

Efficiency or complexity: Two approaches for stimulating students to write coherent persuasive essays based on a movie

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Students can have problems producing coherent persuasive essays. This paper proposes and evaluates two useful approaches for preparing junior college or university freshmen students to write group essays based on a movie. The first approach is a structured class discussion; the second is an analysis of the structure and lexis of a movie-review. Student questionnaires and lexical analyses were used to investigate which approach prepares them more effectively for their essays. Results from the 60 high school age students indicate that essays that were prepared through pre-task discussion reused more vocabulary than essays that used the review as input. However, the process-genre analysis of the review led to essays with a greater range of opinion lexis and cohesive ties.

学習者は明瞭で説得力のあるエッセイを作り上げる際にさまざまな問題を抱える。この論文には、映画上映の後グループでエッセイを作成するための2つの違ったアプローチについて討議し、評価を行っている。1つは、クラスで構造化された討論を行うアプローチである。この方法は、アイデアや語彙を新しく発見するために効果的である。もう1つのアプローチは、その構造とレビューの語彙を分析する方法である。学生へのアンケートと構文解析により、どちらのアプローチが有効であるか調査した。これは、学習者が、より広い範囲の語彙とアイデアを使った高度なエッセイを書くために有効である。

This paper introduces two methods for motivating students to write coherent persuasive essays based on a movie. The first method uses a structured class discussion to provide a framework of topics and to help the learners to think of ideas and vocabulary that is useful for their essays. The second is a student analysis of a review. This paper explains the two approaches and then investigates which method was found to be better preparation for composition.

This movie composition courses have been implemented for students at a five-year engineering college that is called a *kosen* in Japanese. The five years consist of three high school years' equivalent plus two years higher education. Two classes of 30 students are involved in this investigation, including one class from high school 2nd-grade and one from the 3rd-grade. Apart from *kosen* colleges, these courses are useful for *false-beginner* or *low-intermediate* students in their first or second years of university.

Background

Ellis indicates that using the language is intrinsically motivating, “It is the need to get meanings across and the pleasure experienced when this is achieved that provides the motivation to learn an L2” (1994, p. 516). I have used student essay composition to try to foster intrinsic motivation through the use of the language to communicate. However, past composition courses with previous students at my college have indicated that they have struggled to structure their essays coherently and express their opinions with supporting evidence. Hinds (1987, 1990) commented that Japanese writing tends to lack explicitness and deviates from the main point. Moreover, Takagi (2001) claims that Japanese writers leave it to the readers to develop the links between sections and it is common for the author to write first in Japanese and then translate into English rather than thinking in the target language.

The tendency for Japanese to translate from their mother tongue could be caused partially due to the difficulty of the task. Skehan (1998, pp. 138-9) recommends pre-task preparation to introduce new language, mobilise and recycle

language, ease the processing load and push learners to increase the complexity of their output. Therefore, one option that this paper proposes is the use of a structured discussion to prepare students for their compositions.

The second option is to use a movie review. Many students in my composition classes tended to overuse *I like* and *...is interesting* to express opinion while they overemployed *and* and *but* to signal cohesion. Flowerdew (1993) suggests the process-genre approach that I believe can be utilised to counter this. Rather than the traditional genre approach that involves concentrating on copying the structure, the process-genre approach encourages learners to concentrate on the process of analysing a text for lexis that signals the text structure and the author's opinion. They can then reapply this awareness in their own composition. A preparatory text is also useful, not only for a process-genre analysis, but also as an authentic source of ideas and vocabulary for an essay. Prodomou claims that texts can lose their “sound and fury” when they are taken from their original context to be used in the classroom (1996, pp. 371-2). However, Long (1985) says that texts that are necessary, sufficient and efficient will lead to language acquisition. Therefore, a movie review is a useful option for preparing students for their movie opinion essays because it is a similar genre that contains relevant vocabulary and ideas.

