Using Genre-based Pedagogy to Teach Structural Staging of Short Persuasive Essays in a Japanese University Context

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Abstract

University students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are required to read and write specialised academic genres. Genre-based pedagogy, developed from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), teaches lexicogrammar and structure of these genres in context. The present study taught the structural staging of exposition and discussion genres to 17 students over a ten-week program, using the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) framework. Pre- and post-instruction essays were collected. Results show that, post-intervention, students preferred the structurally complex discussion genre when responding to a short essay question. There was a small improvement in the use of main genre stages, while the use of generic sub-stages showed the most improvement. Students’ pre-instruction use of main staging suggested some familiarity with argument genres from previous EFL learning, although incidences of sub-stage crossovers and repeated sub-stages in the pre-instruction essays showed a lack of detailed understanding of the genres’ structure. Post-intervention, such crossovers reduced significantly and, regardless of the genre of the final essay, use of sub-stages was appropriate and accurate. The results suggest that a targeted, short-term program helped students understand and use appropriate persuasive generic structures in short academic essays suitable for standardised English tests. Implications for future studies and teaching programs are discussed.

Keywords: argument, EAP, EFL, ESP, genre, SFL, structure

Introduction

Learning languages is never easy. When you are expected to master not only lexicogrammar but also highly specialised contextual elements of meaning, such as in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP), the task is even more arduous. Students learning and using English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the university level need to apply the lexicogrammar they may have learned in high school to new academic
contexts, often with little external support. For example, until recently, English readiness courses for Japanese undergraduates have been general in nature, and have provided little preparation for academic English (Ruegg & Williams, 2018). While some training on formal writing is provided at the high school level in Japan (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017), in general, EFL students do not learn about most specialised genres until university (Watanabe, 2016). Chinese students also must write in a wide variety of genres at the university level which they may not receive specialized training in (Zhang & Pramoolsook, 2020). Genre theory (Martin, 1992), developed out of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), may offer a starting point for more targeted academic English interventions at the university level.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

SFL suggests that any act of communication is about making choices, and that language is therefore a system, in which different language choices contribute to the end communicative result (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Furthermore, all language is situated in use, and thereby serves a function. In SFL, semantics derive naturally from the grammatical choices we make; therefore, by determining the purpose and meanings of a text, the language requirements for particular communicative choices can be identified (Martin, 1992). SFL differs from the more ‘traditional’, grammatical approach which teaches rules of grammar without the context in which those rules are used (Derewianka & Jones, 2010), and is ideal as a basis for teaching EAP (Alexander, 2019).

Genre-based teaching

Genre-based approaches to teaching reading and writing were developed from SFL (Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2006). In genre-based teaching, students are introduced to a particular genre, such as exposition, and learn the social purpose, structure and lexicogrammar which characterise that genre, and how they work together to achieve the text’s function in context. Genre-based teaching allows students to recognise, describe and create within discipline-specific genres and also to identify how language use varies both across disciplines and within genres themselves, for specific purposes. The development of this kind of metacognitive ability through genre awareness is particularly valuable to L2 university students (Caplan, 2019; Negretti & McGrath, 2018).

The present study sought to conduct a short-term, genre-based teaching program on English writing, with a focus on two related genres that would be of immediate and long-term value to the student cohort. A review of the literature on the teaching of generic structure,
definitions and descriptions of the persuasive genres of exposition and discussion, the relevance of the target genres, and the selected teaching framework, is presented below.

**Literature Review**

In this review of the literature, we will first outline why it is important to teaching generic structure to students of English (2.1). We will then describe the nature (2.2) and structure (2.3) of the target genres for this study, the exposition and discussion genres from the persuasive genre family. We will provide a justification for our decision to focus on persuasive genres (2.4) and will overview current research into the teaching of these genres (2.5), before finally introducing the teaching method used in the present study, the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (2.6).

**The importance of teaching generic structure**

Apart from the language features which characterize a genre, the structure of the genre (its expected moves or stages in order) is critical to the success of a text in context. Individual genres are distinguished by their stages and sub-stages, in which various parts of a text’s purpose and message are iterated (Martin & Rose, 2008). The differing purposes of each sub-genre within a genre family require slightly different structures. While each text is different, residing in a unique context within the overarching context of its genre family, and while authors can manipulate genre structure and language for their purpose at any given time (Martin, 1992; 1995; Sakran et al., 2019), teaching the specific stages which make up any particular genre’s general structure ensures that students have a sound framework for a coherent, functional text. The present study taught the structures of two common academic genres, exposition and discussion, to students of English in a Japanese university.

**The exposition and discussion genres**

The two genres under focus in this study were the exposition and discussion genres, both members of the persuasive genre family. Texts in persuasive genres aim to persuade an audience to a point of view. They may focus entirely on one side of an issue, presenting arguments logically towards a conclusion (as in expositions) or they may present both sides of an argument before stating an opinion (as in discussions). Presenting and leading an audience around both sides of an issue towards a conclusion (as in the discussion genre) increases the structural complexity of the argument presented, with additional stages and sub-stages through which a coherent argument must be made. This means that discussion texts, which investigate
both sides of an argument before drawing a conclusion, are more structurally complex than expositions, and so may be more difficult to master, particularly in Japan, where genre-based writing training remains limited (Nagao, 2018), and the discussion genre in particular has received less attention than the exposition genre (Watanabe, 2016). Watanabe found that over 80% of university entrance exams, regardless of discipline, required only the exposition or personal reflection genres, which include less structural complexity (Watanabe, 2016).

