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**PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' USE OF EVALUATIVE MEANINGS IN ESSAYS:
EVIDENCE FOR TRANSFORMING THE TEACHING OF ACADEMIC LITERACY**

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Abstract

One characteristic of successful academic essays is the effective use of evaluation or expression of evaluative meanings to achieve valued discourse behaviours such as sustaining the writer's stance and projection of authorial voice. Evaluation is the expression of the writer's attitude towards the propositions the writer incorporates into the essay. Choice and expression of evaluative meanings can be a challenge for students who may be unfamiliar with the finer practices in academic discourse or are not fully equipped with the linguistic resources for expressing evaluation. While there have been studies on the role of different types of evaluation in texts, there has been little or no research on how student writers select and use evaluation in their own writing. This paper reports preliminary findings of a study on students' use of evaluation. The study was conceived within a social-cognitive model of writing and guided by two research questions: 1. What cognitive acts may account for the expression of appropriate and inappropriate evaluative meanings in the process of essay writing? 2. What genre knowledge do students apply in decision-making related to the expression of evaluation?

Data addressing the research questions were collected from a group of pre-university students by means of two writing tasks and an interview conducted individually immediately after each writing task. The texts generated in the writing tasks and interview transcripts were analysed to identify decision-making processes and genre knowledge underlying instances of evaluation in the written products. The findings show a higher frequency of rhetorical thinking and application of genre knowledge among student writers of texts containing more instances of appropriate evaluation compared to students whose texts show fewer instances of appropriate evaluation. The pedagogical implications of the findings are discussed with reference to how pedagogy might be redesigned to raise students' academic writing skills.

PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' USE OF EVALUATIVE MEANINGS IN ESSAYS: EVIDENCE FOR TRANSFORMING THE TEACHING OF ACADEMIC LITERACY

Introduction

One characteristic of successful academic essays is the effective use of evaluation or expression of evaluative meanings to achieve valued discourse behaviours such as sustaining the writer's stance and projection of authorial voice. Evaluation is "the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude...towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about" (Hunston & Thompson, 2000, p. 5). The study of types of attitudes in texts, the strength of writers' feelings, and the source of attitudes is also known as "appraisal" (Martin & Rose, 2003).

Judicious selection of evaluative meanings contributes significantly to the construction of a consistent writer stance or thesis in an academic essay, while ill considered choices can create ambiguous or contradictory signals of the writer's stance. Choice and expression of evaluative meanings can be a challenge for students who may be unfamiliar with the finer practices in academic discourse, are not fully equipped with the linguistic resources for expressing evaluation, or have the tendency to use evaluative language without paying sufficient attention to its effect on readers.

Appropriate use of evaluation is particularly important in essay writing in the subject known as General Paper in the A-level examination taken by students at the pre-university (Year 12) level, known as Junior College in Singapore where this study was conducted. Among the General Paper's objectives is the aim to develop literacy skills, notably "effective communication, and the ability to evaluate arguments and opinions" (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2009). To manifest ability to evaluate arguments students are expected to "formulate cogent arguments" (Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board, 2011, p. 1), and display "sensitivity, sophistication, awareness and maturity" (University of Cambridge

International Examinations, 2009, p. 3). The ability to evaluate arguments and construct cogent arguments calls for a facility with deploying linguistic resources for creating nuances of meaning and projecting writer stance, which is what evaluation does in texts. Linguistic resources for expressing evaluation include lexicogrammatical devices for hedging or boosting propositions, valuing topics, expressing the perspective from which a person or event is viewed, communicating personal judgements about the certainty or reliability of information, managing writer-reader relations and shaping reader response. It will be noted that these are all acts involved in meeting the General Paper's aim to develop students' ability to comment on others' arguments, construct their own cogent arguments, and demonstrate sensitivity and maturity.

Evaluation is essential in constructing argument because, according to Thompson and Hunston (2000), evaluation serves three functions, namely, to express the writer's opinion, maintain relations between writer and reader, and signal the organisation of the discourse to enable the reader to keep track of the development of the text. Without evaluation facilitating the performance of these functions, there may be no argument or only simplistic arguments lacking the sophistication and maturity of thought that GP examiners look for.

Inappropriate evaluation can weaken a writer's argument instead of strengthening it as illustrated in the excerpt below from a GP essay responding to the question: 'Children today are no longer able to enjoy their childhood': Is this true of children in our society?