Course methodology

In order to discover the best way to foster motivation and improve composition, I have developed two courses that have been applied for the 2nd- and 3rd-graders at our college that are equivalent to the same grades at high school. The two courses share the following aims:

1. Combat the low motivation to study.
2. Encourage the students to *use* English.
3. Create activities that are useful to the students.
4. Encourage critical thinking.
5. Encourage students to structure their responses to answer the essay question, backing up their ideas with reasons.
6. Provide a scaffolding of ideas through the use of discussion areas or the themes from a review.

Both courses involve watching a DVD movie in English sound that the students select themselves through a vote. This boosts their interest and therefore increases the motivation to watch it. The course takes advantage of subtitle changing that can be done with a DVD. Firstly, Japanese for comprehension then English for vocabulary acquisition. The English subtitles are very useful because it is difficult to perceive the separate words through only listening, but seeing the words help to overcome this barrier and help the students to see the correct spellings. Whilst they watch the movie, they answer simple questions about the names of the characters and other facts from the movie that require low cognition and single-word answers. These simple questions are designed to keep the students focused on the movie and to help to develop their awareness of essential vocabulary.

The assessed part of the course is the essay. Small groups of students produce expository essays that answer the following question: *Based on our class discussions (or review) and your own opinions do you like the movie?* The

essays are approximately four hundred words in length and the students are advised to divide their groups so that each member has a hundred word section; for example, member A writes the introduction and conclusion, B writes about characters, C writes about scenes and D writes about the special effects. This division of labour helps the students to physically divide the essay into different themes. The students are advised that their essays will be marked according to four categories. Firstly, personal opinion that is supported by evidence; secondly, interesting original work; thirdly, good structure that uses paragraphs and answers the question; finally, good language that is not a computer translation, or copied from another source. Sandwiched between the viewing (that includes the simple low cognition movie-watching questions) and the essay is the pre-writing phase. The 2nd-grade students analysed a review during this phase whereas the 3rd-grade had a structured class discussion. A comparative summary of the two courses can be seen in Figure 1 and a detailed description of the discussion and review analysis strands follows in the next subsections.

3rd-grade essay preparation: Discussion

The discussion questions are provided before the movie to allow time for the students to consider their answers. There are five questions:

1. Which character do you like or dislike and why?
2. Which scene do you like or dislike and why?
3. What stunts do you like or dislike and why?

4. Do you like the story and why?
5. How does this movie compare to similar ones and why?

Answering these questions provides the students with a range of examples that can be used in their essays. Therefore, for example, the students who selected the *character* theme after watching *Terminator 3* generally discussed the two Cyborg Terminators, and the two leading humans. Answering the *why* tag is also important to train the students into thinking of reasons to support their arguments that can be recycled when they write their essays. During each discussion, I take notes of the students' ideas and provide them afterwards with a feedback handout that summarises all their main ideas. The handouts are provided as vocabulary sources and retrieval stimuli that are useful when they begin to compose their essays.

2nd-grade essay preparation: Movie review analysis

The students receive a review of the same movie that they watched. The review tasks are based on Flowerdew's (1993) process genre approach that was described earlier.

1. Clause-matching exercise
2. Review comprehension questions
3. Schematic move reorganisation
4. Highlighting key phrases and key words
5. Summarising the review

The clause-matching exercise utilises sentences from the review, therefore it is completed before receiving the complete text. The students attempt to match clauses that have been separated and randomised. This encourages them to search for the key words that encode cohesion or similar opinions. Next, after reading the whole review, students complete comprehension questions to help them to understand it before they proceed with the tasks that analyse the structure and language. For the schematic move reorganisation section, students are given a list of short descriptions for each paragraph. They then need to organise the descriptions into the sequence that matches the paragraphs in the review. This activity helps the students to consider the topics that they can use to structure their essays. Following this, the students choose key sentences from each paragraph and they highlight words that encode cohesion and opinion. Highlighting key words in this way helps to raise their awareness of the variety of lexis that they can apply in their essays. Finally, they summarise the review, this helps them to reorganise the content into their own words in preparation for the essays. A sample of the students' exercises is available on request.