Exposition and discussion structure

The genre stages and sub-stages for exposition and discussion taught in this study were adapted from Martin and Rose (2008). See Table 1 below and note that expositions were rationalised to 8 sub-stages in total and discussions to 10 sub-stages in total.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Main Stages</th>
<th>Sub-stages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>Statement of Position</td>
<td>Issue</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Background Information</td>
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<td>Appeal/Statement of Position</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Preview of Arguments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>Point</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Restatement of Position</td>
<td>Elaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Restatement of Position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Position A</td>
<td>Review of Arguments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Issue</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Position B</td>
<td>Point</td>
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<td>Evidence</td>
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<td>Identification of Opposing Side</td>
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<td>Rebuttal of Opposing Side</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>Recommendation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These stages and sub-stages represent the characteristic structuring of expositions and discussions, although there are many possible varieties, including combining and embedding multiple genres within a single text (Martin, 1992; 1995). In the present study, the main stages
of expositions and discussions were mapped to paragraphs, so that students were taught that an exposition with one argument may consist of three paragraphs (or an introduction, body – the argument paragraph – and conclusion), although most expositions contain at least two argument paragraphs, and a discussion with one argument and one counter argument may consist of four paragraphs (introduction, argument, counter-argument, conclusion). For the present study, separating generic main stages into paragraphs was felt to offer students the most visible and logical means of constructing cohesive texts within the target genres.

 Justification for selection of persuasive genres

Students in non-English-speaking universities may encounter several new academic genres at university (Zhang & Pramoolsook, 2020), including persuasive argument genres such as expositions and discussions (Kongpetch, 2006; Nagao, 2019; Syarifah & Gundawan, 2015). Persuasive or argumentative genres such as expositions and discussions are consideredparticularly important in EAP writing across the disciplines, occurring frequently in assignments and reference materials (Hirvela, 2017; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Newell et al., 2011; Pessoa et al., 2017). Argumentative writing also plays a prominent role in standardised English tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) which many second language (L2) learners must attempt during study or to further their studies abroad (Hirvela, 2017). While some L2 students learn argumentative essay writing in secondary school, many others report that they received very little instruction on this genre in high school, and lack confidence to attempt it at university (Wette, 2017). Overall, many L2 English learners struggle with the more sophisticated expectations of the genre at university (Hirvela, 2017; Pessoa et al., 2017). The students in the present study were planning to take the IELTS test for various reasons, and were studying or intending to study academic subjects using English as the medium of instruction. Therefore, the exposition and discussion genres were considered the most generally useful for this teaching program.

 Persuasive genre teaching research

Persuasive genres have been the focus of a few recent genre-based teaching studies. Kongpetch (2006) taught the exposition genre to Thai undergraduates, because of its prevalence in undergraduate and published academic persuasive writing. Structural metalanguage and staging were taught using a four-stage process based on the Teaching Learning Cycle (TLC) (Rothery & Stenglin, 1994): building field knowledge, modelling the
text, joint negotiation and independent construction. Feedback was provided on three drafts, including specific feedback on genre structure. The post-test expositions were stronger and more consistent in generic structure following the targeted teaching (Kongpetch, 2006). No teaching or comparison of other persuasive genres was included in this study.

In two studies investigating students’ use of the discussion genre, improvements were found in student understanding (Nagao, 2018) and use (Syarifah & Gundawan, 2015) of the genre’s structuring and language features. Both teaching programs were based on the TLC. Syarifah and Gundawan found that students’ post-instruction texts all used appropriate generic structure, which was not present in their pre-instruction diagnostic texts (Syarifah & Gundawan, 2015). Nagao (2018) found that students’ awareness of discussion structures improved, particularly with regard to the Argument-Counter Argument stages (discussed further below). Other persuasive genres were not included in these studies.

Nagao (2019) taught the structure and interpersonal language of both expositions and discussions to Japanese undergraduates, as examples of prevalent persuasive writing in the academic context, one of few studies to combine these related genres in a teaching program. However, no baseline data was collected to determine the impact of the program on student gains. A four-stage version of the TLC was implemented, although the study included no practical written exercises prior to the test writing. The findings showed that students were able to identify structures that worked well in their own and their peers’ essays.

With the exception of Nagao’s study (2019), teaching and comparing multiple related genres, such as exposition and discussion, within the persuasive genre family, has been little studied. Both genres are well-represented in academic English writing and were likely to be encountered by the students of the present study. They differ substantially in structure and purpose, despite belonging to the persuasive genre family; however their structures include many similar stages and sub-stages, such that teaching them together in a short-term program may be an efficient use of limited time. The present study seeks to address the need for additional research on the effects of a training program in which two related genres are taught and compared in terms of purpose and structure, with clear pre- and post-intervention testing, using a teaching method similar to the TLC but with additional opportunities for collaboration.

The Gradual Release of Responsibility teaching framework

In this study, an adaptation of the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) framework was used as the framework for teaching genre structure. The GRR framework was first put forward in 1983 to shift agency for learning from the teacher to the students (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Over the years the original model has been developed and refined. The four-
step model proposed by Fisher and Frey (2008) adds emphasis on collaboration (Fisher & Frey, 2008), which makes it ideal for use in the English classroom (Duke & Pearson, 2009; Fisher, 2003). Peer collaboration allows students more active learning time (Nation, 2011) and serves as an additional opportunity to embed learning prior to constructing texts independently. Thus, the GRR framework differs from the TLC in that it offers an additional stage, Collaborative Learning, in which students work in small groups to practice the new content, following the modelling, and whole-class collaborative construction stages. It was believed that the addition of an extra stage, in which students worked together to practice the content prior to independent work, would provide students with additional opportunities to embed their new knowledge, as well as support students to learn collaborative skills. The students in the present study had the stated intention of travelling overseas for study at English-medium universities, where student-centred and collaborative learning are common pedagogies, which the students may not be familiar or comfortable with (Harumi, 2020; Thanh Pham, 2011). Therefore, the selection of the GRR framework supported students in their immediate and future learning needs.

