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

PAPER 3: A PEDAGOGY FOR SHAPING STUDENT
THINKING AND GENRE PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reiterates the issues and problems of the teaching and writing of expository essays in Singapore secondary schools and argues for a socio-cognitive view of language which links language to its cultural context. Such a view of language (Halliday, 1985, 2004) shows how different communities in the culture will use language in different ways. More specifically, the paper will provide pedagogic scaffolds which will assist students to help shape writing with an understanding of the cultural practices that embed writing. The paper is in two parts. The first provides a pedagogic framework for writing as a social practice. Using the Curriculum Cycle (Callaghan and Knapp, 1989) the paper will discuss the social contextual dimensions of writing an expository text: the field, the tenor and the mode. The role of the teacher and the student will be tracked through the three phases of the pedagogic framework, the modeling, the joint-construction and the independent stages. Some activities for explicit instruction, joint negotiation of meaning and independent instruction will be discussed. The second part of the paper will draw from some Singapore classroom practices to demonstrate the kind of instructional scaffolding provided by the teacher for shaping student thinking and genre practice in line with the social contextual dimensions of expository writing. Implications of the pedagogical approach documented will be discussed from the teacher's perspective. The viability of adopting the approach to help students gain mastery in the control of other school genres will also be explored.
INTRODUCTION

A question many English Language teachers ask is: How can I help my students improve in expository/argumentative essay writing? This paper aims to provide an answer by examining the pedagogic scaffolds adopted in a socio-cognitive instructional approach (Project No. CRP5/04 AC) designed specifically to teach students the social conventions and underlying thinking processes of expository writing.

In spite of views stressing that the teaching of grammar in isolation has little impact on improving student writing (Brindley and Schneider, 2002; Hillocks, 1986), pedagogical practices in Singapore continue to focus on grammar and generation of topic-content in the teaching of expository writing without relating language and content to the context in which the writing takes place. What appears to be missing in the current approach are scaffolds enabling students to mentally construct the social context of expository writing and to use this thinking to manipulate language and content knowledge in a way that generates essays aligned with the genre conventions that enact this context. As one teacher puts forth aptly,

“…I find that the brainstorming [of ideas] part is still very essential, but what’s even more important is later on, when we scaffold them to put these interesting views into a piece of expository writing.” (Teacher B)

Coupling the theoretical frameworks of Callaghan and Knapp’s (1989, 1993) curriculum cycle with Halliday’s (1985, 2004) notion of register or the interaction of field, tenor and mode in a social contextual setting, we examine a series of pedagogic scaffolds aimed at
aligning student thinking and genre practice with the social contextual dimensions of expository writing. Instead of teaching grammar and content knowledge in isolation, grammatical structures and topic content in these pedagogic scaffolds, where taught, are taught with a reference to the thinking and genre practice that enact the expository writing context.

The following sections will present a brief overview of the curriculum cycle with an analysis of the social contextual dimensions of expository writing, after which segments of the socio-cognitive instructional approach to writing (see Chandrasegaran, 2005) will be documented to demonstrate how the curriculum cycle can be tapped upon to scaffold students into thinking and writing in ways that address the field, tenor and mode of the genre. Teacher feedback on the instructional approach incorporating these scaffolds will be included in the paper, together with an exploration on the viability of the approach in helping students gain mastery in the control of other school genres.

THE CURRICULUM CYCLE

The primary goal of the Curriculum Cycle, as postulated by Callaghan and Knapp (1989; 1993) and adapted in Feez (1998; revisited in Hyland, 2004), is to enable students to gain increasing control over the targeted genre of instruction. Instruction, as put forward by the cycle, is construed as a staged process, with three stages, namely, *modelling, joint negotiation of meaning* and *independent construction*. These stages are usually carried out sequentially since engagement in the third stage of *independent construction* often requires students to have some basic schematic and linguistic control acquired in the first
two stages of modelling and joint negotiation of meaning. The model allows flexibility, though, for teachers to start with any stage of the cycle depending on the ability of their students or to return to earlier stages should it be gauged that students are still not quite ready for the later stages. If students have succeeded in acquiring some control of the targeted genre and the language for talking about the genre, teachers may also decide to take students through another cycle of the same genre, but at a “more advanced level of expression” (Hyland, 2004).

