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PROJECT REPORT

Teaching Argumentative Writing at the Primary Level

Report by Koh Guat Hua

Introduction

With the introduction of the new English Language Syllabus in 2001, even teachers in primary schools are now required to teach their pupils all the core text-types, or genres — procedures, explanations, expositions, factual recounts, information reports, narratives and personal recounts, as well as other short functional texts.

Until recently, teachers of English Language in primary schools, both in Singapore and elsewhere, have focused mainly on the writing of narratives and recounts. Martin and Rothery (1981), for example, show that primary schools in Australia favour the writing of narratives and recounts, and Foley (1991) arrives at a similar conclusion from his research in Singapore into the writing, in English, of Primary Six and Secondary One pupils. He found that expository writing is seldom, if ever, explicitly taught in these schools. Moreover, the current Primary School Leaving Examination demands only the ability to write the narrative and recount text-types for the “Continuous Writing” component (See MOE’s *PSLE Question Papers 1996 – 2000*).

Genre theorists (Martin & Rothery, 1980; Martin & Rothery, 1981; Christie *et al.*, 1984; Callaghan & Rothery, 1988; Christie, 1991; Rothery & Macken, 1991; Christie and Misson, 1998) argue that pupils will benefit from explicit teaching of various genres in the classroom. However, as a teacher-trainer involved in the “Singapore-Cambridge Certificate in the Teaching of English Grammar” course designed to prepare teachers for the syllabus change, I have encountered many teachers who express reservations about the teaching of expository writing to their pupils in the primary school. Research into educational change and innovation provides some

insight into the resistance of teachers to curriculum changes, especially if they are perceived as “top-down” decisions (Kennedy, Doyle and Goh, 1999).

English Language Syllabus 2001 states that children are “to be exposed to” expository texts for listening to, reading, and viewing from, print and non-print electronic sources (*EL Syllabus 2001*, p. 35) by the end of Primary Six. Even though there is no explicit mention of the need to teach pupils to write expository essays, it would be a natural progression for pupils to make, from listening and reading of such text-types to writing them.

Aim

This study aims to show to teachers teaching English Language in the primary school that young children are capable of writing an argumentative essay.

Background

The pedagogy employed in this study is based on that of the Genre Approach. The term genre refers to “a staged, goal oriented social process” (Martin *et al.*, 1987:59). As the writers explain:

Genres are referred to as *social processes* because members of a culture interact with each other to achieve them; as *goal oriented* because they have evolved to get things done; and as *staged* because it usually takes more than one step for participants to achieve their goals (Martin *et al.*, 1987:59).

To carry out this research, I adopted the Curriculum Cycle (Derewianka, 1990), which involves the following stages: *preparation, modelling, joint construction, and independent construction of text* (Derewianka, 1990:6–9).

Method

A series of seven 50-minute lessons designed to explicitly teach the writing of argumentative essays was carried out in the early part of the year 2001 to 39 boys and girls in a Primary Five class of an average Government Primary School. They had never been taught argumentative writing.

The names of the teacher and pupils who participated in the research have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Session One – Preparation: Debate

In this first meeting with the subjects, I aimed to establish rapport as well as introduce a topic that would lead eventually to the writing of an argumentative essay. It was important to begin the series with a good, provocative topic. I chose the topic: *Which group is better – girls or boys?* For the girls, the thesis statement was: “Girls are better than boys”. The boys’ thesis statement was: “Boys are better than girls”.

The pupils were given 10 minutes to discuss the issue among themselves, before presenting their points to the class, with evidence and examples in support. The ensuing debate was lively, but subjective and emotional, as presenters brought up individual acts and personal points of view to reinforce an argument:

eg. A female pupil: *Raj is a coward. When Mrs K wanted to punish him, he was very scared.*

A male pupil retaliated: *Girls are cowards also. Sheila screamed when ...*

The pupils gave anecdotal recounts — e.g. of an individual classmate’s act of cowardice in a specific situation. At one point, a group of girls engaged in a role-play to imitate the “cowardly” behaviour of a male classmate.

At the end of the session, the pupils were instructed to observe each other during the coming week: the girls to observe the boys to find out three good things about the boys and to produce a justification for each of the good things mentioned; the boys were instructed to observe the girls and to do likewise. This was aimed at directing the pupils towards a more objective observational style in preparation for factual writing.

