

Teaching the Argument Genre in a Year 6/7 Class

Vicki Athanasopoulos and Debbie Sandford

Vicki and Debbie are ESL teachers. This unit of work was written after attending the Language and Literacy Course. It was originally published in April 1997 in the South Australian ESL Teachers' Association Journal.

In this Year 6/7 class, there are eight children who have language backgrounds other than English. The assistance offered is in the form of classroom support. For a small group identified as needing greater ESL support, there is also some direct teaching.

Together with the classroom teacher, we felt that the most useful way to use our time would be to work on developing the students' written genres. The classroom teacher was concerned that not only was the range of familiar genres for both herself and the children in her class fairly limited but the students' control of the various genres was also limited.

In Term 1, for example, we decided to work on the Recount genre. Although this was a familiar genre, many of the students had never been explicitly taught the schematic structure and language features relevant to it.

In Term 2, we decided to work with the Argument genre. As we had both recently completed the *Language and Literacy Course: the Application of Systemic Functional Grammar in the Classroom*, we decided to work together on this unit of work. This would provide an opportunity to use the knowledge and ideas that had been introduced in the course. We felt a joint effort would develop our confidence and increase our competence when delivering this set of lessons. A realistic goal would be to work on a few of the linguistic features of this genre rather than all of them. This decision was made because of the time factor, our level of confidence and because we didn't want to scare the classroom teacher!

This unit of work took about 7 lessons of 45-60 minutes each.

Preplanning

An important aspect of the classroom support by the ESL teacher is to include and involve the classroom teacher. To do this, clear expectations of everyone's role must be set.

When we meet with the classroom teacher, we share these points:

- the topics that are to be covered
- the length of time involved
- the expectations of each other.

Since this unit of work was a way of modelling for the classroom teacher an alternative teaching

methodology, there were certain expectations of the classroom teacher. They were:

- to show interest and enthusiasm by being involved in the activities and discussion
- to promote the lessons by showing that she personally valued the content
- to provide behaviour management when necessary
- to arrange organisational aspects, eg overhead projector and large sheets of paper for recording information contributed by the students
- to provide a prominent area for the display of wall charts etc. developed during the unit of work—these would function as resources for the students
- to establish a personal folder containing resources/ideas etc. used in this unit of work for her personal development.

The teaching methodology included following an adaptation of the Teaching-Learning Cycle (*Fig. 1*) from the Metropolitan East Disadvantaged Schools Program in Sydney.

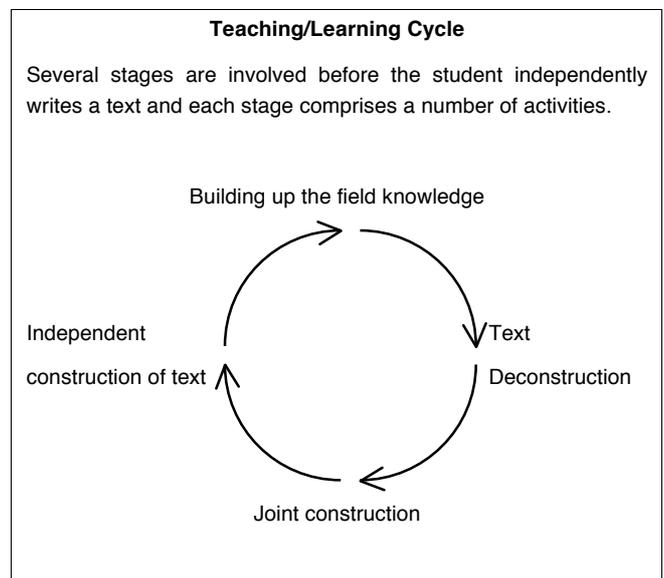


Figure 1: The Teaching/Learning Cycle (adapted from 'The Action Pack' (1992) NSW: Met. East DSP)

Our aims for the students were:

- to have an understanding of the schematic structure of an Argument
- to have knowledge of some of the language features appropriate to this genre
- to use the language of Arguments, both written and spoken.

