

Teaching to Write Right: looking at the ‘process’.

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Abstract

This study investigated the language choices in the writing of freshmen students at an English medium university in Thailand in response to visual stimuli. The study involved identifying the genres and the lexico-grammatical features associated with such genres. 600 samples of writing were collected but only 72 were randomly selected from 12 students in order to compare their progress over a period of 14 weeks (one semester). The framework for the analysis of the students’ writing was based on a detailed approach to these texts as semantic units. But since meanings are realized through the lexico-grammatical system, it was felt that this was the most effective way of making an explicit interpretation of the texts that had some objectivity. This study focuses on the first part of a two part project involving first of all the ‘process’, then a later study dealt with the ‘product’.

The paper will discuss the development of the Nominal Group (NG) in the students’ writing in THEME position as this was felt to be a major issue in the dominantly Descriptive, Recount and Narrative genres which it was hoped they would produce.

The resulting analysis showed that the students had a limited knowledge of the different genres and used an equally limited range of lexico-grammatical choices. No discernible improvement was observed over the period of study. Possible reasons for this were, firstly the lack of awareness of the role and importance that genres play in their academic studies and secondly, an approach to teaching which did not include a grammar that was functionally based. Possible alternative ways of teaching are suggested.

Keywords: English, Thailand, writing, lexico-grammatical choices, genres, visual stimuli.

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Introduction

The rationale for this study was to see how a group of students were developing their network of choices in their written English. Visual stimuli were used as prompts as according to Gardner (1983) Multiple Intelligence (MI), using pictures shows the capacity to move from the non-verbal (visual) to the verbal and vice-versa. Such a procedure would, in principle, stimulate the students to use their imagination as well as giving the freedom to express their ideas through their writing.

The form of textual analysis used in this study is based on Systemic-functional grammar (SFG) as it is concerned with the choices the students are able to make given their language ability (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). These choices are assumed to be meaningful and related to the writer's purpose which will be influenced by the context and culture.

