

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Genre-based approach to teaching academic writing

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Reference data:

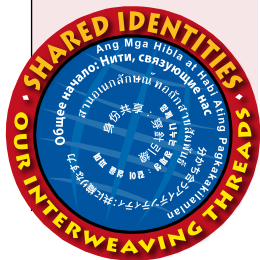
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This is a report on how a genre-based approach helps improve EFL students' writing proficiency. The participants were 39 third-year students majoring in English. Two teaching/learning cycles were designed during eight 2-hour weekly sessions, fashioned closely after the Disadvantaged Schools Project model (DSP, 1989). Three students' texts, selected from high, medium and low proficiency groups were analyzed using the Systemic Functional Grammar framework. The analyses revealed that the students showed some improvement in their writing proficiency. Semi-structured interviews and students' diaries were used to explore students' attitudes towards learning to write using a genre-based approach. A teacher's journal provided information about how students were responsive to the teaching cycles. Self-assessment questionnaires were used to obtain students' attitudes and their improvement in writing. The research findings showed that a genre-based approach bestows great benefits in terms of students' writing skills and their attitudes on learning to write in EFL context.

この研究はジャンルベースのアプローチで書き方を教えることの調査に基づいて、結果をあらわす。関係者は32英語の選考を選ぶ三年生であった。この研究は8週間がかかった。一週間に2時間がかかった。不都合学校プロジェクトモデル(1989)のあとで、ジャンルのディスカッションを教えることと習うことのために、2サイクルがデザインされて、広がった。システム機能的な文法フレームワークを使った先生と研究者は学生の3書いたペーパーを考えた。調査によると、学生の書き方はよくなってきたとすることがわかる。学生の英語で書く方法と意見をわかるように、セミストラクチャのインタビューの内容と学生の日記を集め、結果をもらった。先生のジャーナルから、学生の勉強する方法と新しい教え方に対する反応を示す。さらに、個人査定のアンケートで勉強した経験と書く可能に対する学生の意見がわかる。研究の結果によると、この教え方に対して、学生は積極的な意見があったと言うことがわかる。そのうえ、EFLの場合はジャンルベースのアプローチは適切である。

This is a report on an investigation into the value of the genre-based approach to the teaching of writing to students of English as a foreign language (EFL) in a university in Thailand.

Among the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), writing is perhaps one of the most difficult and important for students with a non-native English background. EFL learners



in Thailand have to date been largely taught by traditional methods such as the grammar translation method, pattern practice and drills. Nevertheless, although they have learned English for many years they are still unable to write an effective piece of writing. Furthermore, their ability to use the English language does not meet employers' requirements when they graduate and try to find a job. This problem also exists at the university in this study.

Systemic functional model of the language

The genre-based approach to writing is informed by a functional model of language; that is, “a network of systems or interrelated sets of options for making meaning” (Halliday, 1994, p. 15). Halliday's (1994) systemic functional (SF) model of language is based on the view that language is a resource for making meaning. Meanings are realised through linguistic choices drawn from a network of systems. Language is also viewed as inseparable from two contexts: the context of culture and the context of situation (Martin & Rose, 2003). The context of culture determines the overall structure of the text, providing its social purpose and resulting in text type or genre. The context of situation further defines the language features in three aspects: field, tenor and mode, which culminate in the concept of register. Overall, language is said to serve three metafunctions which are intimately related to the three aspects of register: Ideational to Field, Interpersonal to Tenor and Textual to Mode. The intricate relationships between genre, register and language are presented by Martin and Rose (2003) in Figure 1 below.

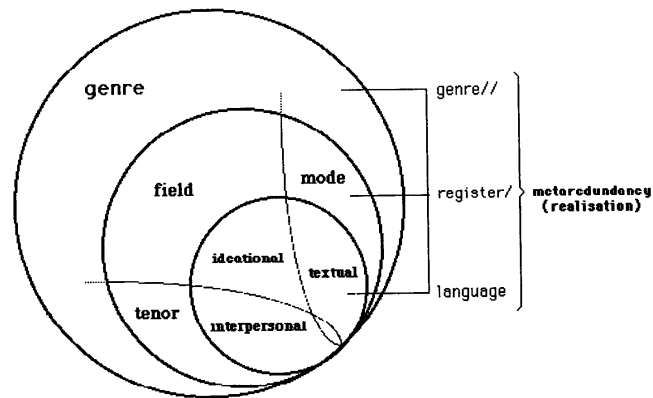


Figure 1. Genre, register and language (Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 254)