The modelling stage of the cycle involves providing students with a number of models/exemplars from the target genre to be acquired. The aim is to familiarise students with the defining characteristics of the genre. They are “…those things that make a report a report, or a discussion a discussion and not a procedure” (Callaghan, Knapp and Noble, 1993, p.181). They are the “key grammatical and rhetorical features” (Hyland, 2004) that encode the social purpose of the genre and play out the socially defined relationships between the writer and reader. Activities during the modelling stage usually involve some form of close text analysis. Analysis can take place at a macro-textual level such as when “chunks” or segments of text from the model/exemplar are identified as having a particular rhetorical function that contributes, in some way, to the overall social purpose of the text. At times, close text analysis can also mean linguistic analysis where students are introduced to conventional grammatical structures for realising specific stages of the targeted genre. The second stage of joint negotiation of meaning constitutes the student's first attempt at constructing some aspect of the genre. The target of construction need not necessarily be extended stretches of text and it can be as short as say, the position/stance
statement of an expository essay. Construction is undertaken by both student and teacher and in certain cases, by students working together in pairs/groups. The principle is for the teacher to gradually take the sidelines in the construction process as the student(s) gain an “increasing control over the genre and its language features” (Callaghan, Knapp and Noble, 1993, p. 182). Enactments of joint negotiation of meaning include having the teacher scaffold actual writing by helping students formulate their ideas/preliminary writing into linguistic structures appropriate to the target genre or having students complete “unfinished or skeletal texts” (Hyland, 2004, p. 135) provided by the teacher. Finally, independent construction occurs when students are gauged to be sufficiently well-versed in the genre to be able to plan and carry out their own writing. In this third stage of the cycle, the teacher adopts the role of a facilitator, facilitating and advising students as they move “from preparation through drafting, conferencing, editing and evaluating” (Callaghan, Knapp and Noble, 1993, p.182). Students at this stage will produce either parts of a text or a whole text on their own. The key at this stage is to give students a feel of the whole writing process in its entirety from construction of the writing context to content generation to decisions on language choice and rhetorical structure. While independent construction usually entails writing, it can also include checking another's draft to determine if it meets certain grammatical and/or rhetorical criteria of the target genre.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF EXPOSITORY WRITING

Before moving on to an exemplification of how the cycle works to enact in students the thinking and genre practice appropriate for the composition of essays that address the
social contextual dimensions of expository writing, it is perhaps necessary to devote
some attention to what exactly we mean by the social context of expository writing. The
notion of social context or register, as understood here, draws on a systemic view of
genre (Halliday and Hasan, 1989; Halliday 1994; revisited in Paltridge (1997) which
states that “a text has meanings which may be discovered by reference to a particular
context of situation (within a particular context of culture) or rather, the linguistic
encoding of a particular contextual configuration of ‘field’, ‘tenor’ and ‘mode’”
(Paltridge, 1997, p. 41). Social context, in this sense, is realised through one's choice of
lexico-grammar. Field can briefly be defined as “the social activity in which people are
involved and what the text is about”, tenor as “the relationship between the participants in
the interaction” and mode as “the role of language (wholly written, written and spoken,
illustrations, etc)” (Hyland, 2004, p. 26, see also Schleppegrell, 2004 and Cope and
Kalantzis, 1993).

The field of expository writing can be broadly understood as an activity, which has as its
social goal, the expression and support of a chosen stance/viewpoint on a socially-
motivated topic/issue. The tenor or relationship between the writer and reader is one of
persuasion and defence, where it is the job of the writer to convince the reader of the
adopted stance. The mode of the expository essay is clearly written. Being classed as an
academic writing text type, operation in the mode of the school expository essay would
and should evoke certain considerations and expectations on how academic texts should
be structured and organised. As Schleppegrell (2004) puts forth of the expository essay,
“[t]he expectation for “reasoned, concrete, and developed” essays echoes the expectations for authoritativeness in presentation of information and clear signals of text structure that are characteristic of academic registers in general. The linguistic structures that enable students to create essays with these characteristics include elaborate noun phrases…effective use of logical connectors, and effective use of modal adjuncts and other resources for attitudinal meaning in the representation of their own and others’ views” (p. 88).

When we refer to the social contextual dimensions of expository writing then, we are in fact referring to an understanding of expository writing as an activity which has the social goal of stance projection under the backdrop of social beliefs/events/happenings, and where convincing/persuading the reader of the projected stance through support arguments in a certain conventionalised written academic style is crucial and constituent of the activity. It follows therefore that if students build this understanding into their thinking and reflect this in their genre practice, their essays may improve through ways that demonstrate a better attendance to the socially-defined contextual dimensions of written exposition.