Data collection methodology

This investigation is summarised from my dissertation (Humphries, 2005). The dissertation covered a wider area including an analysis of the schematic move structures of the essays. However, the JALT presentation focused on two main areas. The first area of investigation is the subjective evaluation of the courses by using a student questionnaire. The whole questionnaires are not republished here, because

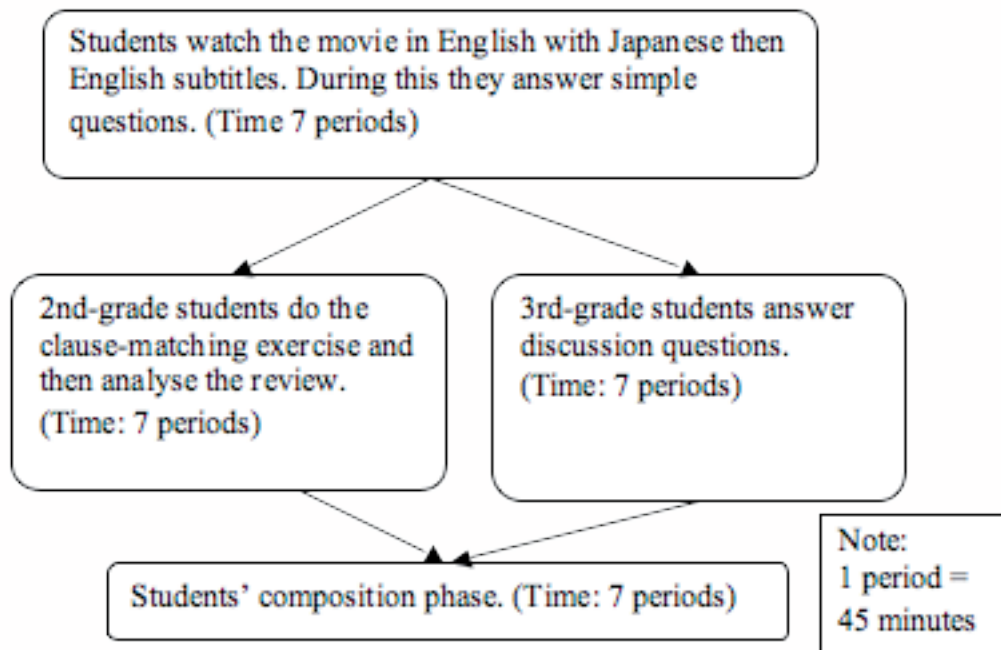


Figure 1. Comparative summary of movie essay courses

they go beyond the scope of this paper. Instead only the

discussion handouts to check for any correlations. If essays in

statements relating to the reuse of words, phrases or ideas from the discussion and review are included.

The second area of investigation is the objective measurement of the frequency and range of the opinion lexis and cohesive ties in the essays. This frequency is then compared to the language used in the reviews and the

course A use a high frequency of words that appeared in the preparation phase but course B did not use these words, then it could be claimed that the preparation had a strong effect. The discussion course relies more on speaking output; therefore, a high reuse of vocabulary from the preparation phase could indicate that output has a stronger influence than input.

Deciding the methodology for this section was quite difficult. I knew that I could probably buy some software and then run the essays through a computer program to discover the range and frequency of all the words in all the essays. However, I wanted to emphasise their coherence and persuasiveness. I felt that I could expect a greater range of vocabulary from the students that received the more complex input from the review. I also felt that the students who had already produced answers in their output from the discussion would be more likely to re-use those words frequently in their written composition. The most important types of words that I felt I needed to search for were those that signal *cohesion* and those that signal *opinion*; this is because the students were being assessed on their ability to express their opinion coherently.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) point to five areas of cohesion. They are conjunction, reference, substitution, ellipsis and lexical. I tried to raise their awareness of these different types of cohesion during the clause-matching exercise. However, it became noticeable that when the students did the key-word search in a later activity that conjunctions had been the only area that they had grasped. Therefore, I have selected this classification as the basis for the cohesive analysis.