Genre-based approach and the research

It has been hypothesized that the genre-based approach can be applied in EFL contexts to assist students in developing their English writing proficiency. Writing in English is generally regarded as difficult by EFL students. They also have problems in organizing and developing their ideas in writing. If the exercise is not a controlled writing exercise, the learners may not feel confident when they write. They may find it a struggle to generate ideas in order to finish a long essay. The genre-based approach has the potential to help EFL students become more aware of writing as a tool. This approach can be employed and manipulated “to meet the anticipated goal and purpose” as well as to enable students “to discover how writers organize texts” (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998, p. 310).

In support of the perceived challenge facing EFL learners in writing English, Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) conducted an international workshop for teachers where they attempted to explore the impact of genre-based instruction in second language situations. These teachers were working with primary, secondary, tertiary and adult students in Australia, Fiji, Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. The most positive outcomes reported were that a genre-based approach is ‘empowering and enabling’, allowing students to make sense of the world around them and participate in it, and be more aware of writing as a tool that can be used and manipulated (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998). Moreover, it was reported that the approach is suitable for learners in a second language context, in that it gives them confidence in learning to write in English.

Accordingly, the author decided to build a program to test the value of teaching tertiary students using a genre-based approach and to help develop individual EFL students’ proficiency to communicate clearly and effectively in written English by using a systematic teaching cycle which includes the stages of *Modeling*, *Joint Construction* and *Independent Writing*. This pedagogy will represent a new approach in teaching writing in Thailand especially in the EFL context. The study described here focused on the Discussion Genre, a genre necessary for the students at tertiary level to master because the skill of argumentation is involved in a range of academic and professional tasks (Pally, 2001).

In the first stage of the teaching intervention using a genre-based approach, instructional materials were used for the purpose of *Modeling* the discussion genre to the students. They needed to become aware of the styles and formats

for a variety of writing purposes and to be trained in the application of the grammatical and lexical items to fit those purposes. In the second stage, or *Joint Construction*, they were given opportunities to work with the researcher/teacher to build new texts. At this stage, the researcher/teacher tried to provide useful comments and suggestions. In the third stage, the students worked to develop *Independent Writing* and had the benefit of working with their peers and constructing their own writing effectively.

Aims of the study

This study has three aims. First, it investigates the value of the genre-based approach to teaching writing in an EFL context at the tertiary level. Second, it explores the students’ perceptions of the genre-based approach. Third, it is hoped that the results of the study will be of use in designing future EFL teaching programs in Thailand. Three research questions were formulated to guide the study.

1. In what ways can a genre-based approach to teaching writing help develop individual EFL students’ proficiency to communicate clearly and effectively in writing English?
2. What are the perceptions of individual EFL students concerning the genre-based approach?
3. What are the implications for future practices in teaching writing to tertiary EFL students that can be drawn from the study?

Research design

The researcher/teacher decided to employ multiple methods of data collection in this study (Silverman, 2000): students' written texts, semi-structured interviews, a teacher's journal, students' diaries and self-assessment questionnaires.

Materials used in the study

The research was conducted in the first semester of 2003 when the participating students were enrolled in the "Extended Writing Course" – a required English writing course that met once a week for two hours. The materials used in this course were adapted from an Australian program designed for English as a Second Language for learners in primary and secondary schools (Disadvantaged Schools Program, 1989; see material used in Appendix 1). The focus of the material was writing discussion genres on two topics: *Advertisements* and *Advantages and Disadvantages of Living in the Twentieth Century*. Each lesson consisted of elements of the genre-based approach and the teaching cycle: Function, Generic (Schematic) Structure and Language Features were involved in the stages of *Modeling*, *Joint Construction* and *Independent Writing*. For example, the first stage, *Modeling*, involved the researcher/teacher in setting the context, modeling discussion texts and the language features of these texts. The second stage of *Joint Construction* consisted of preparing students for the joint construction of texts and for the negotiation of speech into writing. The *Independent Writing* stage involved the independent construction of a new text. Activities provided in each stage helped students to work through each cycle of their writing. Before and after each lesson, the students

completed a self-assessment questionnaire and were asked to reflect on their own English proficiency.