Figure 1 below shows the version of the GRR framework for this study.
This framework has been adapted by adding an introductory stage, Setting the Context, in which students’ thinking is directed towards the context – the target language feature of the lesson – through ice-breaker and warm-up activities in which needed vocabulary is called up in preparation for the learning ahead. Ahmed (2010) has found that a lack of topic-specific background knowledge was cited by EFL learners and teachers as a reason for lack of coherence in learners’ texts (Ahmed, 2010). It is therefore necessary to include a clear context for students at the commencement of each lesson, and to reinforce this context through learning activities throughout the lesson and the teaching program overall.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects on students’ genre structuring of a targeted ten-week teaching program in a Japanese university, based on the GRR framework, in which the generic structures of two academic genres, exposition and discussion, were taught and practised. The participants in this study had a stated aim of improving their IELTS scores in order to study or work abroad. Therefore, the intervention focused on short essays of around 250 words, similar to the format of the second and most highly weighted component of the
IELTS written exam (IELTS, n.d.).

Considering the prevalence of argument genres such as exposition and discussion in university-level EFL study and testing, there remain few empirical studies which investigate the benefits of genre-based pedagogy for the teaching of these genres, particularly in combination. This study will be the first to investigate the efficacy, through pre- and post-intervention essay analysis, of a genre-based short-term program on two persuasive genres.

The research question was constructed as: *How does a ten-week, targeted teaching program at a Japanese university affect students’ use of generic structure in short persuasive discussions and expositions?*

This paper contributes to research on the effectiveness of explicit generic structure training in EAP and ESP contexts.

**Methodology**

*Overview*

The active instruction in this project consisted of a ten-week, 20-hour program (one two-hour class per week for ten consecutive weeks), outside of regular university hours. The ten-week breakdown included a lesson each on exposition (including both hortatory – in which the reader is persuaded to ‘do’ something – and analytical – in which the reader is persuaded to ‘believe’ something) and discussion structure and purpose, as well as additional genre-appropriate language features such as cohesion, nominalisation and evaluative language. Each weekly lesson ended with an Independent Writing activity, in which students were asked to write an exposition or a discussion text. Thus, in addition to the lessons on generic structure in Weeks Two and Three, students practiced the appropriate structural staging in every week of the teaching program. Additionally, in Weeks Four, Five, Seven, Eight and Nine, the structural staging and purpose of expositions and discussions were explicitly reviewed prior to the Independent Writing stage.

*Pre- and post-instruction data collection*

To observe changes in students’ writing across the life of the program, participants were given a writing task before and immediately after the teaching period. The task mimicked the IELTS Task 2 written test, in which students were asked to write a minimum of 250 words in 40 minutes on a given question in English, with no assistive English resources permitted. The question was identical in the pre- and post-instruction tests:
‘Scientists predict that all people will choose to talk the same global language in the future. Do you think this is a positive or negative development?’

The question was sourced from an IELTS practice website (IELTS Liz, n.d.). Students were not given feedback on their responses in Week One, nor were they advised that the same question would be posed in Week Ten, to ensure that they would not attempt to revise or study for the specific question, and reduce familiarity effects.

Participant profile

In the present project, 23 students attended Week One, with 17 of those attending in Week Ten, allowing comparison of their pre- and post-instruction data.

The participants were mostly first or second-year undergraduates from a variety of disciplines attending a university in Japan (two of the 17 participants who completed the course were completing postgraduate degrees). The students were mostly of Japanese ethnicity, with one student from Vietnam and two from China.

Student English level

English proficiency is an important factor in intervention outcomes (Cheng, 2008; Nagao, 2019; Yasuda, 2015). Participants’ IELTS scores were reported by the Japanese program director to be between 4 and 5 (Limited User and Modest User respectively) (IELTS, n.d.), ensuring similarity of proficiency.

Ethical considerations

Following ethical approvals, students were recruited through the university’s English-language support service for students planning to study or work abroad. The program was described as a free, no-grade/no-pressure supplement to existing university English support services. Students were provided information and consent forms in both Japanese and English, and were offered regular opportunities to ask questions both before and during the course of the program, to ensure fully informed consent could be given.

Teaching method

The lead author acted as the teacher for this intervention. In each week, a different language or structural feature was taught as the focus content, starting with exposition and
discussion structure, and including (in later weeks) features such as cohesive tools, nominalisation and evaluative language, with the intention to build a well-structured, cohesive and sophisticated text by Week Ten. Previous language and structural features were regularly reviewed throughout the course of the program.

**Lesson structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using the GRR framework</th>
<th>(see</th>
<th>Introductory Stage</th>
<th>Setting the Context</th>
<th>Teacher Responsibility Stages</th>
<th>Student Responsibility Stages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Focused Instruction (“I do it”)</td>
<td>2. Guided Instruction (“We do it”)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Collaborative Learning (“You do it together”)</td>
<td>4. Independent Learning (“You do it alone”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 (above), each two-hour lesson in the teaching program was divided into stages, in which the teacher gradually turned over more responsibility to the students. Following an ice-breaker and introductory, *Setting the Context* stage, students referred to hand-outs and whiteboard notes while the teacher described the content under focus for that week, during the *Focused Instruction* stage. Model texts were provided, with the generic stages and sub-stages clearly identified and colour-coded, which the teacher then explained in detail. An example of an annotated model text can be seen in Error! Reference source not found..
In an exposition, one point of view is described and argued for.