It was difficult to find a definition of *opinion word* and there seems to be a research gap. Systemic Functional Linguists mention ideational lexis as referring to the ideas that the text is conveying; whilst interpersonal lexis connects to the reader. Both of these functions could be said to be conveying the writer's opinion. Again, my students were a good source of inspiration for this. When they searched for

key-words that signalled opinion in the review, they chose some interpersonal verbs, like *thought*, *expect* and the modal *could*. They also selected mainly adjectives, but also some nouns and adverbs. I think that adjectives are really the best example of opinion words. Moreover, most of the opinion-oriented nouns and adverbs can be modified into adjectives, for example *intelligence* and *intelligently* can be modified into *intelligent*. I am also classing verbs used in the passive voice as adjectives, because the role they fill is adjectival. For example, *impressed*, *excited* and so on, convey the opinion of the writer in the same way as an adjective. Therefore, for this analysis, nouns, adverbs and passive verbs are grouped together with the adjective that shares the same root, rather than being treated as separate words. One of the main reasons for this is that my students tend to learn the various classes of the same root word at the same time in their grammar class, and they also then use them incorrectly in their essays. I can therefore avoid distorting the results (by correcting their grammar) or distorting the meaning (by failing to change the incorrect word).

The analysis of the opinion words is therefore divided into two sections which are *interpersonal verb* and *adjectival opinion lexis*. For reasons mentioned above, only non-passive verbs are included in the verb table. The adjectival opinion words are not necessarily adjectives, but they could be modified into that class. There is definitely scope for human error in this form of analysis, because words that I consider to be opinion oriented might not be considered to be by another reader and vice-versa. However, the most important aspect is that I have consistently applied the same methodology to both sets of essays. Therefore, the results are as accurate as possible in that regard.

After classifying the three lexical areas, I manually counted the frequencies of interpersonal lexis, adjectival opinion lexis and conjunctions. This essay data was then cross-checked for the frequencies of the same words in the discussion handouts and the review. The full lexical frequency table data is available from the author on request, but summaries follow in the next section.

Results

The 3rd-grade students were asked whether they used the same words and phrases in their essays that they had thought of during the class discussion or that had been provided in the handouts. The students strongly agreed to using words that they had thought of during the discussion and there was also a fairly strong tendency to use the same phrases. There was also a reasonable propensity to use words from the handouts in the essays, but the likelihood to use phrases was not so strong. This information is summarised below in Table 1.

The 2nd-grade students felt that they reused words or phrases from the review in their essays. The results indicate however that the students felt that they rarely reused the words and phrases. This is reflected below in Table 2.

I measured the range of lexis that was applied by the students and compared whether they were used in both the pre-writing phase and the essay, or only in the essay but not the input. Considering the interpersonal verbs and the adjectival opinion words, the 3rd-grade learners were more likely to reuse the vocabulary that they had learnt from the discussion handouts than the review class. The 2nd-grade

Table 1. Discussion class questionnaire and results

	Agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree	Disagree
1. I used words that I had thought of during the class discussion	10	15	8	0
2. I used phrases that I had thought of during the class discussion	4	19	8	1
3. I used words that were in Simon’s handouts	7	14	12	0
4. I used phrases that were in Simon’s handouts	5	12	14	2

Table 2. Review class questionnaire and results

	Agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree	Disagree
8. In our essay, we used words learnt from the review.	0	14	13	3
9. In our essay, instead of using only “I like” and “was interesting,” we used new opinion words learnt from the review.	0	16	12	2
10. In our essay, instead of using only words like “and” and “but,” we used new cohesive words learnt from the review.	1	12	12	5
14. In our essay, we used phrases from the review.	0	10	15	5

students reused very few adjectival opinion words that had appeared in the review, but they used a far wider range of new ones than the 3rd-graders. Considering the use of cohesive ties, the students that had used the review applied a far greater range than the discussion class. This result occurred both for the range of cohesive ties that appeared in the input and the essay and for the range of cohesive ties that only appeared in the essay. This comparative summary can be seen below in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparative summary of the range of lexis applied in the essays