Data collection instruments and procedures

The data collected for this study contained a wide range of aspects relating to the teaching and learning process from the students' and teacher's perceptions. The non-observational methods were self-assessment questionnaires, students' written products, interviews and students' diaries while the observational method was the researcher/teacher's journal.

Self-assessment questionnaires

The English proficiency self-assessment questionnaires are another important data source sustaining an improvement in writing proficiency. There are ten items in each questionnaire. The results demonstrate the students' attitudes and feelings towards the teaching intervention and their proficiency assessment in writing English. A Likert scale (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 2000) from one to five is used for each statement of the questionnaires (see Appendix 4).

In the first week and after the second teaching cycle, the 39 students were asked to complete self-assessment questionnaires concerning their improvement of writing proficiency and perceptions of the teaching of writing.

The self-assessment questionnaires were administered to the students prior to their participation in this study for the purpose of gaining an insight into their perceptions of and feeling towards English writing instruction and learning from past experience. The same questionnaires were administered a second time at the end of the second teaching

cycle after the class had experienced the genre-based approach to writing in order to ascertain the effectiveness of this teaching approach in helping students develop their writing skills.

Written products

Written texts were collected from the three key research participants as being typical of learners in the high, middle and low proficiency groups according to the range of their scores in a previous writing course. The instructional modules for the writing tasks were adapted from material from the Disadvantaged Schools Program, which is taught in some Australian schools, as Model Text 1 (see Appendix 1). Model Text 2 was adapted from an original text included in the teaching material of the Extended Writing Course (Oshima & Hogue, 1991, p. 85; see Appendix 2). The students' written Text 2 and 3 were analyzed by using the criteria of the Systemic Functional Language model (SFL) based on the SFG framework (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks, & Yallop, 2003).

Interviews

The interviews used in this research were semi-structured individual interviews. They were conducted after the second teaching and learning cycle, because having participated in two cycles of intensive instructional modules, it was expected that the students would be more comfortable and open to expressing their opinions. In addition, the interviews were conducted at the end of the second teaching cycle so as to explore the students' previous experiences in learning

to write in English, and to investigate each student's perceptions towards learning to write via the genre-based approach. Moreover, it was anticipated that the interviews could reveal how participants, or learners, had reflected on their classroom experiences over a period of time (see Appendix 3).

Students' diaries

A popular technique in education for gathering information about teaching and learning and gaining feedback from the students is diary-writing and diary study (Bailey, 1990; Lally, 2000; McDonough, 1994; Todd, Mills, Palard, & Khamchareon, 2001). Students were asked to write in diaries for this research in order to reflect on the genre-based classroom instruction and writing tasks. The diaries were written in Thai in order to obtain more information and details about the students' opinions and perceptions towards the teaching intervention and the environment in the classroom, including student behavior and the teacher's activities during instruction. The purpose was to gain insight into students' feelings and thoughts about how they attempted to write a discussion genre and improve their writing skills (see Appendix 5).

Teacher's journal

A teacher's journal enables the researcher/teacher to document student behavior and it serves as a valuable resource for recollections and reflections during and after the teaching and learning cycles. The researcher/teacher took field notes during the teaching intervention in order to

observe student behavior and performance in the classroom and she compiled these field notes as daily narratives describing the participants' behaviors and performance while engaged in instructional activity; the field notes were used as an analytical tool and they provided in-depth information about the learners (Thompkins, 1994).

Data analysis

Data collected for this research were both qualitative and quantitative. All data collection supported the research questions as to the effectiveness of the genre-based approach, individual EFL student improvement in writing proficiency and implications for future practices in teaching writing. The researcher/teacher used methodological triangulation to obtain data from different perspectives. For example, the student interviews and self-assessment questionnaires provided details on the students' points of view towards the genre-based approach. The interview summaries were categorized based on the guiding questions and finally synthesized to find patterns relevant to the research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data on the classroom environment were obtained from the researcher/teacher's journal and students' diaries and they were analyzed and grouped into themes. The students' written texts were collected with the aim of tracing the students' development of their writing. The written texts were analyzed in three phases: before using the genre-based approach and after the first and the second teaching cycles of using the genre-based approach. For these analyses, the SFG (Systemic Functional Grammar) framework was employed (Butt et al., 2003), focusing on the three meta

functions as the investigative framework to assess the students' control over several structures and linguistic features of the Discussion Genre, and the specific elements of nominalization, grammatical metaphor, and clause complexity to assess their writing proficiency.