Expositions can be either:

- **Hortatory expositions**, which try to persuade people to act in a certain way.
  - For example: "Do not smoke." "Be kind to others." "Do not use plastic bags."
- **Analytical expositions**, which try to persuade people to a particular point of view.
  - For example: "Baseball is the best game." "Climate change is real." "Vacations are good for you."

An exposition has three stages:

1. **The Statement of Position.** This includes:
   a. **The Issue** — "In this essay I will explain why vacations are good for you."
   b. Some background information — Many people work too hard and don’t take enough vacations. In fact, some workers need to be forced to take vacation days, because they simply don’t want to stop working.
   c. **The Appeal** — "I believe that vacations are important, and I will provide three reasons to back up my point of view."
   d. **Preview of Arguments (optional)** — I will explain how vacations are good for your mental health, and that they will benefit your physical health as well. Thirdly, I will explain how vacations actually improve your time at work.

2. **The Argument Stage.** This includes:
   a. The first Point — "Vacations help your mental health."
   b. The first Elaboration — because they encourage you to slow down and think about different things. They inspire you to be creative and consider different perspectives. And they provide an important rest period for your brain, which needs to take time away from everyday concerns and try new ways of thinking every now and then."
   c. The second Point — "Secondly, vacations help your physical health."
   d. The second Elaboration — "because it is likely that you will get more exercise and try different physical activities when you’re on vacation. Additionally, good mental health has been linked to good physical health."
   e. The third Point — "Finally, vacations are good for your work life."
   f. The third Elaboration — "because they allow you to recharge your batteries and feel refreshed, which leads to more productive work time and increased satisfaction with your life."
   g. More points can be included.

3. **The Restatement of Position/Summary of Arguments.**
   a. "Taking a break from work now and then has many benefits. From improved mental and physical health, to increased work productivity and life satisfaction, it is clear that vacations are important for all of us and that we should all make sure to take them regularly."

Here is the full text showing the structural stages:

**Vacations Are Good For You**

In this essay, I will explain why vacations are good for you. Many people work too hard and don’t take enough vacations. In fact, some workers need to be forced to take vacation days, because they simply don’t want to stop working. I believe that vacations are important, and I will provide three reasons to back up my point of view. I will explain how vacations are good for your mental health, and that they will benefit your physical health as well. Thirdly, I will explain how vacations actually improve your time at work.

Vacations help your mental health because they encourage you to slow down and think about different things. They inspire you to be creative and consider different perspectives. And they provide an important rest period for your brain, which needs to take time away from everyday concerns and try new ways of thinking every now and then.

Secondly, vacations help your physical health because it is likely that you will get more exercise and try different physical activities when you’re on vacation. Additionally, good mental health has been linked to good physical health.

Finally, vacations are good for your work life because they allow you to recharge your batteries and feel refreshed, which leads to more productive work time and increased satisfaction with your life.

**Taking a break from work now and then has many benefits.** From improved mental and physical health, to increased work productivity and life satisfaction, it is clear that vacations are important for all of us and that we should all make sure to take them regularly.

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Figure 2. Example of annotated model text provided to students
Students then created a text as a whole-class group, which the teacher scribed and later emailed to the class (Guided Instruction stage). During the Collaborative Learning stage, students worked in pairs or threes on practice activities related to the topic of the week. Each week ended with time for independent text creation (Independent Learning stage). Students were taught appropriate metalanguage throughout the program, namely the generic stages and sub-stages, as this has been found to be beneficial in developing awareness of and ability to talk about language features (Jou, 2019; Syarifah & Gundawan, 2015).

Data analysis

The essays were analysed using the adapted structural staging model from Martin and Rose (2008). First, main stages were identified and then, once each essay had been sorted into either exposition or discussion, the sub-stages were identified. Comparing each essay with the descriptions of each stage and sub-stage in the model allowed the researchers to identify examples of accurate or inaccurate staging within the students’ work. In order to ensure intrarater reliability, the essays were analysed on two different occasions separated by two months. To ensure validity, the pre- and post-instruction essays were combined and randomised prior to analysis. There were no instances of disagreement in the two analyses, suggesting that the model acted as a strongly reliable and valid tool for structural analysis.

Results

The results are presented here, with quantitative data presented first including the students’ choice of genre (5.1) and their use of main stages (5.2) and sub-stages (5.3) followed by qualitative illustrations of student work (5.4) and the identification of a new sub-stage (5.5).

Choice of genre (discussion or exposition)

Table 2 below shows the genre choice in participants’ first (pre-instruction) and final (post-instruction) written papers.

Table 2: Genre choice in first and final papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Increased in complexity (changed from Exposition in first paper to Discussion in second paper)</th>
<th>Remained the same 1 (wrote Exposition in first and final paper)</th>
<th>Remained the same 2 (wrote Discussion in first and final paper)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice of genre</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The overall results can be seen in Figure 3.

![Genre Choice in First and Final Papers](image)

*Figure 3. Genre choice in first and final papers*

Of the 17 students, seven who wrote an exposition in their first paper elected to write a discussion in the final test. A discussion includes an extra main stage and two additional sub-stages, and is thus a more complex genre to master in terms of conventional structure (see Table 1 above for the breakdown of genre main and sub-stages). These students are included in the ‘increased in complexity’ data. Only recognisable discussions were included in the ‘increased’ data.

