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DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SCAFFOLDING MATERIALS FOR EXPLANATION TEXTS: AN IDEA FOR TEACHING INTERMEDIATE WRITING SKILLS

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INTRODUCTION

Two key questions that writing teachers usually ask are about the necessity to focus on linguistic form and when this kind of language activity occurs in writing tasks. The answers to these questions are language activities are central to genre-oriented writing classes and language exercises are a staple of ESL writing instruction and most teachers acknowledge that language proficiency can seriously frustrate their L2 students' attempts to create effective texts. Moreover, despite variations in teaching practices, there is a strong case for providing learners with the linguistic and rhetorical resources they need to express themselves at the point they need them: when they are beginning to draft, especially disadvantaging weaker learners.

This paper aims at discussing the development of language scaffolding materials in the writing activity which is based on the genre-based approach. "Scaffolding" in this case is the activity to provide any kind of support for students while they are establishing their understanding of a text and their linguistic competence to create the text. The materials provide input, tasks, and instruction that can be used to encourage and as well as to challenge students.

EXPLANATION GENRE

Explanation genre has the function as factual text to explain the processes involved in the evolution of natural phenomena. Explanations are used to account for why things are as they are. Explanations are more about processes than things. In the school curriculum, explanations are often found in science and social studies. It also has social function to explain the process involved in the formation or workings of natural or socio cultural phenomena.

Watkin and Knapp (2005) say that the genre of explaining is a fundamental language function for understanding the world and how it operates. The process of explaining is used to logically sequence the way that we and our environment physically function, as well as understanding and interpreting why cultural and intellectual ideas and concepts prevail. The act of explaining, however, remains one of the fundamental language processes in providing learners with new understandings of the world and how it operates. Explaining has three main orientations: (a) explaining how, such as mechanical explanation technological explanation and natural explanation, (b) explaining why, such as why do some things float and other sink or why do we have different seasons, and (c) explaining how and why.

The generic structure of explanation genre consists of a general statement to position the reader and a sequenced explanation of how or why something occurs. The examples of the general statement are:

> *The life cycle of the elephant can be categorized into 3 main periods – the baby, the adolescent and the adult elephant. Like humans, each stage lasts for an extended period of time and very distinct developmental milestones characterize each level of maturity.*

The example of a sequenced explanation of why or how something occurs is as follow:

> *The baby stage lasts from birth until the elephant has been weaned off its mother's milk completely. This can be anywhere between 5 and 10 years of age...*
> *The adolescent stage extends from the time that the elephant has been weaned (5 to 10 years of age) until about 17 years old. It is during this stage that the elephants reach sexual maturity...*
> *Adulthood starts at about 18 years of age, and the elephant has an average life expectancy of 70 years. Although sexually mature in their early teens, elephants generally only start to mate at about...*

There are some prominent lexico-grammatical features of explanation essay (Knapp and Watkins, 2005). They are:

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- Explanations are often about particular processes involving classes of things, which mean that the nouns are general rather than specific, such as *cars, cities, schools*
- Explanations about classes of things use verbs in the present tense.
- Explanation that deals with specific things such as particular events or concepts, on the other hand, can be in the present, past or future tense.
- Processes or verbs are used in explanations where one process or verb is linked to another process or verb in such a way that a logical sequence is produced. For example,
  When the fuel burns it expands with great force. The exhaust from the burning fuel, however, can only escape through the exhaust nozzle at the tail of the rocket.
- In commonsense and technical explanation action verbs are mainly used, for example, *burns, expands, forces*, whereas in interpretative explanations mental verbs may be used, for example, *suggest, reflects.*
- Explanations generally require connectives-words that join the verbs together, so that they logically indicate sequences that are temporal. For example: *when, then, first, after this*, or casual, so
- Explanations will sometimes make use of modality. For example: *When they reach levels where relics might be found the work is much slower.*
- Pronominal reference is also an important feature of explanations. The use of pronouns helps to maintain the thematic cohesion of the text.

TEACHING/LEARNING MATERIALS

Teaching/learning material is anything that is used by teachers or students to facilitate language learning, to increase knowledge and/or language experience. Teaching material can be in form of a textbook, student workbook, recorded materials on tapes, the material in a CD-ROM, a video, materials from newspapers, or anything that presents or informs about the language being studied. Development of teaching materials is what the writers, teachers or students to provide feedback source variety of experiences designed to enhance language learning (Tomlinson, 2003: 2). Teaching/learning materials generally consist of knowledge, skills and attitudes that students should learn in order to achieve a predetermined standard of competency.

Graves (2001: 149) says that material development is the planning process by which a teacher, a lecturer, or an instructor creates units and lessons within those units to carry out the goal and objectives of the course. Development of material is the activity to select or customize, and organize materials and activities so that students can achieve goals that will help them achieve their learning goals. The material development is also affected by the writers' belief and understanding on the principles language teaching/learning as they apply them to specific teaching programs and specific contexts.