Session Two – Modelling

This lesson began with questions about what they had discovered about each other. The points raised by various pupils were noted on the white board in two columns:

| <u>Girls</u> | <u>Boys</u> |
|---|---|
| <i>kind – they always help the elderly</i> | <i>good cook – male cooks in restaurant, etc</i> |
| <i>good in sports – able to score in basketball games</i> | <i>caring – show concern for others</i> |
| <i>hardworking – concentrate during exam</i> | <i>better in Maths – work out problems faster</i> |

The pupils were reminded of the first session when they were presenting arguments in a subjective manner. The pupils learnt that in an argument, objective evidence based on observation would be more convincing to the listeners/readers than recounts of personal/individual experience based on feelings. The terms 'points' and 'evidence' were introduced, and the pupils learnt that a good argument had to be supported by factual evidence, as illustrated in the following:

The girls are good in sports. They are able to score better than the boys. This morning when we were playing basketball, only two girls joined us in the game. One team had the two girls and the other team was all made up of boys. Each of the points scored by the first team were by either one of the two girls whereas the rest of the boys in that team did not score a single point.

Boys are good cooks. When we see cooks in the restaurants, fast-food centers and hawker centers, they are mostly males.

The pupils were next instructed to develop one of their points from the whiteboard. They were given about 15 minutes to complete the task. One girl and one boy shared what they had written with the class:

Afiza's work (unedited):

Point = Boys are better in Maths.

Evidence = When the teacher give us visual thinking questions, boys can visualize the answer more faster. Like for Maths exam, boys get the difficult sum correct but most of the easy questions they got wrong. For me, boys can do the Maths sums fast, like Jan. All pupils in my class have not finish doing the Maths workbook except for him.

Shay's work (unedited):

Well, my point is that the girls are very kind. My evidence is very strong. It is that whenever I see the photos on the notice board of the students visiting the old folks home, I see the girls sitting beside the elderly people talking to them about fun things. However I see the boys just smiling at them. Well I also do not say that the boys are not that much kind but most of the girls are.

My second point is that girls are also good in riding motorbikes like those kinds of kinetic and easy to drive bikes. My evidence is just as strong as the first one. In many places I see them riding the bikes. That's all!

These two pieces of work served also as models for the pupils.

The children were then given a homework task. Several days earlier, *The Straits Times* in Singapore had reported the initial findings of the investigation team into the SQ006 crash in Taipei, Taiwan in October 2000. The pupils were

instructed to find out for themselves whether the pilots should be held responsible for the accident and the deaths of eighty-three passengers. They were encouraged to interview parents, siblings, teachers and anybody who had an opinion about the issue. They were also instructed to collect information from newspapers and magazines. It was hoped that this would ultimately lead to the joint construction of a written argument with the class.

Session Three – Negotiating Field: Writing a Factual Recount

Several pupils came armed with newspaper clippings of the SQ006 crash, and a lot of time was spent on establishing certain “facts”. One boy, Jan, started by being very sure that the pilots were guilty, based on the information given in the papers. Because the damage involved those parts of the plane occupied mainly by the passengers, his argument was that the pilots, attempting to protect themselves, had intentionally caused the other parts of the plane to be damaged. This launched the class into an active discussion during which many points concerning the incident were clarified. Words like “runway”, “control tower”, “debris”, and “visibility” were used throughout the discussion, and the pupils became quite familiar with these terms.

The lesson lent itself naturally to the writing of a factual recount of the incident that helped the pupils reinforce what they had learnt and also provided an opportunity for them to clarify their thoughts about the incident.

Session Four – Joint Construction: Writing the Introduction to the Argument

This session began with a recapitulation of the factual recount about the plane crash, then focused on writing the introduction to the argumentative essay through a joint construction exercise. The need for a thesis statement was introduced. The pupils then decided on the stand they would like to take. In contrast to the preceding session when there was a difference of opinion, there was now a unanimous view that the pilots were not guilty for causing the crash. The pupils gave the thesis statement: *The pilots were not guilty of causing the crash.* This created the opportunity to teach the pupils to use the mental process verbs, *think* and *believe*, and that a mental process verb was needed here because they were not in a position to pronounce judgment on the case. The thesis statement was then amended to: *I believe that the pilots were not guilty for causing the crash of SQ006.*

The class was then questioned on the effectiveness of beginning their essay with the thesis statement. After much probing, the class concluded the readers might need some background information to give some sense of orientation.