There were ten students who wrote expositions in their first and final papers. While not an increase in complexity, exposition is a valid response to the question, which offers students the choice of stating a single opinion (exposition) or weighing both options (discussion).

No students changed from writing a discussion in Week One to an exposition in Week Ten. There were three students who wrote a discussion in Weeks One and Ten, listed in the ‘remained the same’ data, showing that this genre was familiar to at least some of the participants, and remained their genre of choice after the teaching program ended. It should be noted that these participants included all four main structural stages of the discussion genre in both Weeks One and Ten. However, for two of the participants, their use of the sub-stages of discussions increased (see the section on sub-staging below), suggesting a more nuanced awareness of the genre.

*Use of genre main stages*
Table 3 below shows the main genre staging use across all students’ first and final papers.

Table 3. Genre Main Structural Stage Change in First and Final Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Count</th>
<th>Main staging improved in final paper</th>
<th>Main staging remained the same in final paper</th>
<th>Main staging got worse in final paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 17 initial written papers, five (29%) omitted a main structural stage. All were expositions, and all omitted the final stage, Restatement of Position/Summary of Arguments.

Use of genre sub-stages

Figure 4 shows the improvements made to sub-staging in students’ Week Ten papers. Ten out of 17 students improved their sub-staging use, with five students remaining at the same level and two students showing a deterioration.

![Genre Structural Sub-Stage Use in First and Final Papers](image)

*Figure 4. Genre structural sub-stage use in first and final papers*

Of the three students who wrote a discussion in both Weeks One and Ten, two improved their sub-stage use from using five and six of the ten sub-stages respectively to using all ten (the third student’s sub-stage use remained static, with six out of ten sub-stages used in both Weeks One and Ten).
In eight pre-instruction essays, sub-stages were included from the other persuasive genre. Thus, if the essay was an exposition, sub-stages from the discussion genre were present, and vice versa. Among the pre-instruction essays, six expositions included one or more sub-stages from the discussion genre, namely the Identification of Opposing Side and Rebuttal sub-stages. Additionally, two discussions included a sub-stage from the exposition genre, the Statement of Position sub-stage, in which the writer states their opinion about the essay subject. Two pre-instruction essays also included an unnecessary Review of Argument stage.

**Qualitative examples of student work**

One student included four discussion sub-stages in their text; however, their opening statement stated their opinion on the question clearly and noted that they would justify their opinion in the following text. This is a key feature of an exposition and not generally included in a discussion; thus their paper was categorised as an exposition. An extract of this text can be seen in Table 4 below (note that Tables 4, 6 and 7 are extracts rather than full texts and student spelling errors have been corrected).

Table 4. Student exposition paper with discussion staging present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Student Essay – Exposition with elements of Discussion</strong></th>
<th><strong>Stages and Sub-Stages from Martin &amp; Rose (2008) (exposition stages in bold)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scientists predict that all people will choose to talk the same global language in the future.</td>
<td><strong>Issue (exposition/discussion sub-stage)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some people might think this is a positive development, because we can communicate to each other more easily and freely.</td>
<td>Position B (discussion main stage), Point + Evidence (discussion sub-stages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However, I think this is a negative development for following two reasons.</td>
<td><strong>Statement of Position (exposition main stage)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First, there are possibilities that nobody will talk and learn their native language. This mean they cannot understand their literature or geography written in their own language.</td>
<td><strong>Appeal (exposition sub-stage)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is true that they can transfer it to the same global language by technology, but it is not always become same meaning.</td>
<td><strong>Preview of Arguments (exposition sub-stage)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second, we will lose cultural or political diversity. Using one same language mean the</td>
<td><strong>Argument (exposition main stage)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Point + Elaboration (exposition sub-stages)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
world become one place. Indeed, it is [essay ends] - unfinished

In cases where a sub-stage was included but was incomplete or used incorrectly, it was not included in the count of sub-stages used. One example of incorrect usage can be found in Participant 11’s pre-instruction essay which commenced with the sentence ‘I agree with this opinion.’ In answer to the question posed, it makes no sense, and so, despite stating a position, it is incorrect in the context. Therefore, the sub-stage Statement of Position is not included in this student’s tally of correctly-used sub-stages. In cases where a sub-stage is phrased incorrectly but still makes sense in the context, it has been included in the count. An example of this is Participant 3’s final paper in which her first sub-stage, which should be the Issue in a discussion, with no opinion attached, is phrased as an Issue plus Position – ‘Scientists estimate that all people will choose one common language in the future. I don’t think it will cause a positive development.’ However, the text as a whole is otherwise structured as a discussion, with points and evidence on two opposing sides leading to a Recommendation sub-stage at the end. Thus, the Issue-Position sub-stage at the beginning can be accepted as correct.

The improvement in genre sub-stages can be demonstrated through one student’s first and final essays. Here, the student attempted a discussion text in Weeks One and Ten. In Week One, several key sub-stages were missing from the text, noted as N/A in Table 5. By Week Ten, the same student used all discussion sub-stages accurately (Table 6).