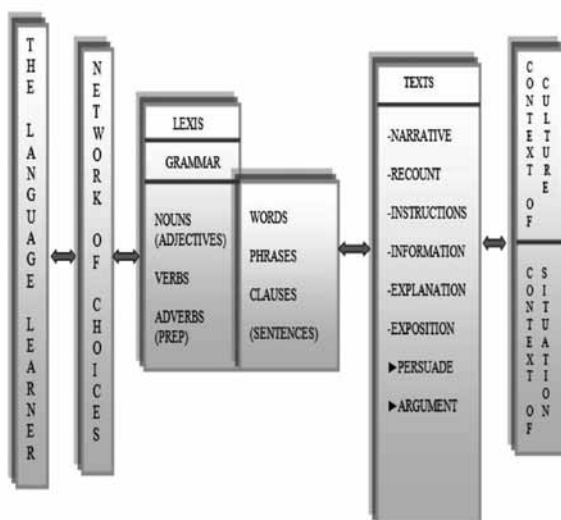


Figure 1 A Grammar outline from the perspective of the student

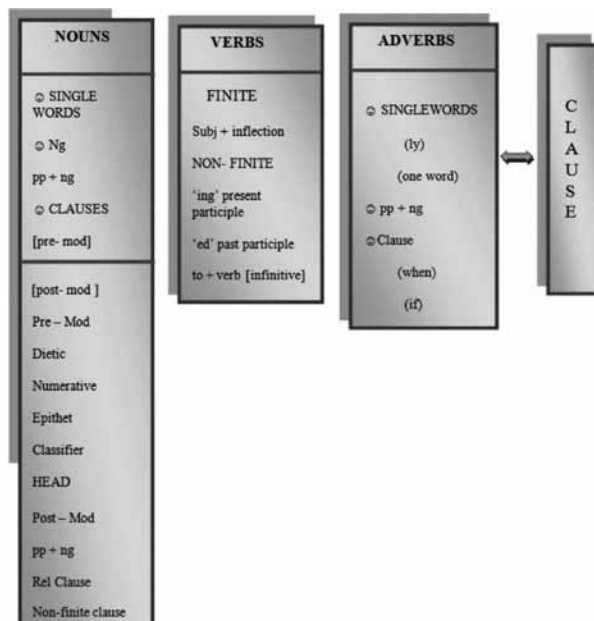


Figure 2 A Grammar outline from the perspective of the student

SFG presents a view of language in terms of both the structure (grammar) and the lexis. The term lexico-grammar is used to underline the fact that these traditional viewed aspects of language are actually one. Meaning in SFG is seen from three points of view, *the ideational, interpersonal and textual* (Halliday, 1994).

The *ideational* view is how the writer represents experience, ideas and ways of seeing the world. In terms of the form this is expressed through the clause structure (ng+vg+[adv]). The adverbial group is optional.

The *interpersonal* function concerns how language is used to interact between participants in the exchange of meaning. The finite part of the verb indicates the time frame as seen by the writer. The speech functions and modality indicate the relationship between the participants, while appraisal indicates the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in the text.

The *textual* function weaves the ideational and interpersonal meanings together. Martin (1999) sees this function as the information flow management, involving the organization of the text relevant to the context. The important element to understand the textual meaning in the clause is the THEME. The theme serves as the starting point for the message to be conveyed and gives a signal to the reader how to follow the logic of the discourse in the text.

In terms of the structure of the theme, there are four possible functions: *Topical, Marked Topical, Interpersonal and Textual*. The Topical theme functions as the subject of the clause (Eggins, 2004). *Marked Topical Theme* can be circumstantial elements (adverbial) or participants that are not the subject of the clause. Marked themes are often used to signal a new phase in the discourse. *The Textual Theme* relates the clause to its context and can be any combination of continuatives (*yes, no, now, then*); conjunctions (*and, because*) and conjunctive adjuncts (*for instance, in addition, likewise*). The logical use of Textual themes plays an important role in producing a cohesive text. *Interpersonal themes* are related to modal or mood markings and vocatives (*Hey, Oh, Yep*). Consequently, *interpersonal themes* are found more often in spoken discourse rather than written, except in direct speech.

The Nominal Group.

The nominal group (NG) is the grammatical unit which has the most variety at the rank of groups and this would allow the widest range of meanings to be expressed (Thompson, 2000).

There are three structures pertaining to the NG: *Premodifier, Head* and *Postmodifier*. The ability to construct a complex NG is considered an indicator of developing control in a language. Children rarely use complex NG in subject position (Foley, 1991). EFL learners also tend to employ short NGs depending on how much control they have of the target language. Also, the NG is constructed differently in Thai where there is no premodification as in '*nungseu see daang*' (book color red) or *sorong see fah sorng peun* (sarongs light blue two) and if a classifier is required it comes after the color. The categorization of the nominal group in English tends to pre-modify and post -modify. The following is a table of the basic categories of the NG in English.

Single Noun & Noun with Premodifier			
1	Single noun	a Noun/ Pronoun	e.g. you, it, he
2	With Premodifier	D+H	e.g. a gift, my friend
3	With Premodifier	N+H	e.g. some game
4	With Premodifier	E+H	e.g. new e-mail
5	With Premodifier	C+H	e.g. strawberry smoothie
6	With Premodifier	D+N+H	e.g. the first alley
7	With Premodifier	D+E+H	e.g. a big seal
8	With Premodifier	D+C+H	e.g. Clash's music video
9	With Premodifier	N+E+H	e.g. many big leaves
10	With Premodifier	N+C+H	e.g. many water activities
11	With Premodifier	E+C+H	e.g. pink nail polish
12	With Premodifier	D+N+E+H	e.g. these three remote controls
13	With Premodifier	D+N+C+H	e.g. the first pine tree
14	With Premodifier	D+E+C+H	e.g. the big sun glasses
15	With Premodifier	N+E+C+H	e.g. two closed circuit cameras
16	With Premodifier	D+N+E+C+H	e.g. this first little baby boy

Noun with Postmodifier			
17	With Postmodifier	preposition phrase [pp+ng]	e.g. the colour [of the word]
18	With Postmodifier	relative clause	e.g. My friend who stands next Max call me
19	With Postmodifier	reduced relative clause	e.g. You just press the Talk button, located at the middle top

Modified from Foley (2007) cited in Wang (2010)

Figure 3 Single Noun

Lexical strings (NGs)

A lexical string (NG) is a list of lexical items that occur in a text that can be related to a prior NG. It is an important tool for revealing the cohesion of a text as well as exposing the repetition of the lexical items being used.