Findings and summary

A detailed analysis of the three key research participants, using SFG (Butt et al. 2003) found that their texts share a number of common features of a Discussion Genre. The texts produced by the three key research participants during the teaching intervention (Texts 2 and 3) revealed the abilities of students in writing the Discussion Genre. Regarding the schematic structure, they showed some improvement in their texts, i.e. how texts are structured and why they are written in the ways they are. Further, Hyland (2003) states that teachers can assist students to see a text as something that can be questioned, compared, and deconstructed. In that way, the students will be able to understand the underlying assumptions and ideologies of texts (Hyland, 2003).

In summary, the genre-based approach designed and implemented in the study was instrumental in helping students at different proficiency levels to improve their writing and to produce discussion texts. However, some observations from the teacher's journal revealed that some weak points emerged during the teaching intervention. First, during the joint construction stage, the teacher's journal revealed that it took time for the teacher and students to complete this stage of the learning cycle. Some groups of students seemed to take more time than others. Second, the students seemed to struggle with some certain grammar

points. Some students still made mistakes when they wrote. This might result from the fact that they did not have much background knowledge of English grammar and English vocabulary. It could be said that students' grammatical knowledge did not significantly develop. As mentioned earlier, the eight-week teaching time for grammatical structures was not sufficient to develop the students' grammatical understanding. Third, there were different attitudes about how to work. Some students preferred to work on their own. Students who needed peer support preferred group work activities. Other students felt more comfortable working with their close friends.

Students' attitudes towards the genre-based approach

The findings from students' diaries and interviews revealed that with regard to the modeling stage, all of the students recognized that modeling helped them to understand the schematic structure and the language features of the Discussion Genre. They studied the models and discussed them. *The modeling stage* displayed the characteristics of the Discussion Genre clearly and easily. The students could see the features of a discussion before moving to the next stage. The model also helped them to understand the field knowledge in developing arguments.

“The teaching program is very good. I learn a lot from the model and how to work in groups and share ideas with others. I like the three stages of teaching because we can learn how to write step by step. If we do not know the step of writing we

may get lost and do not know how to begin to write and finish our writing. It's good to follow the model first and then go on to work with friends and teacher. I think I can write a discussion by myself at last.” (high proficiency group interviews)

For *the joint construction stage*, the students found that group work also worked well in the writing class. They felt that they had confidence to write after discussion with their friends during joint construction. Moreover, they mentioned that it was good to have opportunities to talk and share ideas with the researcher/teacher and friends without pressure. They could overcome difficulties when they were working in groups. The three key research participants also claimed that *the joint construction stage* was very effective. They felt more relaxed and happy when they wrote a discussion. However, as mentioned in summary and findings, there were some problems with working in groups. Some students still did not like working with others, but most students thought working with their friends was useful and helpful to them.

“When we want to write a discussion, we have to have creative ideas first. During the second stage, I think I can learn from my friends and my teacher and get some ideas. We can share ideas about the issues and word choices. This way helps me to learn more about writing. I also feel very relaxed when I work with my friends. We can share opinions.” (middle proficiency group diaries)

In relation to the *independent stage* of the learning cycle, most of the students thought that they could write a discussion text better after they discussed and wrote it in the first teaching cycle. Furthermore, they were able to write a

discussion text on their own on any topic after the teaching intervention.

Thus, the investigation into the students' viewpoints and attitudes towards learning to write with the genre-based approach elicited mainly positive viewpoints. According to them, the modeling stage helped them to understand what and how to write, while the joint construction stage promoted cooperative learning and helped with ideas and word choice.

Contribution made by the study

Regarding the evidence from the summary of findings, it can be said that the genre-based approach to teaching writing applied in this study has proved to be of great value. The research has demonstrated that the implementation of a genre-based approach in teaching English writing in EFL contexts has some benefits and it was effective in improving students' writing. Most significant, however, was the students' development of new understandings of features of the Discussion Genre. Since this study sought to find the solution to students' negative attitudes towards writing in English some changes in cognitive aspects of students' linguistic knowledge could not be expected to occur. However, many students reported that they gained more knowledge of writing a discussion. Many students were able to gain more confidence in writing English.