Table 5. Sub-Stage Use in One Discussion Writer’s First Paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages/Sub-Stages</th>
<th>Student first paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Researchers expect that people all over the world will communicate with each other by the global language in the future. First, having the same language means communication become easy even with those who come different countries. It will lead us to be able to make a lot of friends around the world. N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Position A) Point</td>
<td>Evidence Identification of Opposing Side Rebuttal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Identification of Opposing Side Rebuttal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the other hand, there will be some people who are worrying about disappearing many languages in this world. To speak the same language means the decline of opportunities to speak their mother-tongue. It can lead tons of languages abolish. N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Position B) Point</td>
<td>Evidence Identification of Opposing Side Rebuttal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Identification of Opposing Side Rebuttal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despite of these criticisms, I believe the common language provide us the benefits.</td>
<td>Recommendation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. Sub-Stage Use in the Same Discussion Writer's Final Paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student final paper</th>
<th>Stages/ Sub-Stages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Today, there are a scientific expectation that people around the world will share and talk the same global language in the future.</td>
<td>Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are some people who believe that sharing the same global language is a wonderful development.</td>
<td>(Position A) Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The language allow people to communicate smoothly with each other and to avoid several troubles related to language differences.</td>
<td>Evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some argue that choosing and spreading the same global language will take tons of time and money.</td>
<td>Identification of Opposing Side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However, it doesn’t matter since these people will be aware that the global language is by far more useful than English or French someday although they may not recognize that in a short term.</td>
<td>Rebuttal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the other hand, some people think that promoting the same global language will cause disappearing of a lot of languages.</td>
<td>(Position B) Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today, there are tons of languages in the earth. Many of them are vanishing due to a decreasing speakers.</td>
<td>Evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However, not all language are lost because of the same global language. businesses.</td>
<td>Identification of Opposing Side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even today, many people speaks more than two languages. As is the often case with that, they speak their mother tongue and other language which people need to study or do businesses.</td>
<td>Rebuttal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimately, choosing the same global language is a positive development.</td>
<td>Recommendation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Presence of a new sub-stage*

An interesting finding from the pre- and post-instruction papers was the presence of a new sub-stage, which we have named Solution. This appeared in two students’ pre-instruction papers, both discussions, and in two students’ post-instruction papers, one an exposition and
the other a discussion. The new sub-stage was placed at the end of the paper in the concluding remarks. In all cases the Solution sub-stage added onto the Recommendation or Restatement of Position sub-stages by proposing a way in which the recommended action could work or could have its negative effects mitigated. Participant 9 added this sub-stage to both pre- and post-instruction essays. In the pre-instruction essay, after concluding that a global language is a good thing, the student reiterated Position B, the negative side of a global language.

Then, the Solution stated:

To solve this problem, they should save other language. For example, they should learn and educate that there are a variety of languages and they should promote people to use other languages.

Participant 9’s post-instruction essay also included a Solution stage following the Recommendation that a global language is a good thing:

We should learn the global language as a second language and we should regard both global language and their language as important things.

In Participant 8’s initial writing test, after concluding that a global language is a good thing, the Solution sub-stage stated:

In order to prevent the two [second, or negative] situation, it is necessary to prepar the education system which all people are able to be attend the chances to learn the language regardless of their races, religions, what countries they live in, if they are poor or rich, their beliefs and so on.

This additional sub-stage was not present in Participant 8’s final essay.

Participant 14 included a Solution sub-stage in the post-instruction essay, but not in the initial essay. The Solution stated:

…here is a solution: every countries should teach their mother tongue properly to children, rather than focusing on other language education.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings, first considering students’ choice of genre (6.1), then their use of main stages (6.2) and sub-stages (6.3). The new sub-stage found in student essays is then discussed (6.4). Some discussion is presented on students’ individual language choices with regard to structure (6.5) and the effect of the Gradual Release framework is also discussed (6.6). Finally, the research questions are considered (6.7) and limitations of the study are outlined (6.8).

Choice of genre

The results show that students made use of both genres in their first and final essays.
Students were given many examples during the teaching program of when each genre might be appropriate, depending on the wording of the essay question and the students’ own planning and opinion. In addition, students were explicitly taught planning techniques, such as listing possible arguments, before identifying whether the arguments sat mostly on one side or covered two sides of an issue, thus helping them decide which genre to use in their response. Planning strategies can be an effective tool for academic writing, consistent with Rajagopalan and Shi (2016), who noted strong first drafts following provision of content planning strategy in their investigation into writing research abstracts (Rajagopalan & Shi, 2016). In the present study, students’ improved planning ability and improved familiarity with genre structure may have led them to identify the most appropriate genre to respond to the Week Ten essay question following their planning time at the beginning of the test. For students who struggled to write enough words within the time limit (at least 250 in 40 minutes), the exposition may have represented a ‘safer’ option, which would prevent them running out of time in the middle of a more complicated argument/counter-argument discussion structure. For others, the arguments they had in mind may have prompted them to try the discussion genre, and challenge themselves.

The complexity of the argument/counter-argument structure in discussion texts should be clarified here. The writer of a discussion must not only consider both sides of an argument, but must also think about the counter-arguments and possible rebuttals that might effectively persuade a reader to agree with them. This requires additional planning time. An exposition is, in the simplest definition, a list of arguments designed to draw the reader to a clear point of view which is explicitly stated at the very beginning. A discussion, on the other hand, requires the writer first to make a determination as to their point of view, and then to follow a series of logical steps: identify arguments that support their position, identify counter-arguments against their position, identify ways of rebutting those counter-arguments, identify arguments that support the opposing side and identify ways of rebutting them as well. This complex process leads the reader to a less explicit and more embedded recommendation. Therefore, the seven students who wrote expositions in Week One and then chose to respond via a discussion text in Week Ten demonstrated visible improvements in their ability to manipulate complex argument structures.