Genre Theory

The term ‘genre’ is used in this study to refer to the different types of texts that enact various types of social contexts. Since patterns of meaning are relatively consistent for each genre, we can learn to predict how each situation is likely to unfold. In this study the visual stimuli would normally lend themselves to descriptive genres, mainly *observation*, *recount* and *narrative*. *Proto-typical genres*

Table 1

Main Genre Structure Used in School Settings

Main Genre	Main Genre Structure Used in School Settings
Observation/ Comment	Orientation (^) Event Description (*) Comment (^)
Recount	Orientation (^) Event (*) Re-orientation (^)
Narrative	Orientation (^) Complication (*) Resolution(*) Coda (^)
Report	General Classification Not necessarily in this order Description --- parts [and their functions] qualities habits/behavior/uses } Not necessarily in this order
Procedure	Goal Steps (*) Diagram (^)
Explanation	General statement Sequenced explanation (*) Final state of being or thing produced

Main Genre	Main Genre Structure Used in School Settings
Persuasion	<pre> graph TD Thesis --> Preview Thesis --> Position Thesis --> Argument Argument --> Point Argument --> Elaboration Argument --> Reiteration </pre>
argument	Issue Argument (*) ---- for /against Recommendation (^)

(^) optional element, (*) recursive (Foley 2011: 195)

Observation/Description

The purpose of the observation/descriptive text is to create an image of a particular person, place of thing in detail. Observations/descriptions can appear in various genres or in mixed genres (Derewianka, 1992). Typically the generic structure in terms of language features would include:

- Use of specific NG
- A variety of verb processes [relational to provide information; mental to express the writer’s view]
- Time frame normal present tense
- Complex NGs to provide information about the subject or situation.

Recount

The purpose of recount is to retell events for as information or entertainment. The pattern is normally

- Orientation
- Events
- Re-orientation

Language features would include:

- Past tense to locate events in relation to the time of writing
- NGs to identify people and things
- Material processes to express action of

the participants

- Time markers
- Adverbials indicating time and place or sequence of events.

Narrative

The purpose of a narrative text is often to entertain typically in the form of ‘story telling’. Narrative is different from recount in that it involves some kind of problem and resolution.

The generic structure follows the basic pattern of

- Orientation
- Complication
- Resolution
- Coda [optional]

The typical language features may include:

- Focusing on specific and individualized participants

- Past tense, although the present tense can be used to create the sense of immediacy

- A variety of verb process can be used and would include material processes to indicate action; verbal and mental processes to show the characters’ feelings, thinking and saying.

- Complex NGs to describe the settings and the participants in the story

- Temporal conjunctions and time connectives to sequence the events in a time frame.

- Adverbial groups are added to locate the events and places.

Visuals

In this study visuals are used as stimuli in order to engage the students in the writing activities. According to Kress and Leewen (2006), the visual mode offers semiotic and cognitive resources which

allow the students to create meanings through their own interpretation of what they see. Obviously the ‘type’ of visual stimuli will affect the genre of writing (White 1987). A single frame is likely to generate a descriptive text while a sequence of pictures might lend itself to narrative.

