

Influencing teachers' theoretical orientation to expository essay writing through instructional material design

Abstract

Research has established that the teaching methods played out in classroom lessons tend to reflect teachers' theoretical orientations (Johnson, 1992). It seems possible then to improve the effectiveness of teaching by seeking to bring about change in teachers' theoretical view of their subject. This exploratory paper inquires into the extent to which English language teachers can be influenced, through instructional material design, to adopt a social-cognitive theoretical orientation to expository essay writing and to its teaching. Instructional materials were designed to engage students in the learning of goal-referenced thinking during writing and of discourse practices conventional to expository writing. Teachers' guides were provided and discussion sessions held to familiarise teachers with the philosophy underlying the materials. Lessons were observed for evidence of a social-cognitive orientation to writing instruction as opposed to the form-focused, product-centred orientation that teachers tended towards at the beginning of the study. The results tentatively suggest that instructional materials can, to some extent, influence writing teachers' classroom practices by initiating a shift in their theoretical orientation towards the socio-cognitive dimensions of writing. Implications for teachers' professional development will be discussed with reference to the role that school climate and teacher-researcher collaboration in materials design can play in changing teachers' theoretical orientation.

Introduction

Teachers' classroom practices reflect their theoretical view of their subject and of the learning process involved in achieving mastery of that subject (Johnson, 1992). In a review of the literature on teacher learning and teacher knowledge, Freeman (2002) observed that from the 1980s there has been increasing recognition of the role of teachers' "mental lives" in their decisions on what and how they teach (Freeman, 2002, p.1). Johnson (1995), for instance, noted that teachers' theoretical beliefs are filters through which "instructional judgements and decisions" are made (Johnson, 1995, p.33).

It follows that any attempt to improve teaching methods through the implementation of innovative approaches may be thwarted if teachers' theoretical orientations do not change to align with the philosophy underlying the new pedagogy (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999; Turnbull, 1999).

The importance of the teacher's theoretical orientation in improving pedagogy raises the question of how teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning can be modified to align with the theoretical underpinnings of new, research-based teaching methods that may be more effective than current commonly practised methods. One method may be through the design of educative curriculum materials, that is, instructional materials "intended to promote teacher learning in addition to student learning" (Davis & Krajcik, 2005, p.3). Davis and Krajcik argue that the principled development of educative curriculum materials "can promote changes in teachers' knowledge and practice" (2005, p.3). The question, which is the concern of this paper, is whether instructional materials designed to shape teachers' knowledge and practice would bring about concomitant changes in their theoretical perspectives on the teaching of their subject.

This paper reports on the differential effect that a common set of instructional materials had on teachers in a research project that sought to shift English language teachers to a social-cognitive approach to teaching expository writing. The project's primary aim was to test the effectiveness of explicitly teaching the genre practices and associated thinking processes of expository essay writing. In carrying out the study, the results of which are reported elsewhere (Chandrasegaran, 2006), it was observed that the same lesson materials and teachers' guides influenced teachers' classroom practices differently, suggesting that there can be wide variation in the impact of the same instructional materials on teachers' mental lives. The aim of this paper is to describe the variations observed in teachers in two schools and to explore the factors that could account for the differential effect of a common set of instructional materials on teachers' theoretical orientation towards the teaching of writing.

The specific questions addressed in this paper are:

1. Can curriculum materials realising a social-cognitive approach to writing instruction bring about some observable change in the theoretical orientation of teachers who tend towards a product-centred approach to teaching writing?

2. What factors in the teacher's professional development environment may account for whether a teacher's theoretical orientation changes to align with the philosophy of a new method of teaching?

In the rest of this paper a case will first be made for the use of self reports and classroom observations as a means of identifying a teacher's theoretical approach to teaching writing. The methodology section that follows will describe the teachers involved in the study, the instructional materials, and the method of identifying theoretical orientation in questionnaire responses, interviews and teacher talk during lessons. The findings are next reported in the form of frequency of observations of two theoretical orientations, one of which is aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of the lesson materials. The discussion section explores the factors that could influence outcomes in the use of curriculum materials as a means of developing teachers' theoretical orientation, and the possibility of a relation between teacher's theoretical orientation and student performance.

Identifying writing teachers' theoretical orientation

The assumption that beliefs can be inferred from what an individual's words and observable behaviours has driven previous research on teachers' beliefs (Pajares, 1992; Johnson, 1994). In a study of preservice ESL (English as a second language) teachers' beliefs, Johnson (1994) demonstrated that it is possible to identify teachers' perceptions about teaching and learning through analysing narrative data from such sources as interviews and observing their teaching behaviours in the classroom. The study reported here starts from the assumption that it is possible to infer, from interview data and classroom observations, teachers' beliefs about writing and methods of developing student's writing ability.

There are three theoretical orientations to teaching writing that are often summed up as product, process, and genre-based approaches (Kern, 2000). These orientations and their manifestation in classroom practices are briefly described here because the teachers in my study tended towards one of these approaches while the instructional materials designed for intervention were written within the framework of a combination of the other two approaches.

A product-oriented approach to teaching writing focuses on achieving “structural well-formedness” (Kern, 2000, p.180) of sentences and paragraphs, and certain intrinsic qualities of ideational content such as originality and creativity. Teaching activities typically aim at eliminating grammatical error, construction of paragraph topic sentences, production of ‘interesting’ ideas on the given topic, and organisation patterns described in finished-product terms like introduction, body and conclusion. The process approach to writing instruction, as understood by most English language teachers in Singapore, directs attention to the composing process, devoting class time to freewriting to encourage self expression, peer editing, and the writing of multiple drafts. Genre-based approaches to teaching writing emphasise the explicit teaching of the discourse conventions that are valued by writers and readers of a genre as a means of socialising students into the ways of thinking and language use of the targeted reader’s discourse community and raising student awareness of the cultural function of texts (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Clark, 2003). Ineffective writing is attributed to inadequate sociocultural knowledge of the genre expected by the teacher (Myhill, 2005). To equip students with genre knowledge, instruction is characterised by teacher-guided close study, known as ‘deconstruction’, of authentic texts exemplifying the target genre to draw students’ attention to rhetorical moves, their organisation, and language structures for realising the moves and the social goal of the text.