PEDAGOGY FOR SHAPING STUDENT THINKING AND GENRE PRACTICE

The pedagogical question remains, at this stage, on how the three-staged curriculum cycle can be worked to align student writing with these social contextual dimensions. We argue that the socio-cognitive pedagogical approach (Chandrasegaran, 2005), segments of which are documented below, offers an answer.
To familiarise students with the field dimension of expository writing as an activity motivated by social happenings/events/beliefs, which the writer then responds to through the projection of his/her stance, *modelling* in the form of text deconstruction activities were used. A number of authentic letters written to the forum page of a local newspaper—“The Straits Times” were provided and students were instructed to identify, within specific paragraphs, the happenings/events/beliefs that motivated the writing, as well as statements that depicted the writer’s stance on the issue/topic. This exercise was aided by a series of guiding questions. Examples of these questions are given in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1. Examples of scaffolding questions (extracted from Chandrasegaran, 2005, Unit 1)**

| Example 1 | What happened before the writing that caused the writer to write? [Read paragraphs 3 and 4, then paragraph 2 for past events and beliefs…] |
| Example 2 | What position (point of view) does he/she wish to defend? [Read paragraphs 1 and 5 for writer’s position] |

By having students identify certain features from authentic texts, instruction at this stage served to familiarise students with the conventional discourse practices used to enact the *field* dimension of expository writing, i.e. stance is usually projected under the backdrop of certain social events/beliefs/happenings in a written product. At the same time, the scaffolding questions used in the task served to structure individual student thinking in tune with the socially-construed thinking behind these discourse conventions. They are an enactment of the thinking strategies that ought to be played out in the composing process. For instance, in asking students “What happened before the writing that caused the writer to write?” in the modelling stage, the intention is to get students to start thinking of expository writing as a socially-motivated activity. Similarly, in asking students “What position (point of view) does he/she [referring to the writer] wish to defend?” the student
is, in essence, being inducted into thinking of the tenor or relationship between writer or reader as one of the former convincing/persuading the latter, with the latter not necessarily starting off in agreement with the former’s view.

To acculturate students into the more formalised written academic mode of constructing arguments characteristic of the expository writing genre, joint negotiation of meaning in the form of nominalisation exercises were incorporated into the instructional approach. In these exercises, arguments that were structured more towards the spoken mode are given on one side of the page. Through corresponding hints on the other side of the page, students are aided, step-by-step, to reconstruct these arguments from a spoken mode to a more formal written mode. An example of this is given in Figure 2 below. The targeted reconstruction is: “Today, one job advertisement can attract hundreds of eager job applicants”.

Figure 1. Example of a nominalisation exercise (extracted from Chandrasegaran, 2005, Unit 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence to be reconstructed</th>
<th>Hints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>today, say you advertise one job, hundreds of people apply; all so eager.</td>
<td>Start sentence with <em>Today</em>. Change <em>advertise</em> to a noun. Before it put words to say <em>what is advertised</em>, and <em>how many</em>. Follow with verb <em>attract</em>. Put before it a modal to say <em>it’s very possible</em>. Continue to say <em>attract who?</em> Change <em>apply</em> to mean <em>people</em>. Add an adjective to say how these people feel about the job. Add words to say <em>how many?</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Joint negotiation of meaning here works to shape students’ genre practice with the highly nominalised structures conventional of the academic written mode.
To evaluate if students had successfully acquired the social-contextually determined thinking and genre practice of expository writing taught through the stages of modelling and joint negotiation of meaning, the *independent construction* stage was implemented. Students were not required to independently construct one whole essay in the course of instruction (this was done only at the conclusion of the instruction), but to just construct specific paragraphs typically found in the school expository essay. For instance, after introducing to students, through modelling of text and language use, the notion of expository writing as an activity socially motivated by social beliefs/events/happenings with the writer’s stance in response to these beliefs/events/happenings forming a crucial part of the writing, students were tasked with writing out an opening paragraph containing these components as homework. Facilitating prompts posed to students at this stage again aim to confine student thinking within the socially defined context of expository writing. A prompt like “Think of the social situation in which people will be interested in the topic. What has happened to create an interest?” (Chandrasegaran, 2005, Unit 1), for instance, aims to align student thinking with the *field* dimension of expository writing being a socially-motivated activity. Another prompt like “How do you want the reader to think or feel after reading your essay? Write down a goal. Satisfied with the goal? Use it to plan a position statement.” (Chandrasegaran, 2005, Unit 1) aims at aligning student thinking with the *tenor* dimension of persuasion.