This present study

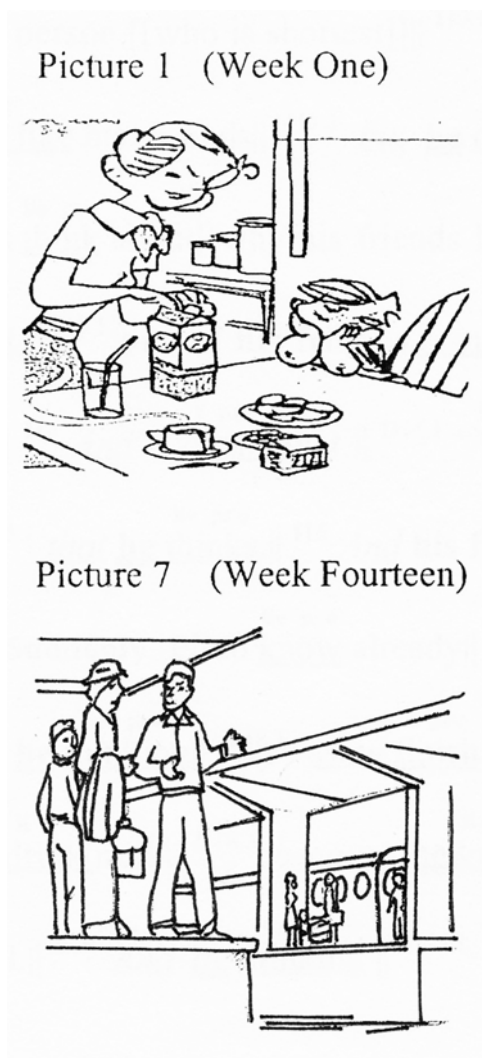
As previously indicated this study focused on the development of the nominal group in the students’ writing over a period of 14 weeks. The argument is that the limited language ability of the students would be manifest in their lack of elaboration or expansion of the head noun and the tendency to use short independent clauses. Visual stimuli were used as prompts to engage the students’ creativity in their writing and it was hoped that over the period of time of the study, the students would improve on their descriptive skills mainly though using more complex nominal groups.

Different instructors taught each class but the instructions given to the students were standardized in that the pictures were in black and white and were the basis for a 200-250 word essay. The data collected over a fourteen-week period approximated to 600 samples of students’ writing and 76 texts from 12 students were taken at random for analysis. The initial part of this research was undertaken by Minwong (2012) in terms of the experiential function as expressed through *transitivity* or the verb processes and the tense choices related to the text-type or genre. The part of the study described here focused on the development of the nominal group as this is a major problem for Thai students as well as being

an indicator for the development of the target language in developing writing skills.

The samples that follow show the writing of the same student in the first and fourteenth week. The choices of NGs in THEME position are then compared and commented upon.

Figure 2 presents samples of the visual stimuli as used for all students in week one and week fourteen.



Key

I = independent clause; D= dependent clause

Marked = topical marked theme; **bold** = topical theme; *interpersonal* = interpersonal, *Textual* = textual theme;

underlining = process; E= existential, Me =mental, B= behavioral,
M= material, V=verbal, R = relational

|| = clause boundary ; embedded clause = [[]]

past = past tense ; pre = present simple tense ; future = future tense

double underlining = reference; dotted underlining = substitution ; ^^ = ellipsis ;

waved underlining = conjunction ; Dashed underlining = lexical cohesion

Student G

Analytical from Writing 1(week 1):

