Stance-Development in the Expository Writing of Non-native English Speaker Students

Abstract
This paper presents an analysis of stance-taking and development in the essays of a group of non-native (English) speaker (NNS) students following instruction in stance-taking and stance-maintenance in expository essay writing. Assuming and maintaining a stance or position, definitive discourse acts in the English expository/argumentative essay, may be unfamiliar acts for students whose literacy traditions favour discourse practices different from those expected in the Anglo-American model of the academic essay. Stance development in this paper is evaluated on the basis of stance-enhancing topicality. Lexico-grammatical items are considered stance enhancing if they raise topics and make topic comments that perform some rhetorical function in arguing the writer’s stance. An analysis of post-instruction essays revealed an increase in stance-enhancing topicality and a drop in non-functional topicality. The results suggest that teaching students the thinking processes underlying the discourse practices of expository writing can effectively improve their ability to sustain a consistent stance and avoid digression or ‘going out of point’.

Introduction
Taking a stance or position and supporting it are defining discourse acts in expository essay writing, expository essays being “a genre through which writers present a point of view and support it with…evidence” (Martin, 1909, cited in Schleppegrell, 2004, p.88). However, stance taking and stance maintenance can be problematic for students who are non-native speakers of English (NNS) due to inadequate linguistic proficiency coupled with unfamiliarity with the argument practices of the Anglo-American model of the academic essay. This paper presents the results of an attempt to improve students’ stance development skills through a socio-cognitive approach to teaching expository writing.

The instructional method and method of assessing quality of stance support in essays will be described after the research objectives and theoretical framework are explained. The findings will then be presented and discussed with reference to how
explicit teaching of cognitive processes and discourse practices can lead to better expository writing.

**Objectives**
The main objective of this study was to determine if stance-taking and stance development would improve in the essays of a group of NNS students following explicit instruction in the thinking processes and discourse practices of the school expository essay genre. To measure improvement, two specific research questions were posed:

1. Whether instruction in the thinking and genre processes of expository writing would result in post-instruction essays showing an increase in the number of lexical items constructing stance-enhancing topicality;
2. Whether there would be a decrease in non-functional topicality items in post-instruction essays, with ‘non-functional topicality’ defined as meanings that do not play a rhetorical role stance development.

The concept of topicality posits a relation between the meanings in a text and its stance, a relation explained in this and the next two paragraphs. Stance in this paper is used in the sense of the writer’s “attitude … towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about” (Hunston & Thompson, 2000, p.5) the topic or issue in the essay question. An adequately developed writer stance in the essay would create unity and “texture”, Halliday and Hasan’s term for the property of ‘being a text’” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p.2). One building block of texture is the presence of meaning relations or semantic links, called cohesion (Halliday, 2004), across sentences and paragraphs. Previous research on students’ essays has demonstrated the role of cohesive relations in the development of argument (English, 1999), although in English’s study cohesive relations is confined to reference and logical links.

In a text with a well supported stance, the meaning relations or cohesion links creating stance-development topicality may be categorized into two strands:

- Topics and topic comments consisting of ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings that contribute to the performance of some rhetorical function in explaining and justifying the writer’s position.
• Topic-stance links expressed in textual and interpersonal meanings that relate topics in sub-arguments to the writer’s position.

Topicality is constructed of the topics that the writer raises to “bring the outside world into the text” (David Butt, personal communication, September 15, 2005) and what the writer says about those topics. The topics raised, or ideational meanings, spring from the writer’s knowledge of the world and his/her personal experiences. What the writer says about a topic often includes interpersonal meanings expressed in evaluative language indicating the writer’s views or feelings about a topic. For example, when a student writes *Examinations cannot test creativity whereas school project work can* the student makes visible a positive attitude towards project work through the implied link between “creativity” (a valued construct in education) and “project work.” Such expression of attitudinal meaning, one element of the interpersonal function of language, constitutes the writer’s attempt to persuade the reader to view “project work” with the writer’s positive slant.

Another thread in the fabric of cohesive relations constructing stance-development topicality consists of the links between supporting-argument topics and the writer’s overall position in the text. Links between topics and writer stance are discernible in texts because language “construes relations of parts to wholes within its own text” (Lemke, 1998, p.1178). In Figure 1, for example, the conjunction *therefore* in the final clause serves the textual function of marking a causal relation between the final sentence, which reiterates the writer’s stance, and the preceding paragraphs, which offer reasons for the stance. In reiterating the writer’s stance, the final clause performs an interpersonal function through its evaluation of the topics (*project work is better than exams*).