The introduction was then joint-constructed, the pupils' suggestions being written on the white board so the whole class could see how the introduction was taking shape. The pupils provided the information by suggesting answers to the "wh" questions posed to them. At one stage, one pupil suggested giving the names of the three pilots. However, some others objected to this with various reasons. Finally, one pupil suggested that it would not be necessary to include the names because they were debating the guilt of the pilots as a collective group and not as individuals. The pupils also suggested including other facts like the condition of the weather and the state of the runway in the introduction. It took some time for the class to finally decide that these facts would serve more relevantly as evidence rather than background information. At this stage, there was no overt correction of grammar, especially in the choice of tenses.

Session Five – Joint Construction: The Body of the Argument

The session began with a quick recapitulation of the introduction discussed in Session Four.

A new introduction was produced. Students were now showing good awareness of audience and genre. For example, no reference to weather or visibility appeared in this second introduction, and when asked why not, students replied that this would be mentioned in the later part of the essay as evidence.*

Several pupils insisted that the word "plane" should follow the words SQ006 so that readers would know that the writers were talking about a plane and not a taxi or a motor-cycle. After much discussion it was decided to insert the word. At this point the pupils were asked:

"What about adding in 'an SIA plane'?" They agreed to do so with the following reasons:

"It is better."

"It tells people that it is an SIA plane."

In writing the body stage of the essay, a lot of time was spent guiding the pupils in sequencing the events for the elaboration of the point. For example, the fact that the plane went onto the wrong runway should be mentioned before they could

mention the point that the Control Tower failed to give any warnings; and that the aircraft crashed into the cargo left on the wrong runway followed from this.

Discussion also focused on vocabulary. In the conclusion stage, for example, pupils chose the word “passengers” over other words like “people” and “victims”. Each text change was approved by the class.

One of the pupils performed the function of the scribe. (It was a fortunate coincidence that I had a temporary disability in my right arm.) This let me discover more of the pupils’ linguistic competence, as they were more ready to point out errors written down by a scribe who was also their classmate. As a result, active peer correction took place. (This started with the first error spotted – the word “crashed” in the first sentence of the introduction, which the pupil had written in the present tense.) In the subsequent parts of the essay, verbs in the wrong tense were quickly spotted and corrected by the pupils. There was also peer correction of spelling and punctuation errors.

Below is the product of the session:

On the 31st of October 2000, SQ006, an SIA plane, crashed at Taipei’s Chiang Kai-Shek Airport. I believe the pilots were not guilty for causing the crash.

The visibility at Chiang Kai-Shek Airport was poor that night. Poor visibility caused a lot of problems. The pilots could not see clearly and so the plane went into the wrong runway. People in the Control Tower could not see that the plane had gone into the wrong runway and so they did not give any warnings to the pilots. The pilots continued to drive along the runway to take off. The pilots could not see the cargo in front of the plane until it was too late. So the plane crashed. The crash caused the death of 83 people.

Because of the evidence stated above, we agree that the pilots are not guilty for causing the death of 83 passengers.

Session Six — Deconstruction

The essay written in Session Five was flashed onto the screen by means of the visualizer. The pupils were asked to name the generic stages in the essay – Introduction (with Background Information and Thesis statement); Body (with Point of Argument and Development) and Conclusion (with Summing Up of the Position taken in the Introduction). They came up very easily with the metalanguage these generic stages used during the Joint Construction stage. The generic stages and their social function were clarified and recorded.

Before the pupils left the class, they were instructed to prepare another essay: *Should students be given homework to do every day?* They would be required to write this essay without any assistance during the next session. Meanwhile, they were instructed to think about the topic, if necessary to discuss this topic with classmates, friends, parents and other adults, or to research it in any way.

Session Seven – Independent Construction/Peer Editing

The session began with a revision of the generic stages of an argumentative essay and the social function each stage performed. As some had already written their essays at home, the class was divided into two groups: Group A, who had completed the essay at home, and Group B, who were to do their independent construction of the essay in class.

While Group B wrote their essays, Group A pupils were able to participate in peer-evaluation. They were instructed to work in pairs to study each other's essay and look out for the presence or absence of the various generic stages in the structure. They should also read the "body" part of the essay carefully and decide whether the arguments found there were convincing enough. They had to write their comment(s) directly onto their peer's essay and also correct any errors they could identify. (No specific lexico-grammatical items were identified at this stage for editing since there had been no explicit teaching in this area during the intervention. The children, however, did exhibit an awareness of tenses.)