The next section will highlight anecdotes from a teacher who tried out the instructional approach.
A TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE

Teachers focused on the text structure and linguistic features of the text type they teach. For instance, in the Teachers’ Network sharing by YISS then HOD EL, Ms Lucy Tay in 2003, the teacher provided students with templates and helping words to help students write argumentative essays.

The main challenge teachers faced when applying the social-cognitive approach to teaching expository writing therefore happens in applying Unit 1 – when they were expected to present expository writing as a form of communication and explicitly teach concepts like social goals and writer’s goal.

The teachers generally felt more comfortable once we moved beyond this initial step into Unit 2 which focused on strategies to argue, an area which is more familiar to them. Previously, this step would be Step 1 to teaching expository writing because students would be given topics where they brainstorm pros and cons. Hence Unit 2 would originally have been part of the writing plan. I find that Unit 2 provides a more structured approach that also explicitly explains the social function of each strategy. The ability to select the appropriate strategy to meet the social function is usually implicitly expected from students but never explicitly taught in class. This explains why a common complaint among teachers about students’ essays is that they do not know how to make arguments that will help them to be more convincing.
Students picked up concepts like Position Statement and Reader Orientation easily, but like the teachers, they took a slightly longer time to grasp the significance of communicative concepts like Social Goal on the way they should write. It is telling for PS and RO are visible, textual features, whereas SG is not.

**DISCUSSION OF TEACHER FEEDBACK**

The feedback from teachers who tried out the socio-cognitive instructional approach can be broadly discussed on two levels, namely:

- The extent to which the scaffolds in the approach enhances the teachers’ current pedagogical methods
- The challenges that the teachers face in carrying out instruction through this approach

With respect to the first level, teachers reported that the socio-cognitive approach affords them a more systematic structure with which to teach students the essential components of expository writing, such as argumentative strategies. This is evidenced by the following comment from one of the teachers who tried out the approach.

"Unit 2…focused on strategies to argue…Previously, this step would be Step 1 to teaching expository writing because students would be given topics where they brainstorm pros and cons…I find that Unit 2 provides a more structured approach that also explicitly explains the social function of each strategy. The ability to select the appropriate strategy to meet the social function is usually implicitly expected from students but never explicitly taught in class. This explains why a
common complaint among teachers about students’ essays is that they do not
know how to make arguments that will help them to be more convincing.”

Situating this comment within the context of Unit 1 which has the instructional objective
of internalizing in students the social goal of writing as persuasion, what may be inferred
from the above comment is that in scaffolding/directing students to think of the *tenor* of
expository writing as being about convincing/persuading another of one’s stance through
the curriculum cycle, the students are, in essence, provided with a more structured
platform/conduit with which to effectively define the role or what this teacher terms the
social function of argumentative strategies in Unit 2. Pros and cons of a topic will remain
as pros and cons and not get translated into effective argumentative strategies with a clear
intention of “convincing” an audience if they are not framed, in the students’ minds, as
having the social function of persuasion.

On the flip side of the coin, one of the challenges faced by the teachers who tried out the
socio-cognitive instructional approach is the difficulty in shaping patterns of thoughts
that are not textually visible, such as thinking about the social goal of persuasion. While
thoughts of persuasion as a social goal are crucial to the extent that the absence of such
thoughts is instantly felt by a reader reading an essay not guided by them, such thoughts
are not immediately visible in a text the way stages of a genre or specific linguistic
structures are. This challenge is explicated in the following comment from a teacher.

“Students picked up concepts like Position Statement\(^1\) and Reader Orientation\(^2\)
easily, but like the teachers, they took a slightly longer time to grasp the

\(^1\) This refers to a statement reflecting the stance/position on an issue/topic.
significance of …Social Goal on the way they should write. It is telling for PS [position statement] and RO [reader orientation] are visible, textual features, whereas SG [social goal] is not.”

It would appear, then, that while instructional activities designed based on the scaffolds of the curriculum cycle are effective in teaching students genre practices that enact the social contextual dimensions of expository writing (e.g. statements explicating writer’s stance and grammatical structures conventional of the academic mode of writing), their role in shaping student thinking in accordance with the thinking behind these genre convention may have to be enhanced in some way.

REFERENCES


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2 This refers to statements/text depicting the social events/beliefs/happenings motivating interest in the issue/topic.
Michigan Press.