The department's curriculum documents were consulted to illustrate to the classroom teacher the relevance of this work to all students, not just ESL. The lessons were planned to provide opportunities for the students to achieve the following outcomes.

LESSON ONE

Teacher Input

In this lesson, we revised the notion that different genres achieve different purposes.

We introduced the Argument genre and discussed some of the formats used—no distinction was made at this stage between the hortatory (persuading someone to take some action) and the analytical (persuading someone to agree with them).

The meaning of the word 'persuade' was discussed using the ideas from Chapter 7 of *Write Ways: Modelling Writing Forms* by Lesley Wing Jan; that is, persuasive writing can include:

- advertising texts, which sell and promote goods, services and activities
- texts to change people's points of view or attitudes by putting arguing a specific issue.

We then read an example of an argument written in a letter format (Fig. 2).

Text 1

Dear Peter

I am writing this letter to try and convince you that a non-smoker lives a more full and much healthier life than a smoker.

A non-smoker's circulatory and respiratory systems function more easily than a smoker's due to the strain that is not on the lungs.

A non-smoker's body is free of carbon Monoxide (the gas in car exhaust fumes), Tar, Nicotine (the poison used in insecticides) and over a thousand poisons. These substances are the contents of cigarettes. Smoking causes many life-threatening diseases such as lung cancer, emphysema and many other circulatory and respiratory diseases.

I have come to the conclusion that a non-smoker's life is more lively and more enjoyable than that of a smoker's.

Yours sincerely,

Mishka Holt

Figure2: Sample Argument text (taken from ???)

There was a brief explanation of the unfamiliar vocabulary used in the letter to ensure the children's field knowledge was sufficient for the activity.

This example was used because it was a simple text and cause and effect were easily identifiable.

During the discussion, the class felt there were problems with the text. These were concerned with the authenticity of the text.

The Arguments that the children ultimately wrote were relevant because the topics were chosen by the students and had personal meaning to them.

Group Activity

The children were placed in groups of four, asked to assign a reporter and to discuss their opinions on the purpose of the text.

After the discussions, each group's response was with shared with the whole class. All the groups agreed that the purpose of the letter was to express an opinion and to try to convince the reader that a non-smoker leads a much healthier and happier life.

The definition of an Argument was displayed on a wall chart.

'An Argument text is used to change people's points of view or to persuade them to take some form of action by putting forward arguments about a specific issue.'

So far the genre and its purpose had been established. Next we posed the following questions to the group:

- Who would use this genre?
- When is it used?
- Where would you find examples of it?

The children's responses were recorded under the following headings.

SPOKEN TEXTS	WRITTEN TEXTS
Class Meetings	Letters to the editor
Current Affairs (news programs)	Essays (especially in high-school)
Parents	Environmental issues-journals

Table 1: Different Argument texts

The children then copied into their books for future reference the definition of the Argument genre and where and when it would be used. They were also asked to collect examples of this genre (eg letters to the editor) from the local Messenger and other newspapers for the next lesson.

LESSON 2

In lesson 2, the children were introduced to the schematic structure of an argument.

ARGUMENT	
1	Issue – state your opinion
2	ARGUMENT(S) – provide reasons to support your argument(s)
3	CONCLUSION – restate your opinion taking into account the evidence you have provided

Figure 3: Schematic structure of an Argument

They were also shown the following framework.

ARGUMENT FRAMEWORK

1	I believe that There are many reasons to support my argument and these include
2a or	The first reason is Firstly,
2b or	Secondly, In addition to this,
2c or	Furthermore, The third reason is
3 or	Finally, In conclusion,

Figure 4: Detailed scaffold for an Argument

This chart was a basic framework to use when writing this genre. We emphasised that this was a useful scaffold to use when first attempting the genre, but that as their writing developed, they would be making other choices.