...in the world today, usage of these technologically advanced gadgets are indeed ways children spend their time and they do relish the time spent on them. Take for instance, most of the time, a child could be kept silent or disciplined just by engaging him/her with a handphone or gaming console. As the world gets more developed, the definition of "enjoyment" would be

redefined. In conclusion, it is untrue that children today are no longer able to enjoy their childhood. [Student B036]

In disagreeing with the statement, the student was arguing that today's children derive enjoyment from electronic forms of entertainment and not from outdoor games as was the case with their parents' generation. The depiction of the child with the "handphone or gaming console" as 'kept silent' and 'disciplined' detracts from the intended argument that "technologically advanced gadgets" are the means by which children enjoy their childhood today. Inappropriate evaluation like the above example, if recurrent in an essay, can result in inconsistency in the writer's overall opinion or position on the issue discussed.

Given the important role played by evaluation in expression of writer position, writer-reader interaction, and signalling text organisation (Thompson and Hunston, 2000), including evaluation in academic writing lessons could contribute to raising the quality of student writing. The question that arises is what to teach about evaluation and how best to teach it. Mere explanation of the concept of evaluation and even exercises in identifying evaluation in finished texts may not result in students learning what evaluation to express or avoid at what point in the production process of their own writing. To make informed pedagogical decisions about whether or how to teach evaluation we need an in-depth understanding of the factors that shape student writers' choice and use evaluation. There may be certain cognitive processes or patterns of thinking, or genre knowledge underlying student writers' appropriate and inappropriate use of evaluation. An understanding of how students use evaluation can only be arrived at through close analysis of their writing and talking to them in an attempt to uncover their decision-making process during writing and the genre knowledge that may influence the decision-making. Hence the research reported in this paper was guided by two questions: What cognitive acts may account for the expression of appropriate and

inappropriate evaluative meanings in students' essay writing process? What genre knowledge do students apply in decision-making that may affect their expression of evaluation?

Previous studies on evaluation and students' writing throw some light on the cognitive processes and genre knowledge that may play a role in appropriate expression of evaluation. The next section reviews some of these studies.

Brief review of literature

As the current study's focus is on the cognitive processes and genre knowledge that may shape student writers' use of evaluation, this brief literature review will explore two types of research for indications of the thinking and genre practices underlying expression of evaluation in text construction. The first consists of studies on the nature of evaluation itself, how it is manifested and its functions in texts (e.g. Biber, 1989; Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Martin & Rose, 2003). The second type of research is that on students' written texts and writing processes, particularly studies that yield evidence of student writers' decision making processes, goals, attitudinal approach to writing, and awareness of audience and genre (Macbeth, 2006; Carbonne & Orellana, 2010; Mason & Scirica, 2006; Christie & Dreyfus, 2007). As the rest of this section will attempt to show, appropriate evaluation in texts may originate from certain cognitive composing behaviours and tacit knowledge of the expected genre, while dissonant evaluation may stem from less effective composing behaviours or from inadequate genre knowledge.

The conceptualization of evaluation as "comparative, subjective, and value-laden" (Thompson & Hunston, 2000, p. 13) indicates an underlying cognitive process of viewing ideas, events, people, or things in a certain light. Evaluation emerges from the writer's intention to see, for instance, childhood as enjoyable or as stressful. Since evaluation is subjective, the writer's view of the evaluated entity must stem from a personal perspective or

stance with reference to the topic or issue of the discourse. The value-laden aspect of evaluation suggests that appropriate evaluation is shaped by a writer's awareness of the values and beliefs operating in the target reader's discourse community. The persuasive power of the resulting text is likely to be enhanced when, in expressing the writer's opinion, it also "reflect[s] the value system" of the community (Thompson & Hunston, 2000, p. 6). The writer's judgement about the worth or desirability of an entity (e.g. *a logical conclusion*; *an effective method*) would have to accord with the criteria for judging worth and desirability in the discourse community's value system. If not, the writer's message may not have the intended effect on the reader, such as would happen if the writer's judgement of "a logical conclusion" does not meet the conditions the discourse community holds as necessary to qualify conclusions as 'logical'. We may hypothesize that for student writers to deploy evaluation effectively, an intention to adopt a stance is necessary along with some awareness of their target reader's value system.