Figure 1 Topicality in an excerpt from a students’ essay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excerpt from student’s essay</th>
<th>Topicality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examinations should be replaced by project work. (Writer’s stance)</td>
<td>*Interpersonal meaning: evaluating topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… … (3 paragraphs on merits/demerits of exams vs project work)</td>
<td>Stance development topicality through: [ideational], <em>interpersonal</em>, and textual meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project work [requires team work]. This [gives students a chance to <em>learn to work with others</em>]. It [<em>prepares them for working life</em>]</td>
<td>*Ideational and interpersonal meanings expressed concurrently. Interpersonal meanings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
because [in the outside world] they [will need to work with others to *accomplish* tasks].

develop stance through positive valuation of topics ‘project work’ and ‘team work’.

| **Therefore** project work is *better* for students than exams. |
| **Topic-stance link through textual meaning, and interpersonal meaning.** |

The ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings that build stance development topicality may be viewed as functional topicality, to distinguish it from non-functional topicality which is constituted of topics and topic comments that serve no rhetorical function in advancing the writer’s stance. The words that construct functional topicality form a network of related cohesion chains not only because the writer is defending a consistent stance throughout the text, but also because, as Lemke (1998) points out, a text repeats the same basic semantic patterns and repeatedly makes the same kinds of connections among the same entities. However, in less well written student essays there may be cohesion links that do not contribute to stance development. Hinkel (2002) observed, after a study of L2 essays, that students can produce cohesion without adding specific information for the elaboration of points raised. In students’ expository essays some topics and topic comments may generate cohesion ties to the essay topic without adding specific detail for the elaboration of the grounds for the writer’s stance. Instead, the topics and topic comments may create ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings that appear to support a different stance from the one declared or implied elsewhere in the essay, prompting an ‘out of point’ comment from the teacher. ‘Out of point’ topics and topic comments may extend topicality but it is non-functional topicality since the topics added serve no rhetorical role in sustaining the writer’s stance. The underlying hypothesis in this paper is that non-functional topicality would decrease and functional topicality increase if instruction in the thinking operations and social practices of the expository essay genre is effective.

**Theoretical framework**

The study draws on a socio-cognitive model of writing (Kern, 2000; Flower, 1994), which views writing as both thinking and social practice. This section explains how expository writing is shaped by cognitive and social processes and why, arising from the social view of writing, systemic functional grammar is an appropriate tool for studying the rhetorical function of topicality.
The cognitive dimension of writing consists of 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, 1994; Flower & Hayes, 1981). Global considerations that influence choice of meaning and language include writer purpose and audience effect (Kern, 2000, Flower 1994) which, in the context of the expository essay, would include the writer’s stance on the issue of discussion. Stance serves as one of the “higher level goals” that “give direction and coherence” to the moves made in writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p.379). If the writer’s overall stance is a reference point for decision making during writing, we can expect the topics and topic comments in the essay to reflect an intention to clarify and support that stance.

The thinking that drives the unfolding of a written text must incorporate reference to the social parameters of the writing situation, given the current view of literacy as a social phenomenon (Christie & Misson, 1998). 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. The social goal is attained, if the writing is successful, through the performance of a pattern of generic discourse moves recognised as conventional by members of the discourse community that regularly interact with each other through exemplars of the genre. The expository essay genre is characterised by rhetorical moves aimed at advancing the writer’s stance with the goal of persuading the reader to accept the stance as reasonable. In the well written essay, the convergence of moves on the goal of supporting the stance will be realised in cohesion ties linked to topics and topic comments that have been selected to influence the reader to be favourably disposed towards the writer’s stance.

To identify and evaluate the role of topical content in stance development, we need to analyse essays from a functional perspective using functional grammar as the tool. A functional analysis of text attends to “the use of language in relation to its surrounding co-text and the purpose of the writer in creating a text as a whole” (Hyland, 2005, p.24). Functional grammar is grounded in the functional linguistics view of language as a phenomenon related to social context (Martin, 2000). Systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1994; Halliday, 2004), which has been developed to serve the needs of “those who want to use their understanding of grammar in analysing and interpreting
texts” (Halliday, 2004, p.4), is an apt tool for determining if the topics that find their way into an essay serve an appropriate rhetorical purpose. The robustness of systemic functional grammar as a tool for analysing student-generated writing has been amply demonstrated in recent research (Schleppegrell (2004).