Hyland (2003: 85) says that learning materials have an important role in learning to write and is widely used to provide stimulus, the model and supports the process of writing itself. These materials are generally printed materials (printed materials), but now many are also emerging materials in the form of audio, visual, computer-based materials, and tangible objects. All this material acts as a provider of input and exposure to written language learners in the class received. Because the outcome or the impact of learning also depend on learning materials, we must make sure that materials used are closely related to the profile of learners, learning objectives, and teachers' belief.

Regarding the role of teaching materials, especially textbooks, Cunningsworth (1995: 7) concludes that there are some important roles in the learning of teaching materials. They are (a) as a resource for presentation material (written and spoken), (b) as a source of exercises and activities for learners of communicative interaction, (c) as a reference grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and others for learners, (d) as a source of stimulation and ideas for activities in the classroom, (e) as a resource for a syllabus, which reflects the learning objectives that have been defined, and as a supporter for the less experienced teachers who want to achieve a self-confidence in teaching.

With regard to writing, Hyland argues that the material is generally used to provide stimulus to the process of writing and discussion, as a starting point for input and analysis of language, and as ideas for learning activities. In the context of English as a foreign or second language, the material has an important role in learning to write in terms of (a) as a language scaffolding, (b) model, (c) references, and (d) stimulus.

The process of creating new materials and modifying existing ones are very similar. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) suggest a framework for material design that includes both adaptation and creation in a model which incorporates input, content, language, and a task. Input is typically a text in the writing class, although it may be a dialogue, video, picture, or any communication data.

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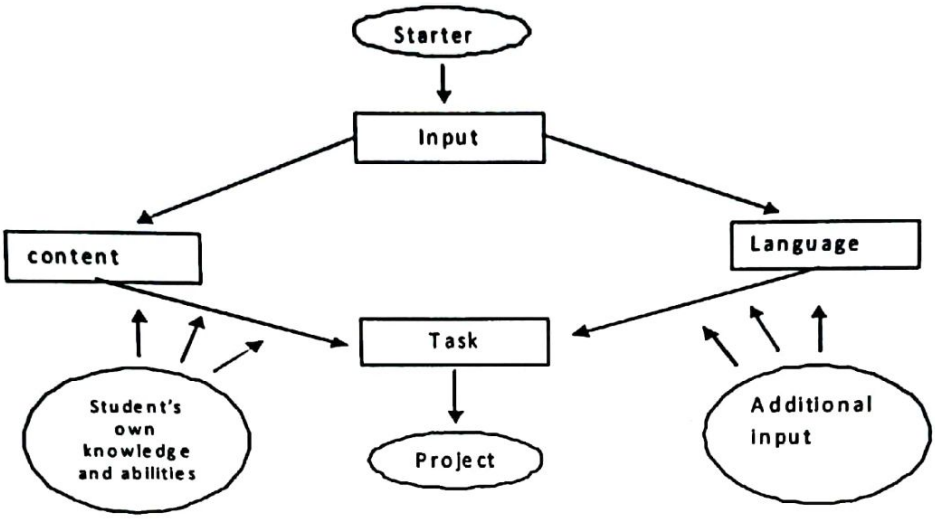
This provides (1) a stimulus for thought, discussion and writing, (2) new language items or the representation of earlier items, (3) a context and a purpose for writing, (4) genre models and exemplars of target texts, (4) spur to the use of writing process skills such as pre-writing, drafting, editing, and (5) opportunities for information processing. Content focus includes topics, situations, information, and other nonlinguistic content to generate meaningful communication. Next, language focus should involve opportunities for analyses of texts and for students to integrate new knowledge into the writing task. Finally, task includes the materials that should lead toward a communicative task, in which learners use the content and language of the unit, and ultimately to a writing assignment. These components can be described as follows:



LANGUAGE SCAFFOLDING MATERIALS FOR TEACHING EXPLANATION TEXTS

The above diagram shows that the input of the materials can be both in forms of content and language. Then, both of them are transferred into a wide variety of tasks. The tasks themselves are designed by considering additional input and students' own knowledge and abilities. The final product is teaching/learning materials. Task is one of the most important elements in teaching/learning material. There are many tasks can be done to improve students' language competencies for writing. Hyland (2003) classifies these tasks into four main groups. They are language familiarization, model analysis, controlled composition and guided composition. These scaffolding tasks are designed to gradually increase learners' independence and control, moving from basic noticing activities through manipulation of models to tasks that vary the degree of guidance.

The main concern of familiarization tasks is raising awareness of language forms and patterns without requiring production. They link tasks closely with texts, drawing students' attention to how language is used in relevant contexts and helping them to see that the language they are learning is directly relevant to creating their target genres. These tasks also allow learners to examine aspects of the whole text and then go on to identify and practice selected features of grammar and vocabulary.

