts activities, direct instruction on different genre forms, and writing process approaches demonstrated that instruction focusing on language use and genres requiring different ways of organizing information as well as explicit practice and guided support enhanced students' awareness of different ways of constructing texts and improved their chances of experiencing success in school where reading and writing skills are emphasized.

SEMANTIC MAPPING AS A THINKING TOOL IN READING AND WRITING

Direct instruction on different genres can be effectively carried out by teaching students to apply semantic mapping in both reading and writing. Semantic mapping is a strategy in which information is categorically structured in graphic/visual form. Although semantic mapping is not new (terms such as semantic webbing, semantic networking or plot maps have been used previously to refer to semantic mapping), its value to reading has only recently been recognized as a consequence of an increased understanding of the importance of prior knowledge in the reading process (Heimlich & Pittelman 1986).

Recent research has confirmed that semantic mapping is an effective instructional strategy commonly applied to general vocabulary and comprehension instruction. The effectiveness of semantic mapping as an instructional strategy for teaching vocabulary has been documented

(Toms-Bronowski 1983; Pittelman, Levin, & Johnson 1985). Johnson, Pittelman, Toms-Bronowski & Levin (1984) found that semantic mapping was an effective pre-reading strategy and facilitated reading comprehension in fourth grade students. Jones (1984) who replicated a portion of the study by Johnson et. al. (1984) with Black inner-city fifth graders also concluded that semantic mapping had a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition and comprehension of expository texts.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING THINKING SKILLS IN READING AND WRITING

APPLYING GENRE ANALYSIS

Here are some useful strategies for teaching students to apply genre analysis in reading comprehension and writing.

1. Teach students to identify the genres that they require in reading and writing: narrative, descriptive, expository or argumentative and help them associate these genres with specific communicative intents.
2. Present students with materials (reading passages and texts for listening comprehension) that are good examples of the particular genre and that are structured based on a particular organization pattern and include the language items (grammar, cohesion and vocabulary) typical of the genre.
3. Help students to identify these characteristic features in the reading passages: organization pattern/structure, typical language items and vocabulary used in a particular genre such as chronological order, spatial order, classification, shift of focus, logical order, ranking order and balance of contrasts. (It is to be noted that this list is, by no means, exhaustive and that different terms have been used to refer to these organization structures.)
4. Provide ample and varied exercises to guide students to practise using these organization structures and language items in their own writing, for example, in writing topic/supporting sentences and in writing introductions/conclusions.
5. Provide independent practice to enhance mastery of the organization pattern, linguistic and cohesive devices as well as the vocabulary items associated with a specific genre.

6. Have students apply the organization structure and related vocabulary/language items/cohesive devices to a variety of texts and tasks.
7. Point out and teach combinations of organization structures only when students have mastered the basic organization structures.

APPLYING SEMANTIC MAPPING

Semantic mapping strategies facilitate thinking skills and are appropriate for teaching the genres that students are likely to encounter in their reading and writing. In vocabulary development, for example, the following procedure is appropriate. The procedure — an adaptation (Heimlich & Pittelman 1986; pp. 5-6) of that suggested by Johnson & Pearson (1984; pp. 12-13) is further adapted to illustrate how teachers can use semantic mapping for teaching specific genres and vocabulary characteristic of the genres.

1. Choose a word or topic related to the genre focused on.
2. List the word on a large chart or on the chalkboard.
3. Encourage students to think of as many words as they can that are related to the selected key word and then to list the words by categories on a sheet of paper.
4. Students are then asked to share the lists they have prepared orally and all the words are written on the class map in categories.
5. The joint effort of the class might resemble Figure 1.
6. Students can gain further practice in classification by labelling the categories on the semantic map.

In addition to vocabulary development, semantic mapping is a good alternative to traditional pre- and post-reading activities. As a pre-reading activity, this procedure helps to activate the students' prior knowledge of the topic and to focus on relevant concepts and ideas, thereby preparing them to comprehend, assimilate and evaluate the information in the material to be read (Heimlich & Pittelman 1986). As a post-reading activity, semantic mapping helps the students to re-focus on the main ideas presented in the reading material.