Teacher/researcher's perceptions

Regarding the teacher/researcher's perceptions of the genre-based approach to teaching writing, some interviews were

conducted and a teacher's journal was kept. The data were analyzed by the researcher/teacher herself using a widely used linguistic tool that is Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). Halliday (1994, p. vxi) argues that SFG offers analysis that is based on grammar, not only offering 'simply a running commentary on a text', so that it can be objective. Hasan (cited in Paltridge, 2000) also mentions that this linguistic tool is valid because each analysis would confer similar results. The researcher/teacher is satisfied with the results. Moreover, the Genre instruction provides learners with "the building blocks" and "the tools" with which to build the genres.

Towards the end of the research period, the researcher/teacher found that the decision to implement a genre-based teaching intervention was most profitable because it has resulted in her developing a new personal body of knowledge that better supports her teaching of English writing and grammar. Her understanding of the systemic functional model of language has provided insight into language as a meaning-making system in a specific context and as a system of choices. The genre pedagogy is an approach that will provide students with both knowledge of the English language and knowledge of how to write to make meaning, not to write for accuracy alone. The researcher/teacher's development of these two branches of knowledge came from putting each into practice and the results were completely satisfactory. This new body of knowledge will be the tool for teaching English writing and grammar; as a result it will be meaningful in context.

At the end of the study, the researcher/teacher/ has a better understanding and appreciation of one of the significant

features of the genre pedagogy. Successful outcomes of the study emerged from active collaborative teaching and learning between the teacher and her students.

Contributions for classroom practice of teaching writing

This study has made a contribution to teachers who would like to adopt this approach to teaching writing in English in Thailand. Firstly, the teaching of writing should focus on meaning making. A student's piece of writing should reflect how he/she is trying to communicate through the use of language as a meaning-making system. It is a system which allows the writer to choose from a variety of system networks to construct a text within a particular social context. However, it is natural for EFL teachers to aim for students' texts that are almost an exact approximation of a native writers'. To achieve this, a technique of scaffolding of grammatical and lexical items pertinent to a particular genre is essential. However, for all these ideas and practices to happen is more easily said than done. One would need training in this kind of instruction to make it happen.

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Appendix 1

Model Text 1: Advertisements

There are many arguments to support both sides of the question, "Should we have advertisements?" Many people have strong views and feel that ads are nothing more than useless junk mail, while other people feel it is an important source of information.

There are some reasons why we should have advertisements in newspapers and magazines. One reason is ads give us information about what is available. Looking at ads we can find out what is on sale and what is new in the market. This is an easy way of shopping. Another reason is that advertisements promote business. When shop owners compete against each other the buyer saves money, more people come to their shops and they sell more goods.

On the other hand, some people argue ads should not be put in newspapers and magazines for these various reasons. Firstly, ads cost the shopkeepers a lot of money to print onto paper. Also some people don't like finding junk mail in their letter boxes. People may also find the ads not very interesting. Ads also influence people to buy items they don't need and can't really afford. Ads use up a lot of space and a lot of effort has to be made to make the ads eye catching.

After looking at both sides of the issue, I think we should not have advertisements because they cost a lot of money to print onto paper. Ads also take up a lot of room in the papers and I don't think I find some of them interesting. I mainly disagree because it's junk mail.

Appendix 2

Model Text 2: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Living in the Twentieth Century

Some people are excited by the many changes that have taken place in the twentieth century, while others would like to return to the simple lifestyle of the past. Living in the twentieth century offers certain advantages, such as more money for less work and a longer life expectancy. However, there are also some disadvantages, for example, a polluted environment and the weakening of spiritual values.

One of the biggest advantages of life in the twentieth century is that people earn more money for less hard work. This is because there are now more office workers compared to laborers, higher salaries, and more government services, such as social and unemployment benefit payments.

Another advantage is that we now enjoy longer lives than ever before. This is a result of improved medical care due to advances technology, and the increased numbers of doctors and nurses. Improved nutrition and greater leisure time have also contributed to a longer life expectancy.

On the other hand, living in the twentieth century has some important disadvantages. One of these is that we are living in an increasingly polluted environment. Air and water pollution, from factories' chemical wastes, raw sewage and oil spills, adversely affect our quality of life. A further disadvantage is the weakening of spiritual values. We can see this greater materialism in modern cultures and an over-reliance on science instead of religion.