Systemic functional grammar identifies three metafunctions of language giving rise to three kinds of meaning present in all texts: ideational meanings that represent the world, interpersonal meanings that express the speaker/writer's attitudes and intentions regarding topics and audience, and textual meanings that indicate the relation between the parts making up a text and between the text and its context (Halliday, 1994, 2004). In the expository essay ideational meanings correspond to the topics the writer brings into the text to build the grounds for his/her stance; interpersonal meanings are the writer's evaluative comments about the topics – comments reflecting the writer’s stance and expressed to influence the reader to share the writer’s position, while textual meanings relate topics and evaluative comments to each other and to the overall stance of the essay. In a skilled writer’s essay, all three types of meanings will tend towards alignment with the writer’s whole-text stance to construct stance-enhancing topicality. Systemic functional grammar’s theory of ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings offers a tool for analysing the inter-relations between lexical items in a text to observe whether or not an item is performing a contributory role in stance development.

From a cognitive perspective, the rhetorical goals that drive the composing process of good writers (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) inevitably result in linguistic choices producing cohesion ties between sentences and paragraphs. From the perspective of functional grammar, cohesion items, particularly lexical cohesion, construct “logogenetic patterns” (Halliday, 2004, p.534) or patterns of meaning that emerge as the text unfolds. In expository writing, the lexical cohesion that constructs logogenetic patterns is woven from stance enhancing topicality items, which serve the function of explaining and validating the author’s stance. Lexical cohesion is the visible sign of stance-enhancing topicality. In the well written essay there will also be cohesion ties between stance-enhancing topics and reiterated stance indicators in the body of the essay.

Since writing is a social activity, stance enhancing topicality will be shaped by and will reflect the culture of the writer’s discourse community. Topics that are current in
the community’s talk will find their way into the essay in a stance-enhancing role; stance-support arguments will echo the values the community places on different behaviours, events and goals (e.g. prioritising studying for exams over playing sports). A socio-cognitive pedagogy of writing may result in increased stance-enhancing topicality in student essays because socially situated learning of cognitive strategies for writing may sharpen students’ ability to tap socially acquired personal experience for use in stance support.

The marrying of the cognitive and social models of writing informed the planning of the content and method of instruction as the next section will explain.

Method
The research design was a test-instruction-test design, with the test being an expository essay writing task. Essays were analysed to detect any improvement in stance-enhancing topicality. The method of analysis is described below after information on the student participants and the instructional activities.

The students
The students participating in this study were 137 high school students in two schools in Singapore. They were a sample of students randomly drawn from 8 classes who participated in the research project. English being the medium of instruction in Singapore, these students had studied and used English for at least 9 years. Most could write understandable, though not always error-free sentences. 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. Their approach to essay writing may be described as tending towards recounting knowledge they have on the essay topic and stating unsubstantiated personal opinions instead of using the knowledge to clarify and support a position.

There was no control group as the school curriculum required that all the students be given the same instruction at the same time in preparation for a common school exam at the end of the semester. It has been observed that the experimental control group design is not appropriate in many circumstances in schools because of “the inherently open and messy system that schools are” (McNaughton, 2004, p.10). To require schools
to change existing curricular arrangements to accommodate a control group design may generate resentment against the researcher for interfering in established school practices.

Instructional method and materials

In the first week of the semester, students were asked to write a 350-500 word essay in response to a prompt requiring the expression of a stance on a disputable topic. The topic was whether weekend homework should be banned. Writing took place in class during a regular English period of 80 minutes. In the following weeks, 14 weekly lessons were conducted to teach the thinking processes and genre practices associated with stance-taking and development in expository essay writing.

Five units of materials were written for the lessons. The five units targeted the following thinking skills and discourse practices:

Unit 1: Constructing the social context of a writing task; setting a rhetorical goal and stating it in a position statement.

Unit 2: Choosing support strategies using writer’s socio-rhetorical goal as reference point.

Unit 3: Selecting details to implement support strategy and accomplish the socio-rhetorical goal.

Unit 4: Anticipating and addressing opposing views.

Unit 5: Maintaining visibility of goal throughout the essay and in the conclusion.

Each unit had a grammar component that presented selected grammatical forms for realising the cognitive strategy or discourse practice featured in the unit. For instance, the grammar section in Unit 2 taught the use of the simple present tense and modals can and will for presenting propositions viewed as ‘fact’ or ‘certainty’ to serve a support function.