Semantic mapping is effective with different categories of reading materials, including reading of content material typically found in

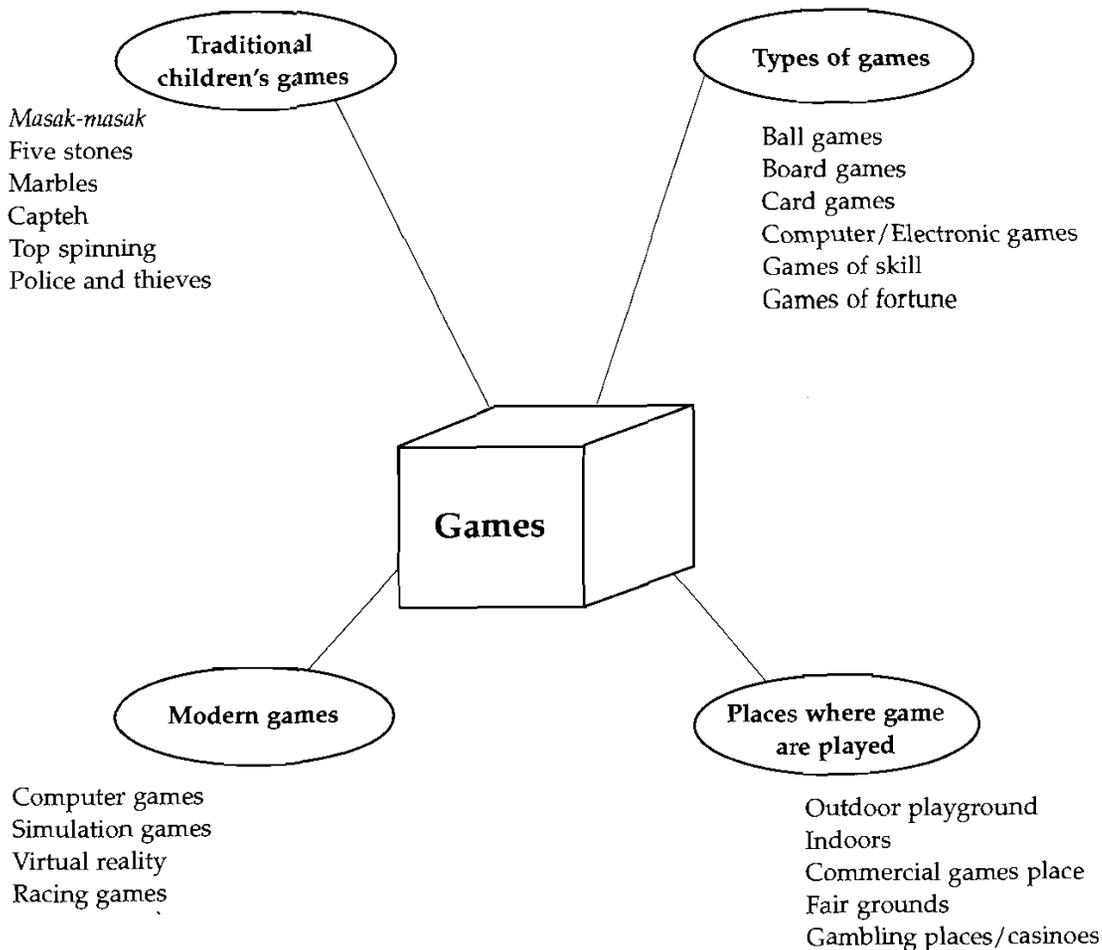


Figure 1: Semantic Mapping

textbooks. A semantic mapping strategy employed as a study skill to guide the reading of textbook material (Hanf 1971), described in Heimlich and Pittelman (1986; p. 8) is adapted for teaching students a particular genre in the following example:

- **Identifying the main idea** : Have students identify the main idea which is written on a sheet of paper. An appropriate shape is drawn around the main idea. Ask students to think of all they already know about the topic and predict what they expect to find in the passage or chapter. Next, ask students to write three or four questions about the topic on the other side of the map.
- **Secondary categories** : Before reading the text, ask students to hypothesize what the basic parts of the chapter/passage will be and then skim the text to check accuracy of their hypotheses. Students are asked to write secondary categories on the map, organizing them around the main idea. (Question marks after each category label indicate to the students what information they should be reading for.)

- **Supporting details** : Students then read the text for details and complete the map by adding the details from memory. (In this way, the map provides immediate feedback about whether students should reread the text to add more information to any of the categories.)

A completed study map for the topic is presented in Figure 2.