Studies on the role of evaluation in texts give us further insight into the ways of thinking that may be responsible for expression of appropriate evaluative meanings. As mentioned earlier, Thompson and Hunston (2000) identify 3 functions of evaluation: expressing the writer's opinion, organising the discourse, and maintaining writer-reader relations. Expression of the writer's opinion is convincing only if the opinion is justified with supporting arguments which cannot be effectively constructed without evaluation. We may deduce that underlying expression of evaluation is a rhetorical intention to persuade with supporting arguments, the execution of which involves the main cognitive acts of setting goals specifying writer purpose and reader effect, selecting goal-targeted content, and managing anticipated reader response, for instance, through rebuttal of anticipated opposing views. Opposing views are usually negatively evaluated in an attempt to assert "the superiority" of the writer's own opinion (Stotesbury, 2006, p. 125). To use an example from a

text in Thompson and Hunston (2000, p. 11) negative evaluation may depict the opposing view as a “misunderstanding” or reduce its truth value by placing it in the category of “assumption”. When such negative evaluations appear in a text the writer must have engaged in the cognitive acts of predicting possible reader response, identifying contrary views and, in the case of experienced writers, planning the rebuttal of those views.

The discourse organisation function of evaluation points to the cognitive processes of making judgements about the relative importance of propositions (which is to be the key point and which the elaborating points) and maintaining a rhetorical intention to influence the reader to perceive the importance of propositions in the same way. Thompson and Hunston (2000) explicate this function with a text in which upcoming propositions are evaluated as “the basic assumption” and, a few lines later, as “a misunderstanding”, evaluations signalling a position “which the writer is clearly not committed to” (p. 11). The evaluative meanings (*assumption/misunderstanding*) cue the reader to look out for the writer’s ‘correction’ of the ‘misunderstanding’ thus orienting the reader to the organisation structure of the argument. It seems reasonable to conclude that use of evaluation is shaped by mental acts of crafting logical progression in argument construction and sorting propositions to create the effect of ‘logic’ or coherence. Further, for evaluative coherence to be sustained, as in the alignment of polarity in *assumption* and *misunderstanding*, the writer’s thinking processes during composing must have been directed by some high level rhetorical goal, a composing behaviour noted of skilled writers (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Atwell, 1980 cited in Kucer, 2005).

The function of evaluation in creating and maintaining writer-reader relations is manifested in linguistic devices for interacting with readers by hedging and qualifying claims so as to project a cautious, objective persona in academic discourse (*x may result in y in many cases though by no means all*), introducing author comment into the discourse to engage the

reader (*Admittedly, ... Surprisingly, ...*), and persuading the reader “to see things in a particular way” (Thompson and Hunston, 2000, p. 8) as when a politician’s work is summarised as “what he has accomplished”. The interpersonal function of evaluation underlines the socio-rhetorical approach of skilled writers to text production that views writing as social interaction and persuasion rather than merely knowledge transmission or what Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) call knowledge telling. Writing with full awareness of the audience and socio-cultural context, and making composing decisions informed by knowledge of the discourse behaviours considered normative in the community would lead to expression of appropriate evaluation. If students know that the persona and voice they should project in an academic essay is that of an objective, inquiring scholar in a reasoned discussion with the target reader, the written product is more likely to feature acts of hedging and qualifying claims and evaluative meanings that steer the reader to the writer’s view of the topic of discussion.

Turning to research on students’ writing, we find evidence suggesting that appropriate evaluation arises from certain cognitive capabilities and genre knowledge that shape decision making in writing. One cognitive skill seems to be that of identifying from a collection of propositions the one that would serve as the writer’s main point, whether the main point of a paragraph or of the whole text. In a study of college students’ summary writing Macbeth (2006) found that identifying the main point in a given text is a challenge for many of her students. Deciding on a main point during writing is no less challenging because it involves a complex process of judging relevance, gauging reader needs, considering rhetorical goals, interpreting significance, and abstracting from a collection of propositions, generated by the writer or gathered from sources, the one proposition that the writer will cast as main point of an essay or of a section or paragraph. In many school writing tasks the main point of an essay answer to a teacher’s question involves a “capacity to offer abstract observations” on a text or

issue, followed by elaboration and development of the abstract claim (Christie & Dreyfus, 2007, p. 236). It is only after going through the complex process of arriving at a main point that writers can select evaluation that would express their opinion and organise propositions in a consistent way so as to facilitate the reader's retrieval of the main point. The sustained reflection of the main point in evaluation is plainly evident in these opening sentences of a paragraph written by a good writer in Christie and Dreyfus' study:

“In *both* Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Frankenstein, we can see *examples of strong emotions* used throughout. Spike's *love* for Drusilla *causes* him to take *dramatic measures* and *risk even his own life to benefit* her...” (Christie & Dreyfus, 2007, p. 238). [Italics indicating evaluation added]

The main claim of ‘strong emotions’ is mirrored in the evaluation of “Spike’s love” as a “cause” of his actions, which are depicted as “dramatic” and of “benefit” to the loved one, and further amplified in “risk even his own life”. The choice of evaluation may have turned out to be less strongly focused on one polarity if it had not been directed by the writer’s sense of his high level goal, his main point.

The preceding discussion on the judging, interpreting, and abstracting processes that enable a writer to arrive at a main point tells us that there are ways of thinking and talking that are highly valued in academic writing such as the school essay and the General Paper essay. Genre knowledge, that is knowledge of the privileged ways of thinking, language use, epistemological attitudes, and social practices in writer-reader interaction, plays a significant role in choice of evaluation. Let us examine just the case of epistemological attitude to see its impact on expression of evaluation in academic writing. The research of Mason & Scirica (2006) has revealed that writers who view competing knowledge claims as legitimate and so “can be ... evaluated to judge which (claim) can reasonably be considered more justified” based on shared norms in the community write higher quality arguments (p. 504). Holding

this epistemological understanding, which marks a writer as cognisant of the genre of academic discourse, would influence the production of a certain kind of voice in writing. We would expect the voice to contain a degree of cautious tentativeness born of the writer's sensitivity to the need for substantiating evidence whenever claims are made, since voice is constructed when writers make "decisions (conscious or otherwise) to highlight certain values ... over others" (Carbone & Orellana, 2010, p. 297). The careful avoidance of unqualified generalisations and unsubstantiated claims produces in the finished text appropriate evaluation in the form of hedging expressions of various kinds indicating the writer's belief about the probability of the truth of statements. Wu and Allison (2003), after analysing manifestations of evaluation (for which they used the term 'Appraisal') in university students' essays, concluded that the writers of the lowest score essays "as a group [were] more inclined to formulate their claims with less tolerance for an alternative perspective," (p. 82). Appropriate evaluation in academic writing then arises from genre knowledge that consciously or unconsciously cues writers to signal awareness of competing positions, and to view competing knowledge claims and their defence as open to negotiation.

This review of studies on the functions of evaluation and on students' writing suggests that appropriate evaluation in academic writing arises from cognitive composing processes that are shaped by high level rhetorical goals and informed by knowledge of the epistemological attitudes and discourse behaviours valued in academic discourse communities. However, there is little or no empirical evidence of this inferred relation between a genre-informed socio-rhetorical approach to writing and effective evaluation in students' texts. Studies on evaluation in writing have tended to focus on experienced writers' texts such as abstracts of published articles (Stotesbury, 2006), economic forecasts (Walsh, 2006), and peer review reports written by journal reviewers (Fortanet, 2008). Studies on evaluation in students' writing largely report the linguistic forms for conveying different

types of evaluative meanings in students' finished products (Wu & Allison, 2003; Hood, 2004). While research on linguistic resources for expressing evaluation may contribute to our knowledge of what evaluative meanings students are capable of deploying in their writing, it is rather limited in what it can tell us about how the evaluation is produced in terms of the students' cognitive composing processes or genre knowledge. This study, therefore, aims to discover through interviews with student writers if there are ways of thinking during writing or knowledge about the purpose and nature of academic essays that may enhance appropriate evaluation and reduce inappropriate evaluation in students' essays.

Methodology

To discover the factors that may influence students' use of evaluation in academic writing, data in the form of students' written products and self reports on their composing decisions were collected from Junior college (Grade 11) students through two writing tasks and individual interviews. Details on the student participants, writing tasks, and data analysis are given below.

Participants

A total of 42 Grade 11 students volunteered to participate in the study, but the results reported in this paper come from the written products and interview transcripts of 19 of them as data analysis is ongoing at the time of writing. The students were from two pre-university colleges, known as Junior Colleges in Singapore. Of the 19 students whose data are reported in this paper, 12 were attending a prestigious Junior College that accepts only students who have achieved distinction grades in English and 5 other subjects in the O-level examination. The other 7 were from a regular Junior College that accepts students with good credit passes in the O-level.