In conclusion, although the twentieth century has made us richer and healthier, it has also made the earth dirtier and our spiritual lives poorer. We should continue to enjoy the benefits

of the age, but also attempt to preserve our environment for future generations and take time to pursue spiritual goals in an increasingly impersonal world.

Appendix 3

Interview questions

The interview aims to investigate the student's perception in teaching writing by using the genre-based approach.

1. Could you tell me how you usually write in English?
2. Is this class different from or similar to how you usually learn to write?
3. What are the problems that you usually encounter when writing English?
4. In what way do you think the approach used in this study is different from or similar to other approaches you have had experience with, either at school or university level?
5. Can you give me a detailed description of what you have learnt from this class?
6. In what ways have the classes on discussion genre influenced your writing in English?
7. Were there any moments during the program in or after class, when you felt nervous or uncomfortable?
8. If so, what troubled you?
9. How do you feel about the teacher's and student's relationship in class? How has this relationship influenced your capacity to write in the discussion genre?
10. In what ways will a genre-based approach help you with your future writing?

Appendix 4

Self-assessment questionnaires

Learners' self-assessment on English writing abilities and attitudes towards English writing after using the genre-based approach

Directions: Please read the following statements and consider them carefully whether you agree with each of them in which level due to the following criteria:

Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Items	English writing abilities and attitudes towards English writing	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	I can write English correctly.					
2.	I can use appropriate words in my writing.					
3.	I can use conjunctions in the sentences.					
4.	I can write a topic sentence.					
5.	I can write a thesis statement.					
6.	I can express my feeling towards the things I like and do not like.					
7.	I can write about advantages and disadvantages of doing something.					
8.	I can give reasons when I write about something.					
9.	I can write the Discussion Genre.					
10.	I feel relaxed when I write in English.					

Appendix 5

Samples of students' interviews and diaries

1. The teaching program is very good. I learn a lot from the model and how to work in groups and share ideas with others. I like the three stages of teaching because we can learn how to write step by step. If we do not know the step of writing we may get lost and do not know how to begin to write and finish our writing. It's good to follow the model first and then go on to work with friends and teacher. I think I can write a discussion by myself at last. (high proficiency group interviews)
2. The teaching intervention is very good. I like the stages of the cycle. We can follow the model first and work with friends and teacher on the second stage. At last we can write by ourselves. I really enjoy the teaching program. The modeling stage gives good example of a discussion to us to follow. I think I can write a discussion by myself. I feel much confident to write now. (high proficiency group diaries)
3. I feel much relaxed when I help my friends with some problems when we work in a group during the joint construction stage. The atmosphere of the classroom is very relaxing when we can talk and share ideas with friends and teacher. After we work together, I think everyone can write by themselves. I can apply knowledge to use outside the classroom when I write a discussion about the hot issues in the newspaper. (high proficiency group interviews)
4. When I learned how to write at my school in the past, my teacher taught me how to write a sentence first. I used to write a story of my family. I had to think in Thai first, then I translated from Thai to English. (middle proficiency group interviews)
5. When we want to write a discussion, we have to have creative ideas first. During the second stage, I think I can learn from my friends and my teacher and get some ideas. We can share ideas about the issues and word choices. This way helps me to learn more about writing. I also feel very relaxed when I work with my friends. We can share opinions. (middle proficiency group diaries)
6. I think I can write a discussion more effectively after the second teaching cycle. (middle proficiency group diaries)
7. The linguistic features that the teacher to give us on the blackboard is very helpful to me and my friends. I can choose the right words to connect my sentences when I want to write a long sentence about arguing. I think when I write a discussion next time, I will remember all these conjunctions and I'll do it better in my writing. (low proficiency group interviews)
8. The difficult thing in the class when we learned writing in this class was the limitation of the time. I felt very stressed when the teacher told us to finish the work at the end of each lesson and we had to write it more quickly. We did not have time to edit our writing. Sometimes, we did not finish writing it. It was boring when we did not know how to write. The linguistic features in the discussion genre were very difficult for me because this was the first time that I learned how to write a discussion. However, I think this approach can help students to write in English because we need to practice through all stages; Modeling, Joint construction and Independent. (Low proficiency group interviews)

9. The program is enjoyable. The teacher pays much attention to us and her monitor is useful to all students. The materials as the model writing are very useful to us. The big class seems very small when we work tighter and help each other. I like this program. I think I can improve my writing. (low proficiency group diaries)