Use of genre main stages

Five students in Week One omitted an exposition main stage, reducing to two students in Week Ten. In analytical expositions such as these, the final stage is considered optional, and
students were made aware of this during the program. However, the final stage in the pre-instruction papers is likely to have been omitted due to time constraints rather than forgetfulness or conscious decision, as all five of the papers without the final stage were unfinished (ending partway through a sentence or idea). Additionally, in Week Ten, it is probable that the stage was also omitted due to time constraints, as one text had commenced a final stage which remained unfinished, and the other text’s final sentence (in the second stage) was also unfinished. As time was a critical factor in the students’ written tests in order to properly simulate test conditions, incomplete stages could not be counted.

In Week One, five expositions included both of the possible concluding main stages for expositions, the Restatement of Position and Summary of Arguments stages. The Summary stage is more suited to hortatory expositions and so less appropriate to the essay question. The inclusion of both of these stages prior to instruction suggests an effect of previous learning about how to conclude a persuasive essay in English. Genre-based teaching remains comparatively new in Japan (Nagao, 2018) and so it is likely that the complexities of different genre structures within the persuasive genre family have not yet been recognised and taught in high school or tertiary English classes.

The students’ use of genre main stages showed the least impact from the teaching program, as 77% of the students were already using most or all of the main stages suitable for the genres they wrote in. Where in other contexts such as Indonesia, students had no prior knowledge of genre structure (Syarifah & Gundawan, 2015), the students in the present study demonstrated some prior knowledge. This finding was expected in the light of other genre-based research in Japan, where students showed a basic prior awareness of exposition (Nagao, 2020) and discussion (Nagao, 2018).

Use of genre sub-stages

Students’ use of sub-stages showed the greatest improvement of all features investigated. Prior to instruction, the majority of students used inappropriate or unnecessary genre sub-stages. This has elsewhere been shown to be an effect from earlier writing instruction (Bangeni, 2013) and is likely to have the same cause in this study, where students are unlikely to have received detailed genre instruction, but rather more generalised information. Ten out of 17 students improved in this area in Week Ten, with five remaining at the same level.

Inclusion of sub-stages from other genres or unnecessary, repetitive sub-stages was less marked in the post-instruction essays, in which only one exposition included sub-stages from the discussion genre (Identification of Opposing Side and Rebuttal) and one discussion
included a sub-stage from the exposition genre (Review of Arguments). The frequent revisions of the discussion genre across the teaching program, including the provision of additional model texts (created by the research team to include clear structural staging) and in-class conversations and demonstrations, may have contributed to students’ increased confidence with this genre’s sub-stages and their preference for this genre in the final written test. Students’ increased accuracy with regard to structural sub-stages in the discussion and exposition genres demonstrates a development of writing capability, from general awareness to detail-focused, specific awareness, which is particularly important for EFL writers, as Yu and Liu (2016) found in their study of article introductions. Bearing in mind the small sample size, the result shows an improvement after instruction on the detailed use of the discussion genre, in students who were already familiar with the genre.

Other studies that have focused on teaching the structure of a single genre have found improvement (Chen & Su, 2012; Gómez Burgos, 2017); however this program taught two related but structurally different genres, which increased the content burden on the students. Where three related genres were taught together, no significant improvement in narrative genre staging was found (Cheng, 2008). However, the present study showed clear improvements in genre staging across both persuasive genres under investigation. Two reasons for this difference in results may be the emphasis in the present study’s teaching program on context and planning for when to use each genre, and the frequent revisions of structure across the program. In a short-term teaching program, there is limited time available and so a balance must be struck between how much to teach and how much time there is to teach it. This study offers some evidence suggesting that it is possible to effectively teach two related genres together providing that strong contextualization is included, without overburdening the students.

New sub-stage ‘Solution’

The identification of a new sub-stage, ‘Solution,’ was notable. In all examples illustrating this sub-stage, a separate Recommendation or Restatement of Position was clearly included, and the solution offered could be identified as a discrete iteration of meaning. Therefore, the addition of the Solution sub-stage to the generally accepted set of generic sub-stages for the exposition and discussion genres is reasonable in these cases. As Martin and Rose explain (2008), genre stages are not fixed and unchanging, but are instead made fit for purpose by each user in their specific context (Martin & Rose, 2008). Genres evolve over time, as social needs and purposes evolve, because genres must be functional within society to survive.
In the present study, the participants were all motivated to score highly in the IELTS test. The students were studying privately as well as in the teaching program and it is probable that they were using popular IELTS test preparation websites and IELTS-produced resources. In the IELTS Written Task 2, a number of possible question prompts may be set, of which one is referred to as the Problem Solution Essay (IELTS, 2020; IELTS Buddy, n.d.; IELTS Liz, 2017). This question type specifically requests the writer to offer solutions to a given problem within their essay response. There was no such requirement in the question posed to the students in the present study; however it may be that students’ previous IELTS study influenced those who used a Solution sub-stage in their responses, perhaps due to paying insufficient attention to the question or lacking experience in reading and interpreting the question.

Students’ independent manipulation of generic structure

An earlier concern about genre-based approaches to EFL was that teaching students specific genre sub-stages in a specific order may limit their ability to assert their individuality and freedom of self-expression in writing in the foreign language (Benesch, 2001; Luke, 1996). Instead, it may cause them to ‘parrot’ or copy rigidly the examples provided by the instructor. However, this was not evident in the post-instruction essays in the present study. The addition of the new sub-stage Solution and the use of sub-stages from other genres may show evidence of students’ individual take on generic structure. No such cross-pollination of genre sub-stages, or additional sub-stages, were provided to students in the model texts during the teaching program; rather, the model texts were created to show clear, uncomplicated structural staging. Additionally, students demonstrated a wide variety of lexical phrasing within their essays. This may have been due to their stated desire to build genre-specific vocabulary, so that the teacher provided a number of alternative phrases to use when stating opinions or giving counter-arguments. While not structural in nature, this variety of lexicogrammar choice provides some evidence that students are willing to experiment and express their individuality within set parameters.