Writing tasks

Two writing tasks were administered individually to each student. In the first task (headed “Part 1” in the Appendix), students were given an essay’s opening paragraph, stating the student author’s disagreement with the view that “Children today are no longer able to enjoy their childhood,” and followed by two instructions. The first instruction asked students to advise the author on how to continue the essay in the second paragraph. The second instruction required students to write the second paragraph putting their own advice into practice.

The second writing task provided an incomplete essay of three paragraphs with the first two asserting the student author’s view that men are not necessarily better scientists than women, and the third paragraph presenting the opposing view. Students were asked to first advise the author how to continue the essay in the fourth paragraph and then write the paragraph carrying out the advice they gave.

Interviews

Students were interviewed individually as soon as they had completed writing in each of the two tasks. Each student was therefore interviewed twice for the purpose of discovering the thinking processes and genre knowledge that may have influenced their choice of evaluative meaning and language during writing. The interview was conducted like a conversation in which researcher and student discussed the advice they gave the fictional author of the given stimulus texts and the decisions the student had made in the writing of the paragraph following the given texts. Most of the interviewer’s questions were along the lines of “What made you say/use the word *x*?” Interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and transcribed.

Data analysis

Two types of texts were analysed: interview transcripts and the paragraphs students wrote in response to the two tasks. Interview transcripts were closely examined for

indications of cognitive composing processes and genre knowledge. Cognitive composing processes were inferred from references in the interviewees' language to writer intention, anticipated reader response, intended reader affect, the purpose of the text, or some such element of the socio-rhetorical context of the writing. Cognitive acts during composing were categorized into groups and named as shown in Table 1, with the specific processes subsumed in each category set out in the column headed "Component processes".

Table 1. Cognitive composing acts

Cognitive composing act	Component processes
Support Claim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decide elaborating details for claim support Select examples or cases to serve as evidence of a claim
Consider OV (Opposing view)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise OV Address OV through rebuttal, downplaying of significance, or other means
Meet Reader Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicate writer's stance (position) Reiterate writer's stance Define terms Provide reader orienting information Relate paragraph main point to overall writer stance
Generate (Topic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use topic as springboard to generate content Search memory for knowledge to say about the topic Recount from sources different views on the topic.
Generate (Rhetorical)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generate content by considering the rhetorical situation Write with intention to argue

Interviewees' knowledge of the General Paper essay genre was identified in allusions to or descriptions of academic discourse practices or the values generally held in the academic discourse community about written argument and writer-reader interaction in written texts. For example, knowledge of the value system is indicated if a student explains why he used the modal "may" in a sentence by saying:

"...unless you have statistics to back up the statement, I don't think we can really say 'they derive fun from...'; you have to say it objectively"

The paragraphs students wrote in response to the two writing tasks were analysed for appropriateness of evaluation. First, occurrences of evaluation had to be identified.

Proceeding from Hunston and Thompson's (2000) definition of evaluation as the writer's "attitude...towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about" (p. 5) the topics that enter into the writer's developing text, instances of evaluation in students' paragraphs were identified by asking two questions:

1. What entity is evaluated? The entity refers to the thing or idea about which the writer has signalled an attitude or viewpoint.
2. How is the entity evaluated? Is it, for example, viewed in a positive or negative light, or as of uncertain veracity, or as having a certain status or quality relative to the norm?

Table 2 shows the list of evaluative acts used to recognize evaluative meanings in the students' texts.

Table 2. Evaluative acts

Evaluative act	Examples
Valuing: Positive, negative, or neutral relative to writer's goals	<i>...information <u>can be readily obtained</u> with a click (Value^{+ve}); /the book is now <u>obsolete</u> (Value^{-ve}); /...people are more concerned with their <u>economic welfare</u> (Value^N)</i>
Comparing: Comparing quality or absence/presence with the norm	<i>No longer, only; at least; lack</i>
Hedging: Expressing degree of commitment to truth of a proposition, or hypothesizing	<i>Probably; unlikely; may; about...; If...</i>
Asserting (certainty, reliability)	<i>there <u>is no doubt</u> that...; <u>Clearly</u>, the results...</i>
Prescribing; recommending	<i>The government should ...</i>
Amplifying: Through use of boosters/intensifiers	<i>There are <u>indeed</u> reasons why...; X is <u>definitely</u> untrue</i>
Distancing: Writer disassociating self from a point of view	<i>so it is said; the so-called... Or uses quote marks</i>
Regulating R-W relation: Expressing interpersonal meaning, signaling intention, etc.	<i>Surprisingly, ... (and other evaluative adjuncts) <u>Yet there are signs...</u> (signal intention to bring in contrary view)</i>
Attributing to source	<i>According to N...; N maintains that...</i>

