A socio-cognitive approach to teaching expository writing: Research results from two Singapore schools

Antonia Chandrasegaran
A socio-cognitive approach to teaching expository writing: Research Results

- Brief background
- Approach to instruction
- Results
- Discussion, questions
Definition of expository writing

Expository writing is defined as any writing, including argumentative essays, in which the writer takes a stance on an issue/topic and provides arguments or information to support that stance.

(Martin, 1989; Schleppegrell, 2004)
Main research question

Would explicit teaching of the social (genre) practices of expository writing and the associated thinking processes lead to improvement in the quality of student essays?
Teaching approach

- Raising awareness of writing as a social activity
- Explicit instruction of genre practices (e.g. declaring stance explicitly at the beginning of essay)
- Articulation of thinking processes underlying genre practices (e.g. formulation of rhetorical goal)
- Explicit teaching of linguistic resources for realising specific genre practices and the related thinking.
Teaching genre practices

Activity 4.2 Anticipate, counter

Situation: ...Celebrities are to...convince the Selection Committee that they are the best choice for Teen Inspiration.

Your group’s role: ... You are writing to the Selection Committee to propose that your celebrity should be Teen Inspiration.

Group’s goal: Convince the selection committee that...

Task 1: Anticipate objection

...Each pair of students takes on the role of one of these persons.

Get into role. Feel and think like this person. Anticipate how this person will object to the proposed celebrity

Selection Committee members

School principal  Parent  Student  Sports personality
Activity 3.2 Does it support my position?
Essay topic: Should wearing the school uniform be made voluntary and not compulsory?
Your group will get a position on the above topic and two items of information. Discuss:

1. Should W 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 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.
Results

- Essay score
- Essay length
- Framing devices (words/grammar signalling moves in organisation of argument, or explicitly projecting author’s voice)
- Topicality (functional and non-functional topic-content)
- Argument moves (stance assertion and stance support)
Examples of framing devices

Firstly, I feel that exams would be a fairer and more accurate gauge of the students’ abilities and intelligence. For example, exams would have the same answers for everyone. However, project work do not have definite answer. Some markers could be more lenient or strict than others, so how could that be an accurate measure of how good the student is?
Results

- Essay score
- Essay length
- Framing devices (words/grammar signalling moves in organisation of argument, or explicitly projecting author’s voice)
- Topicality (functional and non-functional topic content)
- Argument moves (stance assertion and stance support)
Examples of topicality

...banning weekend homework... is a bad idea, as not doing any homework during the weekends may cause a “not wanting to study” thinking in the students’ minds and this may cause their grades to drop. They may also hate homework...

Homework to teachers are good grades ‘improver’ but to students it is a burden which they have to carry it home to finish....

Note:
Functional topicality
Non-functional topicality
Results

- Essay score
- Essay length
- Framing devices (words/grammar signalling moves in organisation of argument, or explicitly projecting author’s voice)
- Topicality (functional and non-functional topic-content)
- Argument moves (stance assertion and stance support)
# Examples of argument moves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extracts from student essay on topic: Should examinations be replaced by project work?</th>
<th>Argument moves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>It is a good idea that projects shall replace exams...</strong></td>
<td>Stance assertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Projects might be a better way of testing students [sic] understanding of topics than exams...</strong></td>
<td>Stance support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Declare position in introduction**

**Support position with a ‘benefit’ claim**
### Findings: Essay score & length

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean (Words)</th>
<th>Pre-instruction</th>
<th>Post-instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay score</td>
<td>62.38</td>
<td>68.99*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay length</td>
<td>332.33</td>
<td>353.40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(words)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant increase (p<.001; paired t-test)

In School N essay length increased from 324 to 414 (p<.001)
## Essay score (by school)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Mean Pre-instruction</th>
<th>Mean Post-instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School L</td>
<td>61.31</td>
<td>64.91*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School N</td>
<td>63.41</td>
<td>72.89**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant increase (p<.01; paired t-test)

**Significantly increase (p<.001; paired t-test)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stream</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-instruction</td>
<td>Post-instruction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal academic</td>
<td>56.25</td>
<td>65.18*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express</td>
<td>68.24</td>
<td>72.64*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant increase (p<.001; paired t-test)

In one school NA scores rose from 57 to 71 (p<.001)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean (per essay)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-instruction</td>
<td>Post-instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing devices</td>
<td>11.14</td>
<td>14.06*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant increase (p<.001; paired t-test)

In School N increase was from 10.84 to 15.23 (p<.001)
Topicality (Mean per 100 words)

- Pre-instruct:
  - Functional: 21.74
  - Non-functional: 9.61

- Post-instruct:
  - Functional: 24.99**
  - Non-functional: 4.66**

*Significant increase/decrease (p<.001; paired t-test)
**Significant decrease (p<.001; paired t-test)
Argument moves: Stance assertion (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-instruct</th>
<th>Post-instruct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declare stance</td>
<td>85.40</td>
<td>93.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imply stance</td>
<td>8.76</td>
<td>5.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No stance</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Argument moves: Stance assertion (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-instruct</th>
<th>Post-instruct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stance in intro</td>
<td>58.14</td>
<td>82.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance later</td>
<td>41.86</td>
<td>17.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Argument moves (Stance support)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stance support move</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-instruction</td>
<td>Post-instruction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State support claim</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>2.04*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal knowledge/belief/experience</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>5.96**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesised outcome</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising and countering opposing view</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>2.24*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant increase (p<.01; paired t-test)

**Significant increase (p<.001; paired t-test)
Stance support moves: Key improvements

- State claim
  - Pre-instruct: 1.58
  - Post-instruct: 2.04

- Personal experience
  - Pre-instruct: 3.77
  - Post-instruct: 5.96

- Raise & counter opposing view
  - Pre-instruct: 1.45
  - Post-instruct: 2.24
Implications of the results

- Explicit instruction (genre practices, related thinking processes) can improve student writing.

- Teaching goal-referenced thinking may help students to remain focused on stance support.

- May be possible to influence teachers’ theoretical orientation & practices through instructional materials.
Where to find the materials

Singteach Issue 3
The research team

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THANK YOU