Instruction took the form of the following types of teaching/learning activities:

- Study of sample texts to observe the social context of the writer and reader of a piece of writing; conventional discourse practices in exposition and argument; cognitive strategies for developing arguments; and patterns of language use in relation to context, social goals, argument strategies and discourse acts.
• Goal-referenced decision-making activities requiring students to select and justify their selection of argument strategy, ideational meanings, or language in a given writing context (e.g. select or reject ideas as support for a given writer position).

• Interactive activities involving role play to practise specific thinking and communicative strategies (e.g. to practise anticipation of counter-arguments, students role-played personalities with an interest in a given issue and likely to object to the writer’s position on it)

• Writing exercises to practise specific cognitive processes (e.g. Plan support strategy for justifying student’s position statement on a given topic), discourse acts (e.g. writing a position statement for the essay introduction to address the issue in the essay question), and use of language for realising specific discourse acts (e.g. practise sentence structures for bringing up an anticipated opposing view).

Text-study, decision-making activities and some of the writing exercises took the form of group work to encourage collaborative learning and to impress on students the interactive, social nature of writing. The teachers’ guide to the lesson materials urged teachers to focus not so much on right answers as on the process of decision making and the socio-rhetorical reasons for selecting meaning and language.

Following instruction, students wrote a 350-500 word essay on a topic different from the one set for the pre-instruction essay. The topic was: Should project work replace examinations? Pre- and post-instruction essays were holistically scored and analysed on a number of parameters to determine if the instruction had an effect on quality of writing.

Analysis of essays

Essays were scored by two teachers, each with more than 10 years of teaching experience in Singapore secondary schools. Scoring was guided by an assessment scheme that directed the assessor to look for a consistent, supported stance in an essay. The average of both teachers’ scores for each essay was used in computing the pre- and post-instruction mean essay scores of the group. The teachers were not told which essays were pre-instruction and which post-instruction. In 68 per cent of the 137 pairs of essays, they were in agreement as to whether a post-instruction essay was better or worse than the pre-instruction effort or had not changed.
Essays were analysed to detect differences, if any, in framing devices, stance-enhancing topicality, and argument moves. The results pertaining to topicality are the concern of this paper. The procedure for analysing topicality was as follows:

Step 1: The essay was first read rapidly to discover the student’s stance on the topic in question. Subsequent close readings of the essay used this stance as the reference point for deciding if meanings expressed served a rhetorical function in stance development.

Step 2: Lexical items expressing ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings were identified and examined for their rhetorical role, if any, in explaining or supporting the stance. As explained earlier, these meanings correspond respectively to topics introduced into the essay (persons, events, acts, etc), the writer’s comment on or attitude towards the topics, and the relations between topics with reference to each other and between topics and the writer’s overall stance in the essay.

Items that serve a rhetorical purpose in the essay were tallied under the category of stance-enhancing topicality, while items with no discernable rhetorical purpose were counted as non-functional. Items falling into the latter category were mainly ‘out of point’ topics and comments that could not be interpreted as clarification of or reasons for the student’s stance. But the non-functional category also included extraneous information in rambling introductions that contributed nothing to reader orientation to the upcoming stance or argument. Figure 2 illustrates the method of identifying stance-enhancing and non-functional topicality.

Lexical items from the essay question were not counted. Neither were repeated words or phrases unless there was a difference in meaning (e.g. *did not complete* and *completed* were counted separately). Counting repeated items would distort the picture as topicality was meant to be a measure of how much of the world was brought into the text to support the writer’s stance.

Step 3: The number of stance-enhancing topicality and non-functional topicality items in each essay was added up separately. Each student then had two sets of topicality indices, one set measuring stance-enhancing and non-functional topicality in the pre-instruction essay and the other set measuring the same variables in the post-instruction essay. The means of stance-enhancing topicality and of non-functional topicality items in
the group’s pre- and post-instruction essays were computed separately. T-tests were run to discover if stance-enhancing topicality items would significantly increase and non-functional topicality decrease after instruction.