After an instance of evaluation was identified, it was coded appropriate or inappropriate according to whether it served a rhetorical function in the text. Evaluation serves a rhetorical function if it plays a role in developing the writer's position or enacting a discourse practice of the academic essay genre. Rhetorically functional evaluation occurs, for example, when it contributes to counter-arguing an opposing view or contributes to the construction of objectivity in voice. The student's paragraph in each task was first rapidly read to determine its main point and the writer's stance before decisions were made on the appropriateness of the evaluative meanings.

The number of appropriate and inappropriate meanings per 100 words in each student's writing task products was computed. Analysis of 27 students' texts was completed at the time of preparation of this paper. From these the 10 with the highest number of appropriate evaluation items per 100 words were placed in a group called the 'High Appropriate Evaluation' group, while 9 students with the lowest scores for appropriate evaluation formed the 'Low Appropriate Evaluation' group. This grouping into 'High' and 'Low' for appropriateness of evaluation facilitated the comparison of the two groups' means for the different cognitive processes and evidence of genre knowledge.

Findings

This study aimed to discover the ways of thinking and the kind of genre knowledge that may influence student writers' use of evaluation. The mean frequencies of the thinking processes and indication of genre knowledge that emerged from the students' interview responses are shown in Table 3. With the exception of Generate from Topic, the mean frequencies of all cognitive acts and references to genre knowledge were all higher in the High Appropriate Evaluation group. The largest difference between the two group's means was in genre awareness. The interview transcripts of the High Appropriate Evaluation Group featured more talk about the students' understanding of the requirements of the academic

essay genre. A significant correlation was found between genre awareness and appropriate evaluation (Pearson's $r = .482$; $p < .05$ [two tailed]).

Table 3 Appropriate evaluation and cognitive acts

Group	Cognitive acts and application of genre knowledge (means)					
	Consider OV	Meet Reader Needs	Generate (Rhetorical)	Generate (Topic)	Support Claim	Apply Genre Awareness
High Appropriate Evaluation N = 10	5.60	3.50	5.10	4.50	15.70	9.30
Low Appropriate Evaluation N = 9	3.22	2.78	4.67	5.44	15.67	5.33

As can be seen from Table 3, the High Appropriate Evaluation group considered opposing views more frequently than the Low Appropriate Evaluation group. Also worthy of note are the means for Generate (Rhetorical) and Generate (Topic), the latter being the only cognitive act that occurred more often in the Low Appropriate Evaluation group. In Generate (Rhetorical), however, the reverse trend was observed. Although the differences are minimal the contrary trends in these two methods of generating content may imply a significant difference in the two groups' composing processes that could have been a contributory factor in the lower incidence of appropriate evaluation in the Low Appropriate Evaluation group. No tests of significance were run on the means in Table 3 as the number of students involved was too small, but statistical tests will be done when data analysis is completed for all 42 students who participated in the study.

As reported above, the two groups demonstrated genre knowledge with a marked difference in frequency. The genre knowledge the students articulated included knowledge of academic discourse practices such as arguing to support claims, providing evidence or reasons to back claims, organising the development of the essay according to genre norms

(e.g. stating or indicating the writer's position in the introduction when there is no reason to withhold it), and managing the interaction with the reader. In addition, the High Evaluation Appropriate group in particular also articulated values generally regarded as characteristic assumptions of academic discourse communities. The assumptions included the value placed on projecting an objective, reasonable writer voice, and of positioning the writer as open to negotiation when contestable claims are made, and addressing anticipated reader response to the writer's statements. A few students were also aware of the prestige attached to nuanced meanings and depiction of complexity of issues as opposed to simplistic positions and arguments.