The next step in language scaffolding is manipulation of models. Models are important for familiarization tasks because they encourage students to reflect on the features of target texts. In the next stage in learners' acquisition of a language competence for writing, models are sources of manipulation activities. Good models therefore provide students with a reliable genre schema to prepare them effectively for authentic writing situations.

There are many types of activities that can be done in model-based tasks. Those kinds of activities involve students in combining, inserting, reordering, or deleting text segments. Combining tasks enable the students to match the first part of a sentence with an appropriate second part, a cause with an effect, an event with a consequence, and so on. Insertion tasks include cloze activities, where target words or features such as topic sentences have to be inserted into a text, and storyboarding,

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where students use their knowledge of format and topic to predict all the language needed to recreate a text from a skeleton.

The following materials are some examples of materials that can be used in language scaffolding activities for improving students' ability in producing explanation texts. They are adapted from Knapp and Watkins (2005).

Flotation

Flotation is a technical term that deals with the degree objects stay on the surface or sink in liquids. Objects that float are said to be buoyant. When a solid object is placed in a liquid it is forced up by the density of the liquid. If the density of the solid is greater than the density of the liquid, then the solid will sink. If the density of the solid is less than the density of the liquid, then the object will float. That is why light objects float on water and why heavy objects like rocks will sink.

In scientific and technical explanations, the introductory paragraph generally has the function of classifying and describing the particular phenomenon to be explained.

- It classifies the phenomenon or concept as a part of a particular group of things; for example,
  Flotation is a technical term ...
- It describes the phenomenon or concept in relation to other things within the same network; for example,
  Objects that float are said to be buoyant.
- It describes essential features or uses that are relevant to the subsequent explanatory sequence; for example,
  ... a technical term that deals with the degree objects stay on the surface or sink in liquids. Objects that float are said to be buoyant.

Once the phenomenon or concept has been located in this scientific frame, the explanation moves into the explanatory sequence stage. This involves the sequencing of verbs arranged either temporally or causally, or in combinations of these; for example,

is placed ... forced ... sink ... float ...

Explanatory sequences in general follow a pattern of two or three verbs, followed by a brief description/ evaluation, followed by another sequence of verbs, and so on.

Actually, concerning the language highlight, there are three prominent features of written texts that should be understood by the students (Derewianka, 1990). They are:

1. Lexical density

By looking at the number of content words (lexical items—nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), we can see how many meaning have been packed into one clause. For example, the clause

This assumption let to the theory that the entire universe once formed an infinitely dense, infinitely hot ball comprising all space and matter that for some reason exploded.

has a number of content words, such as *assumption, led, theory, entire universe, infinitely dense, infinitely hot ball, space, matter, unknown reason* and *exploded*. That's a lot to come to terms with in the space of a few lines. Imagine if we spoke like that and we had to process all those meanings before the next sentence. That's the reason why it is so hard to take in a lecture or speech which is being read from a written text.

2. Nominalization

A favorite ploy of adult writers is to take a 'process' and turn it into a 'thing'. The term to describe what we do when we express a process as a 'thing' or participant is called nominalization. It begins to become evident in students' writing as early as mid to late primary. The process of nominalization can also be taught to students as an editing strategy. The knowledge of nominalization, and its effect on writing, can assist students in making the transition from a purely speech-oriented form of writing, which is heavily action, or verb based, to a more thing, or noun-based written construction.

As a starting point for understanding nominalization, ask students to refer to the action verbs they identify in the following short text:

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There was this man called Hubble and he discovered that galaxies keep expanding into space. Because of what he discovered, we now understand the universe and how it began quite differently.

Verb/Process		Noun/Thing
He discovered	becomes	*Hubble's finding*
Keep expanding	becomes	*the expansion*
We understand	becomes	*our understanding*
How it began	becomes	*its origin*

Thus the above text can be repacked into:

Hubble's finding about the expansion of the galaxies revolutionized our understanding of the Universe and its origin.

3. The noun group (nominal group)

Another reason why writers may prefer to use nouns is that it can keep them building up meanings around nouns, turning them into lengthy structures and thereby compressing even more meaning into the clause. The following examples show some of the noun group used in an explanation text:

- Hubble's finding about the expansion of the galaxies
- Our understanding of the universe and its origin
- An infinitely dense, infinitely hot ball comprising all space and matter

The last example show most clearly how nominal group cal call on a variety of resources, each providing further information about the thing in question. It is unsual to find such lengthy group in the spoken text.

CONCLUDING REMARK

Vygotsky's (1978) views of collaborative learning and Bruner's (1986) ideas of scaffolding are two influential things in genre-based approach. This approach is often presented in the form of a cycle of teaching and learning which is designed to enable students understand what is to learned and to build their confidence and ability to write effectively. Intermediate L2 writers require greater support during the early stages of working with an unfamiliar genre. The teacher scaffolds their progress by providing information, appropriate language, and opportunities for guided practice. When they are able to control this new genre, the scaffolding matters are gradually removed and more responsibility shifted to the students.

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