^{I1} In the picture, I ^{Me pre} see one mother and one son.|| ^{I2} ^{Me pre} They love each other so much.|| ^{I3} ^{R pre} They have a good relationship.|| ^{I4} ^{R pre} And Their family is the family [[that be very happy.]]|| ^{I5} ^{R pre} And in the picture may be in morning,|| ^{I5.1} the boy ^{M future} will go to school.|| ^{I6} ^{M pre} They have a breakfast.|| ^{I7} ^{R pre} Breakfast have some milk, a cup of coffee, bread and other.|| ^{I8} ^{M pre} The mother is pouring some milk into glass for her son.|| ^{I9} ^{R pre} And the boy feels bored|| ^{D9.1} ^{M pre} because he must drinks milk everyday.|| ^{I10} ^{M pre} He wants to eat other breakfast [[that not be milk, bread.]]|| ^{I11} ^{M pre} But he must eats it || ^{D11.1} ^{R pre} because it is only one [[that easy to eat.]]|| ^{I12} ^{M pre} And the boy is waiting to go to school|| ^{I12.1} ^{pre} but he must waits his father ^M send him to school.|| ^{I13} ^{M pre} But his father ^{M pre} isn't getting dressed.|| ^{I14} ^{Me past} He bored to wait || ^{D14.1} ^{M pre} because he want to go to school.|| ^{I15} ^{M pre} He want to play with his friends.|| ^{I16} ^{M pre} And he is thinking to play the games with his friends.|| ^{I17} ^{Me pre} And He is thinking about his girl friend.|| ^{I18} ^{Me pre} He is thinking about [[what should he buy anything [[that the best gift to his girl friend.]]|| ^{D19} ^{Me pre} Because tomorrow ^{R pre} is his girl friend's birthday.|| ^{I20} ^{Me pre} And he is thinking [[how to surprise to his girl friend.]]|| ^{I21} ^{R pre} He is having a poppy love.||

Findings 1:

Types of clauses	Independent clause	22
	Dependent clause	4
	Embedded clause	6
Theme	Topical marked theme	3
	Topical theme	23
	Interpersonal theme	-
	Textual theme	14
Process	Relational	9
	Existential	-
	Verbal	-
	Mental	6
	Behavioral	-
	Material	11
Time Tenses	Past	1
	Present	26
	Future	1
Cohesion	Reference	19
	Substitution	-
	Ellipsis	-

Lexical String 1:

1	son			
2		they		
3		They		
4				
5				
5.1	the boy			school
6		They		
7				
8	her son			
9	the boy			
9.1	he			
10	He			
11	he			
11.1				
12	the boy			school
12.1	he – him			school
13				
14	He			school
14.1	he			
15	He			
16	he			
17	He	girl friend		
18	He			
18.1	he	girl friend		
19		girl friend		
20	he			
20.1		girl friend		
21	He			

Comments

- The majority of the NGs in Topical theme position are pronouns (*I, They, He*) or single nouns (*Breakfast*).
- D+H (*Their family, the boy*) are less frequent
- Marked topical themes are used as pp+ng [adv] (*In the picture*) or single word adverbial (tomorrow).
- In complement position H+post-m [relative clause] is used but often the structure is incorrect: (*that be very happy*, that not be milk,bread*, that easy to eat*, that the best gift to his girl friend**).
- The text structure is a description with little structure, very repetitive and limited use of complex nominal groups showing limited control over the target language.

Analytical from Writing 7 (week 14):

^{E pre} ^{I1} There are many people in this picture.|| ^{R pre} ^{I2} Every one looks hurry to go to works.|| ^{R pre} ^{I3} In this picture is in morning.|| ^{M future} ^{I4} They will go to work by BTS.|| ^{I5} They are waiting for BTS.|| ^{Me pre} ^{I6} There are two line of BTS.|| ^{I7} One of BTS ^{M future} are going to final station|| ^{I7.1} and another BTS ^{M future} will go back the first station.|| ^{I8} There ^{R pre} is one of BTS [[which arrived already.]]|| ^{I9} Two man [[who are waiting for BTS [[which not arrived yet.]]]]|| ^{I10} A man [[who is wearing hat,]] ^{M pre} holding bag|| ^{I10.1} and ^{M pre} put his suit on his arm,|| ^{I10.2} he just ^{M past} lived in Bangkok 2 day ago for work.|| ^{I11} He ^{M future} is going to work in first day,|| ^{I11.1} he ^{Me pre} do not know the way to go to office [[which he works.]]|| ^{I12} So He ^{V pre} go to ask with another man for some way [[that he can go to work by BTS.]]|| ^{I13} Another man ^{V pre} tell him [[how to go to there.]]|| ^{I13.2} but a man [[who is wearing hat]] ^{Me pre} do not understand.|| ^{I14} Therefore A man [[who is not wearing hat]] ^{V pre} ask him|| ^{D14.1} what office [[that he work.]]|| ^{D15} When a man ^{V past} answered,|| ^{I15.1} a man [[who is not wearing a hat]] ^{Me pre} know || ^{D15.2} that a man [[who is talking with him]] ^{M pre} work in same office.|| ^{I16} So he ^{V pre} tell a man[[who is wearing hat]]|| ^{D16.1} that he ^{M future} are going to work in same office,|| ^{I16.2} a man [[who wearing hat]] ^{R pre} is very happy|| ^{D16.3} that he ^{R pre} has new friend in new office already.|| ^{I17} A man [[who is not wearing hat also]] ^{V pre} ask him about his home.|| ^{D18} When a man [[who is wearing hat]] ^{Me pre} know || ^{D18.1} that their homes ^{E pre} are nearly.|| ^{I19} Since that time, they ^{M future} will go to work || ^{I19.1} and ^{M pre} go back home together|| ^{I19.2} and they ^{R pre} become close friend.||