Discussion

The biggest difference between the two groups was in genre awareness. This difference and the significant correlation between genre awareness and appropriate evaluation suggests that ability to select and use evaluative meanings effectively is enhanced by knowledge of academic discourse practices and the values operating whenever texts are written and read for academic purposes. It is not difficult to see the link between a writing process informed by genre knowledge and the expression of appropriate evaluation. If a writer is aware that hedging and qualifying claims are conventional and valued practices in academic writing, for example, there would an intention to hedge or qualify at some point in the writing as a result of which propositions would be evaluated and expressed as possibilities or mitigated statements rather than facts or certainties. But for evaluation to be appropriate the writer has to know when hedging would contribute to the persuasiveness of an argument and when it would have the opposite effect of creating dissonance. How does a writer know?

Writing researchers who have investigated students' writing processes (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1980) and texts (e.g. Christie & Dreyfus, 2007; Atwell, 1980 cited in Kucer, 2005)

offer an answer, which seems borne out by the findings of the current study. Research has found that skilled writers appear to direct their decisions with a high level goal or plan (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Atwell, 1980 cited in Kucer, 2005) and write with “a strong sense of overall organisation” (Christie & Dreyfus, 2007, p. 235) that seems to confirm the role of a high level rhetorical goal to argue a thesis. The influence of a rhetorical goal may account for the higher incidence of Generate (Rhetorical) and Consider OV in the High Appropriate Evaluation group (Table 3). A strongly felt global goal coupled with a rhetorical mindset, that approaches writing as persuasion, may influence the writer to present the thesis initially in hedged, qualified terms indicating mindfulness of competing views as in this sentence from a student essay analysed in an earlier study on evaluation (Chandrasegaran & Kasanga, 2009):

“Despite all its flaws, and even if history itself is “merely fluid prejudice”, there *are still* many reasons why we *should not discredit* the study of history”

(Chandrasegaran & Kasanga, 2009).

This sentence, stating the student writer’s position on the issue (whether history is worth studying) in the opening paragraph of the essay, begins with a hedge acknowledging the competing view while asserting the writer’s view (*are still many reasons ... we should not discredit*). This skilled student writer has evaluated the study of history as worthwhile but the evaluation is tempered by an awareness of the competing view (*history has flaws/is merely ... prejudice*). The most plausible explanation of the allusion to the competing view in the thesis statement is that the writer’s composing decisions were guided by a rhetorical mindset to manage possible reader resistance and by knowledge of the value attached to consideration of competing views in academic discourse. The ability to anticipate potential reader resistance suggests that writing decisions, including selection and use of evaluative meanings, were driven by a clear sense of an overall rhetorical goal to present and justify one key message.

The above discussion on how writers know when to evaluate entities as less than certain or mitigated can be applied to other types of evaluation. The trend of higher mean frequencies for Applying genre awareness, Consider Opposing View, and Generate (Rhetorical) in the High Appropriate Evaluation group suggests that appropriate evaluation materialises from a combination of genre knowledge, directing the writing process with a high level rhetorical goal, and writing with an intention to persuade. Although this conclusion is based on only a sample of the data collected, some implications for the teaching of writing may tentatively be drawn.

Since appropriate evaluation seems to spring from genre knowledge and a rhetorical mindset, teaching the surface manifestations of evaluation is unlikely to improve students' academic writing substantially. Teaching students to recognize evaluation in finished texts and urging them to insert evaluative meanings into their essays will not help students decide what attitudinal meanings, feelings and value judgements are appropriate at what point of development of their essay. What seems more promising, based on the findings discussed above, is a pedagogy that combines the teaching of academic discourse practices with instruction in the thinking processes of formulating high level rhetorical goals, goal directed selection of meaning, and managing anticipated audience, all thinking processes for facilitating the realisation of the discourse practices. Because evaluation serves rhetorical functions in texts, the teaching of academic genre practices must extend beyond mere description of moves in text development and characteristic linguistic features. The discourse practices of a genre originate from certain motivations and mental dispositions (e.g. an intention to contribute new knowledge by re-interpreting the community's existing knowledge, a need to convince an audience while maintaining an objective rational voice) which construct the work of an academic discourse community and regulate the interaction between its members. If writing pedagogy can be designed to provide student writers with

demonstration and practice in the motivations and mental dispositions underlying a genre's discourse behaviours, student writers will be better equipped to sustain appropriate evaluation in their essays. When students are practising the mental postures, epistemological attitudes, and discourse behaviours valued in academic writing they can be taught to check if the evaluation they express align with the expected postures and attitudes.