Figure 2. Analysis of topicality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract from student essay</th>
<th>Analysis of topicality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic:</strong> Should weekend homework be banned?</td>
<td><strong>Stance-enhancing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...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...</td>
<td><em>a bad idea</em> [states stance]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td><em>not doing any</em> [starts reason for stance]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td><em>may cause; a “not...study” thinking; in students’ minds</em> [states reason for stance]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td><em>their grades; drop</em> [elaborate reason]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td><em>also hate</em> [support stance by implying ‘weekend homework will make students hate all homework’]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Student BX9, pre-instruction essay]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total items</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of the 137 pairs of essays was done by two coders using the procedure described above. Coders were not told if the essays they analysed were pre- or post-instruction efforts. Correlation between the decisions of the two coders was significantly high for both stance-enhancing topicality (Pearson r = .85, p<.01 (2-tailed)) and non-functional topicality (r = .70, p<.01 (2-tailed)).

**Results**

The mean number of stance-enhancing topicality items increased from 71.96 in pre-instruction essays to 86.88 post-instruction, although average length of essays did not increase significantly (332 words in pre-instruction essays to 353 post-instruction). A paired-samples t-test conducted on the means of stance-enhancing topicality items yielded a t of -5.14, which is significant at beyond the 0.001 level. The eta squared statistic (0.16) indicated a large effect size, according to Cohen’s (1988) guidelines for interpreting eta squared values.
The means for non-functional topicality items fell from 31.80 in pre-instruction essays to 16.06 in post-instruction essays. The difference was significant (t=6.68, p<.001). Effect size was large (eta squared = .24).

Table 1. Topicality in pre- and post-instruction essays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topicality</th>
<th>Pre-instruction mean</th>
<th>Post-instruction mean</th>
<th>t-test (df=136)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stance-enhancing</td>
<td>71.96</td>
<td>86.88</td>
<td>t = -5.14 p&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-functional</td>
<td>31.80</td>
<td>16.06</td>
<td>t = -6.68 p&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean essay scores rose from 62.38, pre-instruction, to 68.98 post-instruction. The difference between these means was found to be significant in a paired samples t-test (t = −6.944, df=136, p<.001 (2-tailed)).

Although no count of cohesion ties was done, an examination of the essays of individual students with higher post-instruction essay scores revealed an increase in the number of cohesion ties between body paragraphs and the essay’s overall stance. An example is presented in Figure 3 which shows extracts from the middle paragraphs of one student’s pre- and post-instruction essay. The extract from the first essay contains just three links to the stance while the extract from the second essay, although shorter, has many more cohesion ties reflecting the stance and its justification. In the pre-instruction extract there are cohesion ties (e.g. principal, school, study) but they do not contribute to the argument (why banning homework is not a good idea).

Figure 3: Stance-enhancement cohesion ties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-instruction</th>
<th>Post-instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stance: Banning weekend homework is a not a good idea</td>
<td>Stance: Examinations should be replaced by school project work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Banning homework is not a good idea, not only the principal but a lot of parents will also agree. The principal will want us to score well and make the school proud. Which principal would want a school with students that would not want to study? Parents will also want their kids to study hard and have a good job in the future and not wanting them to disappoint by not studying … (72 words)

When doing school project work, students’ relationship with each other will be better as they will tend to talk more during the time when they meet up and discuss the project. Teachers will have a better time marking the work as compared to students having examinations, [when] the marker has to see the same questions over and over again. (59 words)

Notes: *Link to stance. Other stance-enhancing links are in italics or underlined
Discussion

The increase in stance-enhancing topicality items and corresponding decrease in non-topicality in post-instruction essays suggests that students’ stance-taking and stance-support abilities improved following 14 weeks of instruction in the thinking processes and socio-rhetorical practices of expository writing. To examine the validity of this conclusion, two questions need to be addressed: Whether the changes in functional and non-functional topicality represent a real gain in students’ stance development ability, and whether the gain, if real, can be attributed to the content and learning activities in the instructional materials.

The rise in post-instruction stance-enhancing topicality and fall in non-functional topicality must be seen in juxtaposition with the mean essay scores. The significant increase in mean essay scores, computed from scores given by two raters, indicate that the post-instruction essays were markedly better than the pre-instruction essays. The two raters, English language teachers with secondary school experience, were not told that topicality in the essays was being measured or how it was measured. In evaluating each essay they looked for an articulated stance and judged whether it was consistently supported. The post-instruction higher means for essay score and stance-enhancing topicality, independently obtained, converge to point to a real gain in students’ stance development ability following the writing lessons. At the same time, the lower mean frequency of non-functional topicality scores in post-instruction essays is corroborative evidence that the students had learnt to maintain a stance with significantly less digression.