Findings 7:

Types of clauses	Independent clause	26
	Dependent clause	8
	Embedded clause	12
Theme	Topical marked theme	2
	Topical theme	29
	Interpersonal theme	-
	Textual theme	15
Process	Relational	6
	Existential	2
	Verbal	6
	Mental	4
	Behavioral	-
	Material	13
Time Tenses	Past	2
	Present	23
	Future	5
Cohesion	Reference	17
	Substitution	-
	Ellipsis	2
	Conjunction	12

Lexical String 7:

1				
2				
3				
4	BTS			
5	BTS			
6	BTS			
7	BTS			
7.1	BTS			
8	BTS			
9	BTS			
10		wearing a hat	A man	
10.1			he	
10.2			He	
11			he	
11.1			He-he	
12	BTS		him	another man
13				another man
13.1				
13.2		wearing hat	a man	
14		wearing hat	him	a man
14.1			he	
15			a man	
15.1		wearing a hat		a man
15.2			a man	
16		wearing a hat	a man	he
16.1				he
16.2		wearing hat	a man	
16.3			he	
17		wearing hat	him	A man
18		wearing hat	a man	
18.1				
19				
19.1				
19.2				

Comments

- Again the majority of NGs in Topical theme position are pronouns (*There, They*) or single nouns H or D+H (*another BTS, Another man*) or N+H (*One of BTS*).

- D+H+post-m (relative clause) is used extensively:

A man who is wearing a hat

A man who is not wearing a hat

A man who is talking with him

- N+H+post-m (relative clause+relative clause)

Two men who are waiting for BTS which not arrived yet

- NG are used in complement position

N+H+post-m (relative clause)

There is one BTS which arrived already.

- H+post-m (relative clause)

office which he works.

- Again the text structure is a description with little structure, very repetitive and limited use of complex nominal groups. The use of the relative clause as embedded post modifier simply increases the repetitive effect.

What steps can be taken to improve the students' writing?

The features that we have been considering are features that we identified through a lexico-grammatical analysis of the text, clause by clause. The significance of such an analysis is to show how the meaning of the text derives from the way the clauses and thematic structures are woven together.

Texts in general should display cohesive chains or as in this particular study, lexical chains

of reference of which some repetition can be a feature. From the visual stimuli the chains would be expected to develop around the interpretation of the images.

But the effectiveness of this inter-chaining will depend on the textual structure and in particular on the organization of the *Topical and Marked Topical themes*. The evidence from the analysis indicates that the writer's ability is well below the level expected of freshmen year university students.

Given the visual stimuli some form of description would be expected mainly using Relational and Material processes as Minwong's part of the study shows. While the time frame is that of the *present, rather than the past*. This would be typical of an immature writer as it represents the writer simply writing down their observations as they see it in the present..