	Discussion class	Review class
Range of interpersonal verbs used in both the input and the essay.	7	4
Range of interpersonal verbs that did not appear in the input but appeared in the essay.	10	11
Total range of interpersonal verbs	17	15
Range of adjectival opinion words used in both the input and the essay.	23	11
Range of adjectival opinion words that did not appear in the input but appeared in the essay.	39	91
Total range of adjectival opinion words	62	102
Range of cohesive ties used in both the input and the essay.	18	26
Range of cohesive ties that did not appear in the input but appeared in the essay.	12	24
Total range of cohesive ties	30	50

Discussion

Questionnaire responses (see Tables 1 and 2) and the lexical analysis (see Table 3) indicate that the discussion class students were more likely to *reuse* and *remobilise* words from their pre-task preparation than the review class (Skehan, 1998). However, the input from the review was important for the quality of the essays. Flowerdew's (1993) recommendation of a process approach to text analysis has been useful. This is because although the students did not reuse words from the review, they used a far greater range of vocabulary than the discussion class essays (Table 3). It seems that the analysis techniques raised their awareness of the range of opinion lexis and cohesive ties that they could use and this appeared to be transferable to their composition. Therefore, although Hinds (1987, 1990) claimed that Japanese tend to write texts that deviate and lack explicitness, and Takagi (2001) indicated that Japanese writers leave the readers to form the transitions, it seems that in the review class, in particular, the students learnt how to structure and lexically signal their essays coherently to the reader. However, Takagi's position that students tend to translate from Japanese does seem to be supported by my investigation. I could see many students drafting parts of their essays in Japanese, and the wide range of additional opinion lexis could mean that they are thinking in Japanese and then searching for the words in the dictionary.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the general aims of the courses seem to have been achieved. The students found the courses motivating and useful. They used the English in a meaningful way

and they tended to activate their critical thinking skills, because they had various opinions of the movie. Their essays answered the question and were well structured by using ideas and themes from the review or the discussions.

I expected the review class to use a wider range of vocabulary than the discussion class and the discussion class to use their smaller range of words much more frequently. However, I was startled to discover how few of the words used by the review class actually came from the review. Probably the awareness-raising tasks of the review class encouraged them to use words beyond the text. Moreover, they could have felt that copying words from the review was a type of plagiarism.

Based on the evidence, I would like to propose a tentative output theory of writing. The EFL students' awareness of structure, cohesion, range of lexis and ideas gathered from the input is likely to influence their composition. However, the students will, given enough time, tend to use a large amount of vocabulary that did not occur in the input. EFL students that produced sentences in a pre-writing phase are more likely to reuse some of the vocabulary, but they will also, given time, use a wide range of new words in their essays. This is a hypothesis that I will need to test further in the future before I can claim it is true.

One method to further develop this research would be to conduct a longitudinal study. In this way, the students would remain constant. The same students could be assessed, firstly by holding the discussion style class and then by reading the review and writing a new essay. Even this would not be a perfect study, because if the students write essays on different movies, their style could alter. However, if they

wrote two essays on the same movie, then the first essay would almost definitely influence the content of the second one. This seems to be an untested area and any study of this kind can be distorted by outside variables. Moreover, the population of this study only consists of 60 students. Therefore, more investigations ought to be done and on a larger scale before the hypothesis outlined above can be confirmed. Other factors needed to improve this study would be more randomisation and some type of pre-test would be useful to measure the ability of the students. I believe that if my research findings are supported by evidence from further studies, composition teachers will be empowered to decide whether to focus on pre-writing output or input. Pre-writing output practice efficiently prepares the vocabulary that can be reused whereas input can be provided to develop a rich awareness of the variety of lexis that can be applied in the composition.

Simon Humphries is currently teaching at Kinki University Technical College. He holds an MSc in TESOL from Aston University and his research interests include motivation, curricular innovation and bringing up his two daughters bilingually.

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