On the other hand, students exhibited limited individuality of choice in the internal structure of sub-stages, in both genres. Of 17 essays, two final-essay expositions provided four or more very short points and rebuttals with limited evidence. However, the majority of expositions offered a more balanced approach with two to three points, all sufficiently detailed in evidence, and no rebuttals. All final-essay discussions included one argument each in Positions A and B. It should be noted that all model exposition texts were specifically designed
to show three Points with Evidence, and all model discussion texts included one Position A argument and one Position B argument, and while this was not explicitly recommended in class as the best option, they were discussed as suitable for the time limits of an IELTS written test, and these options formed the structure used by the majority of students. However, the teacher did discuss with students that the stages and sub-stages of discussions and expositions could be used in longer essays written without strict time constraints, and there is no reason to suppose that, given an unlimited writing time, students would not choose to alter the number and complexity of points they made.

**Effect of the GRR framework on generic structure use**

In every lesson, generic structure was taught, practised, and repeated for emphasis, according to the Gradual Release of Responsibility framework, allowing students to embed information about generic structure throughout the course of the program. In their final reflection survey, students were asked how their knowledge of essay structure had changed over the course of the teaching program. Of the 17 respondents, 12 talked about their improved understanding of essay structure. For example, one student wrote: ‘[I learned] to change essay structures depending on types of questions being asked (discussion or exposition)’. Another response, showing some internal rationalisation of metalanguage, stated:

I have learned the structures of both persuasive and argumentative essay (expository essay?). Now, I pay more attention to the structure of essays whenever I have to do some English writing.

The GRR framework is likely to have contributed to students’ improved understanding and use of the purpose and staging of the Discussion and Exposition genres.

**Research question**

The research question asked:

*How does a ten-week, targeted teaching program at a Japanese university affect students’ use of generic structure in short persuasive discussions and expositions?*

In response to this, we can see that the teaching program had a clear positive impact on the accuracy and detail of students’ generic structure, particularly with regard to the sub-stages of each genre. Students demonstrated an understanding of how to construct complex arguments and how to accurately read an essay prompt and plan an argument according to key genre
conventions. This outcome has valuable implications for the future development and implementation of short-term teaching programs for specific purposes, so that students can receive the maximum benefit from their time and teachers can ensure the content is relevant and valuable for both short term and longer term purposes.

Limitations of study

This study considered the changes in understanding and manipulation of generic structure in two persuasive genres, exposition and discussion, in a group of 17 undergraduate Japanese students, during a ten-week teaching intervention.

The small sample size of this study renders it exploratory in nature and provides an opportunity for further testing on a larger scale. One limitation of the study was in the sample size - the original number of enrolled students into the program was 31; however, the program was voluntary and fluctuations in course attendance led to only 17 students attending both the first and final weeks of the program, thus allowing their written essays to be analysed.

There were no penalties for non-attendance, and future studies may look at further incentivizing attendance across a full teaching program, to ensure that non-attendance is ruled out as an influencing factor in results.

The short-term duration of the study precludes an investigation into the long-term effects of a targeted, genre-based intervention, and further exploration of participants’ ongoing use of taught generic structure would be valuable.

A fourth limitation is in the time allowed to students to write their test and practice essays. The study taught short essays within restricted time limits, to simulate IELTS test conditions, to cater to the stated needs of the participants. It is possible that students may have shown a more thorough understanding and use of taught generic structures if they were given more time to plan and write their essays.

Finally, the class duration of two hours was perhaps not sufficient time to both teach and practise the weekly content. Students’ independent writing tasks were curtailed to between 10- and 25-minutes’ duration at the end of each class, insufficient to attempt an entire short essay each week. Instead, students were encouraged to practise planning and then to select one or more essay stages to practise, such as the Position A main stage (sub-stages Point, Evidence, Identification and Rebuttal of Opposite Side).

A key promotional feature of the program for student enrolment was that there would be no homework, and thus most students chose not to finish their practice essays outside of class hours.
Conclusion

This exploratory study showed that Japanese undergraduate student short essays increased in structural complexity, and particularly improved in generic sub-stage use, following a ten-week, 20-hour teaching intervention on persuasive genre structure. Students tended to prefer the more complex genre structure of discussions after completing the teaching program, and showed increased awareness and capability to use generic sub-stages across both discussion and exposition genres. This study provides insight into the efficacy of a targeted short-term intervention on academic argument writing for undergraduate EFL students who plan to study and work in English-speaking areas. The results support the use of the Gradual Release of Responsibility teaching framework in the field of English for Academic Purposes. This study offers additional evidence demonstrating the power of genre-based approaches to the teaching of English, particularly when combining related genres, with implications for the development and implementation of short-term English writing programs. A short-term program can support the improvement of writing in related genres which are of immediate and long-term relevance to students, offering benefits to both EFL students and teachers with limited time for engaging in supplementary courses in university contexts. The study provides a foundation for further investigation into this area.

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IELTS (n.d.) *How IELTS is scored.* https://www.ielts.org/about-the-test/how-ielts-is-scored