However, both texts from week one and week fourteen turned out to be simply 'observation'. The dominant characteristic in the lexical strings of repetition of the same lexical item in Topical theme position is an indicator of the limited choices available to the student. Even where H+post-m (relative clause) is used; it is both mechanical and repetitive. From the detailed analysis of the text, there is no obvious improvement in terms of writing over the period of the fourteen weeks. Contextually, the reference to BTS (the over- head train that runs through the center of metropolitan Bangkok) shows some attempt at local color. However, the student rarely used *Marked Topical* themes to vary the writing and the limited use of the range of NGs available in English is a serious drawback for any form of descriptive writing.

From the 76 texts that were analyzed in terms of the nominal group in *Topical Theme* position they ranged from 1 to 9 on the categorization of nominal groups, in other words, H to N+E+H. Where, embedded relative clauses were used, the structure was either incorrect or simply repetition as indicated in the sample: *A man who is wearing a hat, A man who is not wearing a hat.*

The next stage in this research is to set up procedures to improve the writing of the freshmen students. This is at present being undertaken in the second semester of 14 weeks. Learning a second language means gaining progressive control over the systems of options in the new language, learning which options to select to make meanings in which contexts (Lock, 1996). Beginning learners have very limited options (a few structures, some lexical items and some unanalyzed 'chunks' of language. More advanced learners will have developed a greater range of options and are able to make delicate distinction of meanings appropriate for different contexts. The ability to use different text-types or genres is seen as extending the learner's making- meaning potential.

The genre pedagogy as presented here is based on a Vygotskian (1962) approach to learning. Language is learned through guidance and interaction in the context of shared experience. The teacher inducts learners into the linguistic demands of these genres that are important to participate in academic life and the wider community. Gradually responsibility is shifted to the learners as they gain control of the genre. However, before developing a genre-based program, the teacher or institution will need to conduct an analysis of the teaching/

learning context. At its broadest level, this should take in account the culture, history and tradition of the educational setting as well as the constraints posed by access to materials, English proficiency, learner expectations and assessment requirements.

• *Preparing the Context*

Locate sample texts in the chosen genre to use for modeling. If the students demonstrate quite different levels of proficiency, it is a good idea to work in groups.

• *Developing the Context*

Discuss the purposes for which we use this type of text in society (e.g. the purpose of Recount is to tell what happened as in the first pages of a newspaper). It is a good idea to give each group a copy of the model text with its stages clearly marked. Discuss the function of each stage. (For instance, the function of the orientation of a Recount is to let the reader know who was involved, when and where the events took place, and any other information necessary to understand the events which follow.)

• *Modeling*

Assessing progress as some students may be keen to try to write an independent text, while others may need more modeling: flexibility is a key factor here. Rather than restricting creativity and copying someone else's work, students need to find out what the valued, accepted and successful norm of a particular kind of writing looks like. In other words, how meaning is constructed and communicated in the particular section of society for which the students are writing. Once they are familiar with the norm, they can start adapting creatively with it to enhance their particular

purpose.

- *Teacher-led Construction*

Before the students write independent texts, they should participate in group writing in the chosen genre. The type of writing will depend on the genre we plan to use with the teacher acting as guide while the students contribute information and ideas.

Students (possibly with the teacher's guidance), choose a topic already modeled then they write their drafts based on the model.

Students can consult with the teacher and peers, receiving comments and suggestions for change to help the text achieve its purpose more effectively.

However, at this stage the teacher may find that conferencing about drafts reveals a need for more modeling and joint construction.

- *Student-led Construction*

At this stage, the students independently construct texts of their own similar to the model. It is important that the teacher asks the students to

write texts in the same genre and does not require them to write in a different way.

While students are working on their texts they could be conferencing with other students or the teacher for guidance on both the content and language to be used in the writing.

- *Assessment*

The primary aim of this procedure is to present clearly the language conventions students need to master in terms of English. In the example presented in this study, the emphasis would be on developing the nominal group in describing. Once the students have absorbed these language features, they can be used as reference points in the formal assessment of the students' writing in English.

- *Extending*

As well as allowing for separate skills development, an extended teaching/learning cycle also allows multiple opportunities to build up the students' knowledge.

Editing and publishing the texts are a final step to be kept in a portfolio of the students' work.

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