It is now generally accepted among literacy researchers that writing is situated in social contexts (e.g. Kern, 2000; Christie & Misson, 1998), which means that the cognitive abilities called into play during writing entail knowledge of social practices and cultural assumptions (Kern, 2000). In this light product-centred approaches to teaching writing tend to be regarded as limiting on account of its focus on only one aspect of writing – surface level qualities like grammatical accuracy. Students who are told that an essay must have a thesis may not have the cognitive skills to generate a thesis or to determine whether a statement they have in mind is a thesis. But while writing is a thinking activity, the thinking is shaped by and has to respond to the writer’s and reader’s social-cultural context. The goals a writer sets for an unfolding text are “not...based on properties of the human mind, but are a question of socialization” (Kern, 2000, p.33). A socio-cognitive approach that integrates the cognitive and genre views of writing seems a

sound theoretical ground for designing a pedagogy for empowering students with the ways of thinking that lead to the production of genre practices valued by examiners. The belief that writing is impelled by socially rooted thinking processes guided the design of the instructional materials used by the teachers involved in the current study.

Methodology

This section begins with information on the four teachers selected for study before giving an account of the method of noting and analysing their theoretical orientations to the teaching of writing.

The teacher participants

The four teachers featured in this study were selected from the eight who participated in a research project to test the effectiveness of explicit instruction of genre-related thinking processes in expository writing. The four were selected for three reasons. Firstly, they were trained teachers with a bachelor's degree in English or a social science subject and a postgraduate diploma in education from the National Institute of Education, Singapore. (Due to a staff shortage, untrained teachers were employed in one of the schools and were involved in the project for part of its duration.) Secondly, the four teachers were with their school before the writing project began and remained with the project for its duration of one semester, or in the case of one teacher, for more than half the semester. Other teachers joined the project halfway or were moved to teach other levels a few weeks into the semester. Thirdly, the four teachers permitted the researcher to observe one of their lessons. Teachers had been asked if the researcher could sit in at one of their classes to observe how the new materials were received by students. A profile of the four teachers is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the teachers

Teacher	School	Gender	Teaching experience (years)	Educational background (Bachelor degree major)
R*	N	F	2	BA (sociology& English literature); PGDE**
L	N	F	2 and a half	BBA (Business administration); PGDE
H	L	F	Less than a year	BA (English literature); PGDE

G	L	M	Less than a year	BA (Political science); PGDE
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* Teachers' initials have been changed. **Postgraduate Diploma in Education

Teachers in the two schools came to be involved in the writing project under slightly different circumstances. In one school, teachers L and R (teachers' initials changed to preserve anonymity) initiated contact with the expository writing research team when their school was searching for ways to improve their students' writing, and asked if they could use the project's instructional materials in their writing classes. They further made arrangements for a two week work attachment at NIE to collaborate with the researcher in the writing of a small part of the instructional materials. The involvement of teachers H and G, from the second school, was the result of their English department head's interest in hosting the expository writing research study in her school.

Teachers' orientation towards writing

This section describes the efforts made to influence the teachers' theoretical orientations to align with the socio-cognitive orientation of the writing intervention project on the assumption that the success of the intervention would depend on their receptiveness to the philosophy that shaped the curriculum materials. An account of how theoretical orientations were identified then follows.

[attempts at influencing teacher beliefs about writing instruction]shaped through meetings, collaboration with researcher in authoring, ...teachers' guide, ...nature of the classroom activities like oral small group activity....

Teachers' beliefs about writing and the development of students' writing were identified from three sources: a questionnaire that teachers answered at the beginning of the study, interviews with the researcher on their responses in the questionnaire, and lesson observations. Two items in the questionnaire, expanded on in the interviews
... lessons observed as unobtrusively as possible...., sensitivity to researcher intrusion...

Findings

[Report attendance at meetings, questions asked, issues raised. ...response to call to contribute to materials construction.]

[findings – indications of theoretical orientation in interviews and lessons]

Table x: Indications of theoretical orientations

Theoretical orientation	School N		School L	
	Before project	During project	Before project	During project
Form & product focused	13	4	8	7
Socio-rhetorical & cognitive	5	11	2	4

[sample utterances or episodes – describe the behaviour- indicating each orientation,]

Discussion

The question: to what extent can teachers’ theoretical orientation be influenced through educative curriculum materials (lesson texts, activity materials, and teachers’ guide)... so that classroom instructional practices align with the theoretical framework of the materials.

[Discussion will advance two interpretive claims] 1. may be possible to influence teachers’ theoretical orientation through educative curriculum materials but....[discuss factors likely to assist growth in theoretical orientation to facilitate more effective teaching and promote learning ...] 2. we should care enough about teacher beliefs to want to influence them because teachers’ theoretical orientation could affect effectiveness of teaching...leading to better student learning [cite students’ higher scores in School N] ... teacher orientations changed more in School N than in School L.....if essay scores and topicality counts rise, they indicate effective learning of the socio-cog processes of writing; possibly, the learning resulted from more effective teaching... due to teachers focusing on the thinking and discourse practices/teacher belief in the importance of learning thinking/genre practices as means of improving writing

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