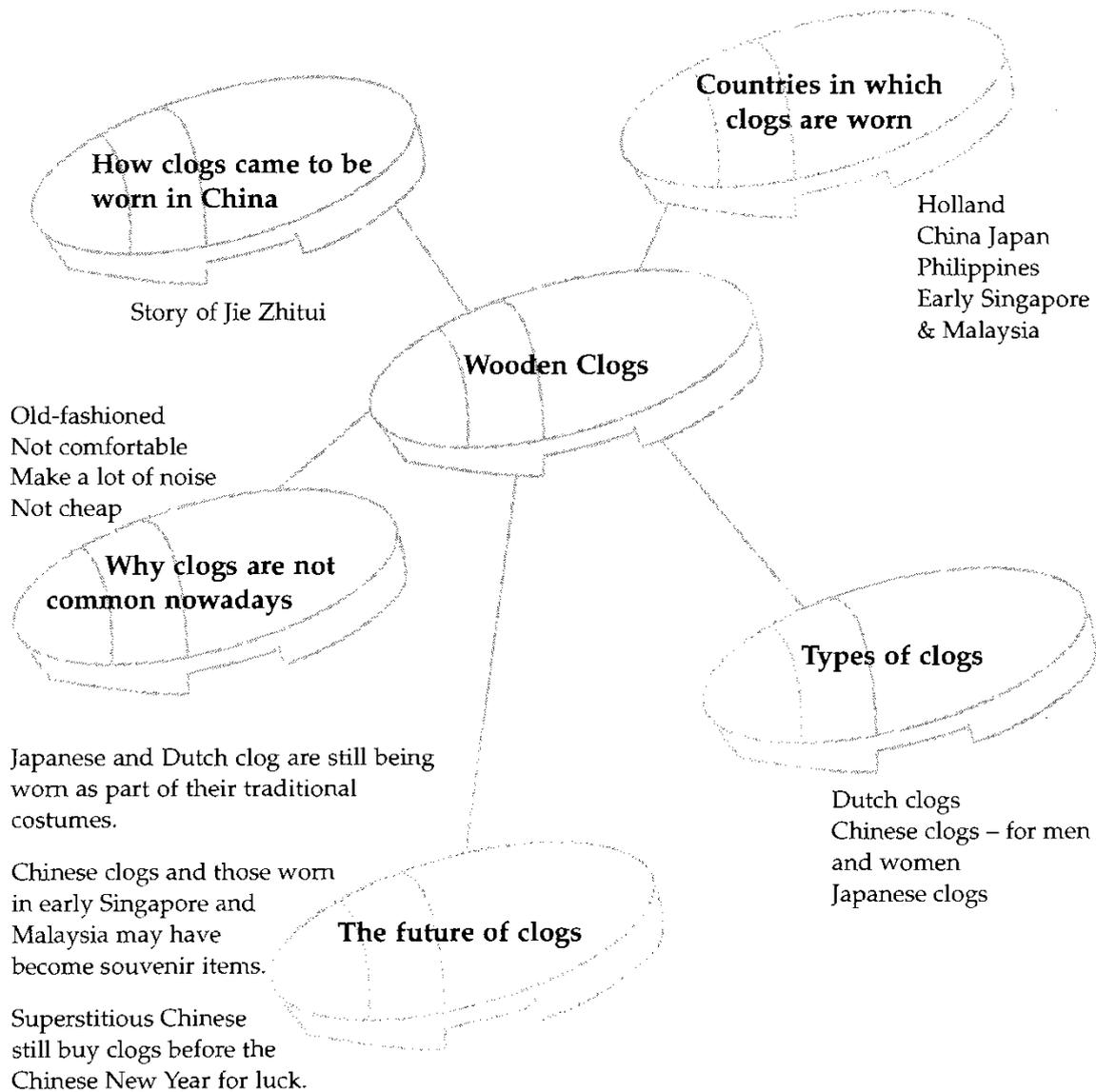


Figure 2: A Study Map

Semantic mapping is also effective as a pre-writing strategy. As an instructional strategy to teach writing in a specific genre, the semantic mapping process is used to meet the following objectives:

- Identify information related to a topic of interest.
- Identify main ideas and supporting details relevant to the topic.

- Organize prior knowledge onto a semantic map.
- Write paragraphs from the completed map.

The procedures described in Heimlich and Pittelman (1986; pp. 34-37) are adapted for use with a particular genre to be taught.

1. Ask students to think of a topic of high personal interest. Students write this topic in the centre of a large paper and circle it.
2. Ask students what they know about the topic. By means of discussion, elicit the main ideas and supporting details. List the main ideas as category headings and the supporting details as the information listed under the categories. Write each major category and its details in a different colour to facilitate paragraph writing later.
3. Review the information on the map. Discuss the information listed as main ideas and supporting details for each major category. Ask students to rewrite the information in complete sentences.