There are reasons to believe that the increase in stance-taking topicality in the post-instruction essays is more likely due to writing with greater awareness of a felt rhetorical goal than to the practice effect or an easier topic for the post-instruction essay. The practice effect may be harder to discount if the same topic had been set for pre- and post-instruction essay, thus giving students a chance to improve on their initial arguments the second time round. But this was not the case: the pre-instruction topic was whether weekend homework should be banned, while after instruction the topic was whether project work should replace examinations. Both topics were familiar to students and relevant to their lives. The second topic cannot be said to be easier and therefore the
reason for increased stance-enhancing topicality in the post-instruction essays. The appearance of more stance-enhancing topics and topic comments in the second set of essays must be due, to some extent at least, to the intervening instruction.

It might be argued that practice in essay writing over a semester, without instruction or with any kind of instruction other than the socio-cognitive instruction provided in this study, could have led to improvements such as enhanced functional topicality. However, without explicit instruction in the decision-making processes and social practices of expository essay writing, students can hardly be expected to do more than re-enact a habituated approach to composing, an approach that tends towards the recounting of personal experience and knowledge as a result of years of “personal writing” in the lower grades (Schleppegrell, 2004, p.150). With a knowledge-recount approach to writing it is easy to stray from the stance taken unless students have learnt some cognitive procedures for evaluating and selecting meanings against their rhetorical goal of justifying their stance. The lesson materials in the current study taught students to use their overall stance as the reference point for decision-making in choice of support strategy, vetting of elaborating detail, and anticipation of opposing views. The drop in non-functional topicality in the post-instruction essays suggests that the lessons had some effect.

Having ruled out the practice effect and an easier post-instruction writing task, we should examine the content and methodology of the instruction to see how the lessons could have contributed to the rise in stance-enhancing topicality and drop in non-functional topicality. The texts, exercises and other learning activities devised for instruction had one main aim, which was to shift students from a form- and content-focused approach to expository writing towards a socio-rhetorical goal-driven approach. For instance, one unit of the instructional materials taught students to support their stance by anticipating an opposing view and selecting a countering strategy. The lessons in the unit focused on developing audience-aware, goal-targeted thinking to correct the tendency, observed in less proficient student writers, to be predominantly concerned with “surface structure and meaning searches” (Kucer, 2005, p.187) in an effort to produce more sentences. More proficient writers, Kucer observes, focus on the ‘big picture’” (ibid. p.190), which in expository writing would be the writer’s role and purpose in the
text vis-à-vis the reader. If students had learnt to devote sufficient attention to the goal of justifying their stance to the reader, the generation and selection of meaning would consciously or unconsciously be influenced by the stance. The result of this learning would show up in the essays as a higher incidence of stance-enhancing topicality than would occur if writing had been driven by a sentence-production, content narration approach. At the same time, non-functional topicality would decrease as the intention to support the stance would cue students to reject topics and topic comments that will not play a part in stance support. The figures for functional and non-functional topicality in (Table 1) may not have significantly changed in opposite directions if the instruction had not had some effect in directing student attention to a macro rhetorical goal during writing.

The ability of the students in this study to stay more focused on their stance after instruction is ground for recommending a socio-cognitive approach to teaching expository writing. Explicit instruction of rhetorical goal-referenced thinking underlying the social interaction practices of expository genres not only helps students to be more reader conscious but also equips them with a systematic method of deciding what to say and what to omit in their essay, thus minimizing the tendency to ‘go out of point.’ For NNS students whose literacy traditions favour non-direct modes of stance maintenance, articulation of and training in the thinking procedures and discourse practices of English expository writing removes some of the guesswork involved in writing English essays. Explicit teaching of thinking and genre practices is probably relevant to NS (native speaker) student-writers too. It has been reported that American students are most proficient in writing tasks calling for reporting or description of information and far less proficient in tasks requiring persuasion (Applebee, Langer, Mullis, & Jenkins, 1990). Persuasion is involved in the expository/argumentative essay genre where the desired outcome, from the perspective of the writer, is the reader’s acceptance of, if not agreement with, the writer’s point of view.

Conclusion
The question that this study sought to answer was whether students’ stance development skills would improve after instruction in cognitive and discourse practices appropriate to expository/argumentative essay writing. The answer, obtained through an analysis of
topics and topic comments in pre- and post-instruction essays, appears to be in the affirmative. Stance-enhancing topicality markedly increased in essays written after 14 weekly lessons while non-functional topicality decreased significantly. The results suggest that students’ expository writing skills can be improved through instructional materials and activities directed at nudging student writers into the mental postures and writer roles associated with stance adoption and defence.

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References