Peer-editing took about 15 minutes, after which the children returned their partner's essay, each child read his/her own peer-edited essay, and they discussed in pairs the corrections made. They were told to do a second draft of the same essay outside class without time constraints. They could make any changes or additions to their first draft. They would submit the two drafts together.

Results

Two pupils' essays will be used to demonstrate the effects of explicit intervention. The sample essays are independent writing done in Sessions Two and Seven by these two boys, Cheng and Wei.

Cheng (Group B)

Session Two:

Good in Sport – The boys dare not snatch Matt's ball from Afiza and Cindy.

They are robbers – They used my correction pen every time, they also have the correction pen but they still used mine.

Cheng

Session Seven:

I believe that kids should not be given a lot of homework everyday.

When kids are given too much homework everyday they will not have enough time to sleep and this will affect kids' health. Kids will fall ill or sick and take MC and can't come to school to take their homework. If they take some more days on MC their homework will keep on adding and adding. In the end too much homework again and continue to fall ill and sick. Some of them will have stress and commit suicide. So I think we should not do too much homework.

Wei (Group A)

Session Two:

Girls

Points

Evidence

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 1 hardworking | One week before exam they will start revising. |
| 2 great cook | Most fathers do not cook but mothers cook |
| 3 caring | When I had hurt myself my mother will ask how I got it. |

Wei

Session Seven: First version (written at home)

Good afternoon, teacher and reader, I had a question and answer and for the question is "Must pupils have to do homework everyday, I believe it is not, but at least for 2 days"

Why? Evidence?, well, the evidence to support my detail, although doing homework everyday could improve or maintain exam results but it causes stress which makes a lot of pupils commit suicide. I had experience it before, it is terrible, I did not have enough sleep, when the next morning I can't wake up early like last time and I could not relax.

This is the evidence for the question. And the evidence I found is from the news paper and from Mrs K. That why I think teacher should not give homework every day. thank you.

Wei's first draft was edited by a classmate. Notice the comments made by Hwee, his partner during peer-evaluation:

- *Wei not every body commit suicide.*
- *You can add in more evidence to support your details.*
- *Wei I could not understand some of your sentence. You can write it more clearly.*
- *You did not have quite a lot thesis statement.*
- *Maybe you can start a better background.*

Revised version:

Have you seen on newspaper that some pupils eat drug or commit suicide at lest once a week. Do you agree that pupils have to do home everyday, it is up to you but I am going to show you all the evidence to all reader that agree that every day we must do homework.

Well although you may think that doing homework everyday could improve or mantain exam result but is cause stress which some pupils could not stand it that it make them eat drug or commit suicide. And pity those pupils who had night class and enrichment class in the morning. You see night usually last about 1 and a half hour. And after night class they will have to do homework until 12 mid or 1 midnight even then they must still wake up early in the morning And that make some pupils sleep even in class. And when the teacher find out. Doom! So after this I hope you will support me. The End.

Cheng was initially uninterested in the writing sessions. Wei, on the other hand, was highly enthusiastic about learning to write an argumentative essay. However, as a pupil who came from a non-English speaking country quite recently, he was handicapped by his inability to express himself clearly. Yet in both cases, the pupils demonstrated an awareness of the demands of the genre.

Discussion

Martin (1985) categorizes expositions into the Hortatory Exposition (persuading to) and the Analytical Exposition (persuading that):

Both involve value judgements, but in Analytical Exposition, the arguments intended to persuade are presented as facts. In Hortatory Exposition, on the other hand, opinion and subjective reaction is more overt (Gerot, 1995: 22).

In this research, the focus of intervention was on Analytical Exposition where the pupils retrieved facts to support their arguments from external sources. It would be

interesting to carry out an intervention in Hortatory Exposition, which should reveal young children's ability to present arguments to persuade the readers to take or to refrain from taking certain action through their subjective view of an issue.

This was the first time this group of pupils had received explicit teaching in the writing of an Analytical Exposition. Consider the potential results if the teaching of expository writing had begun at a lower level and was done more regularly.

Conclusion

One compelling reason for teachers to teach argumentative writing is the enjoyment and benefits that pupils derive from learning to write this particular text-type which presents to them something refreshing, challenging and authentic. Based on informal oral feedback from both the form teacher of the class and the pupils themselves, the series of lessons was highly valued. Even parents gave positive comments.

It would also be useful to remind ourselves of the needs of our pupils. After PSLE they will encounter factual and expository texts more frequently. Lacking familiarity with such text-types, they may have more difficulties processing them in future encounters.

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