Figure 3 illustrates an example of a semantic map used as a pre-writing activity.

CONCLUSION

In meeting the challenge of implementing a syllabus based on a thematic and whole language approach (Lim 1996), together with the current emphasis on developing thinking skills, English language teachers need to select materials and activities and apply instructional strategies that will enhance thinking skills in reading and writing. Instructional strategies applying semantic mapping procedures in teaching particular genres may be the key to enhancing students' academic performance by improving their ability to apply thinking skills in reading and writing.

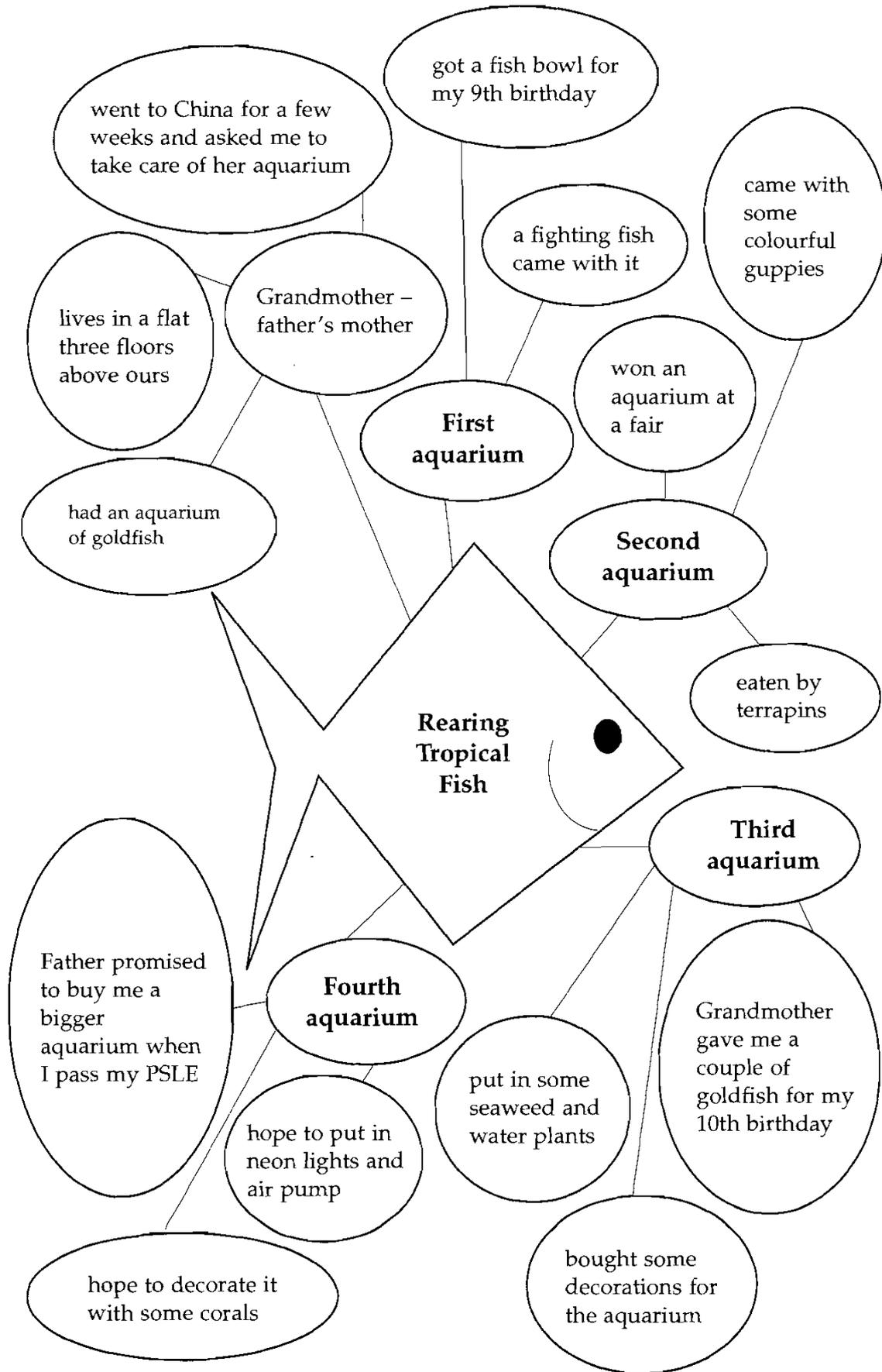


Figure 3: A Semantic Map Drawn during a Pre-writing Activity

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