Conclusion

This paper has reported preliminary findings from a study of evaluation in pre-university students' essays. The study aimed at discovering the cognitive acts and the influence of genre knowledge in students' choice of appropriate and inappropriate evaluation in essay writing. The findings reveal a significant association between knowledge of the essay genre's discourse practices and incidence of appropriate evaluation. Students whose writing showed the highest frequency of appropriate evaluation displayed more indications of genre knowledge and the cognitive acts of considering opposing views, meeting reader needs, and generating content from the rhetorical situation, compared to students with the lowest frequency of appropriate evaluation. One pedagogical implication of the results is that integrating the teaching of genre practices and instruction in the cognitive operations of a rhetorical approach to writing may help students to use evaluation more purposefully and thus raise the quality of their academic essays. The study of evaluation in students' texts can provide insights into how we might redesign pedagogy to assist students to develop a more sophisticated level of academic literacy.

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Appendix

Writing Task

PART 1

A student has written the first paragraph of an essay. Read the essay title and the first paragraph. Then do the task below.

Essay Title: “Children today are no longer able to enjoy their childhood.” Is this true of children in our society?

First paragraph:

One often hears the refrain that children today do not enjoy their childhood as much as their parents or grandparents did in the past. Evidence is cited of how children in Singapore are tied down by their school work and other commitments that compromise the “enjoyment” of their childhood. While admittedly, this trend is true in Singapore’s society, it would be a sweeping generalisation to say that children are no longer able to enjoy their childhood. Recent societal trends and developments have seen the emergence of different lifestyles compared to those of the past, and perhaps a new meaning to the enjoyment of childhood alongside these changes. This may mean that the past experiences of the older generations and their definition of enjoyment no longer hold, and should change with the times. Thus this may not necessarily mean that children are no longer able to enjoy their childhood.

Task

1. The writer is uncertain how to continue in the next paragraph. Advise the writer on what he can do. Be as detailed as you can in your instructions so that the writer can continue.
2. Write the second paragraph of the essay, carrying out your own advice. (It is alright if you find you can’t carry out the advice; just write the paragraph.)

When you have finished the task, the researcher will talk to you about what you have done. The purpose of the conversation is to find out more about how students think as they write.

The writing you do in the two tasks and the thoughts you express in the conversations will not be divulged to your teachers.

PART 2

Read the essay title and the paragraphs below. Then do the tasks that follow.

Essay Title: “Men make better scientists than women.” Do you agree?

In one of his speeches, Harvard’s President, Mr. Summers suggested that men generally make better scientists than women. This resulted in an uproar and much unhappiness amongst Harvard’s female population. We have once again witnessed another episode of the Battle of the Sexes, but this time, in the context of the scientific arena. Such notions that men are generally superior in science as compared to women are not just held by Mr. Summers, but also by many other people. This essay will hence attempt to illustrate why such a notion is an example of a bias and an overgeneralisation.

Contrary to popular belief, women are not entirely absent in the arena of science. In fact, there exist famous female scientists, such as Marie Curie, who laid the foundation for radioactive science. By what yardsticks can one compare Marie Curie’s achievements with that of Thomas Edison’s invention? Indeed, light bulbs have brightened the nights of our modern world, but the discovery of radioactivity has also evolved into one of the most important means to treat life-threatening diseases.

Statistics do show that in most science faculties, the predominant sex is the male. Specifically, in Harvard, women generally take up less than 30% of the science faculties. Such statistics appear to support the notion that men are better at science, since it is generally the males who are capable of making it to the science faculty of the top university in the world. In fact, this is complemented by research done by Columbia University, which found that females and males are intrinsically different in terms of the structure of the brain. Men have brains which are more compartmentalised and are generally more adept at visualisation and logical thinking. Their counterparts, however, are more proficient at verbalisation and emotional empathy. Comparing the strengths of each sex above, it would yet again seem that males are better at science since their brains are more inclined towards developing essential scientific skills such as visualisation and logical thinking.

Task

1. Advise the writer how she should continue the essay. Be as detailed as possible to enable the writer to follow your advice. Also explain why you advise her the way you have done.
2. Continue the writer’s paragraph above **or** write a new paragraph to demonstrate how your advice would be carried out.

Thank you for your time and effort. Please return the task sheets to the researcher before you leave.