We examined an Argument written by a Year 3 student.

Text 2

Dear Salisbury Council

I live in Salisbury Council area and I think you provide lots of good things, like the library and the swimming pool. I go to the primary school and it's a very beautiful school. However I am feeling angry about the Salisbury Council for taking away the carparking space on the reserve opposite the school.

Firstly, Because parents have little children and if parents park far away from the school people can pick the children up and take them away and parents cannot see if the children get to school safely or not.

Secondly: Now that the car park has been taken away there are never any parking spaces left and children have to walk a long way in the rain.

Thirdly: Parents are now being forced to park close to the school to see if the children get to school safely and the children on the side opposite of the school have to wait a long time to get out and it is also dangerous to open the door on the road side.

Finally: We think you should NOT get fined for parking on the reserve because parents have no choice.

Lots of parents think that reserve should be a car park. I think you should listen to what people who live around say and change

it into a car park. I hope you took some of my advice.

Year 3 student

Figure 5: Sample Argument (Student Needs Assessment Procedures 1990)

After reading and discussing Text 2 with the class, we compared the structure of this text with the schematic structure outlined in the chart.

The children could identify that the first paragraph contained the issue.

The remaining paragraphs were labelled as the supporting evidence used to justify the point of view expressed in the introductory paragraph.

The last paragraph was seen to be a conclusion in which the writer reaffirmed the position taken in the opening paragraph. We again focused on the paragraph beginnings in this example and discussed whether the writer had successfully tied the conclusion to both the issue statement and the supporting reasons that had been developed.

Group activity

For the next activity, the children needed the arguments they had collected throughout the week. In groups of 3 or 4, they were asked to read through these examples and try to identify the part of the text that stated the issue—these were then highlighted with pens. They were also asked to highlight any words displayed on the framework chart, eg *Firstly, In addition*. The purpose of this was to help the children become familiar with this language.

Each group read out some of the issue statements. As this occurred, we were able to point out to the students that the authors of these letters were likely to be confident writers of this genre and often had not used the language examples shown on the framework chart. However, the schematic structure remained the same; that is, the issue was stated, followed by reasons/supporting details and then a conclusion.

The students were asked to base their first independent writing task on this scaffold as we felt this would increase their confidence when attempting this genre for the first time. Scaffolds such as these are crucial for ESL students when faced with new genres.

Throughout the unit of work, when dealing with a new example of the genre, we emphasised the different ways to begin paragraphs by highlighting the words and phrases that had been used. We pointed out that these words and phrases act like road signs, in that they guide the reader, clearly identifying the stages of the argument being presented.

Reconstruction of text

As a follow-up activity, the children were asked to work either individually or in a small group on the following task. They had been given a text that argued that children should go to school. However, the paragraph order had been mixed up and the students needed to organise the paragraphs correctly and paste this example into their exercise books. They were

asked to reflect on why they had placed the paragraphs in the order they did.

Reflection

After this lesson, the three of us discussed our feelings about the lessons so far.

- Were we happy with what we had done up to this stage?
- Did the students’ responses to questioning indicate they were able to understand the new information they had been given?
- Were we introducing too much at once?
- Were the students ready to go on to the next aspect planned?
- Were there any students who could not cope with the ordering activity?
- Were the lessons of suitable length?

The classroom teacher’s input was crucial as her knowledge of the students in her class allowed her to judge/assess the appropriateness of pace, delivery, students’ understanding and interest.

This evaluation of the process so far was particularly rewarding and valuable. It was in these discussions that we analysed what we felt were successful or not so successful aspects of the program. As both of us have since continued to work on this genre with other classes and teachers, we have continued to evaluate/reflect in this way and to adapt the lessons accordingly.

At this stage, we felt that this class seemed to understand the information and they were ready for the next aspect of the program. As teachers, we could also see the purpose, relevance and practical application of the Language and Literacy course and this increased our confidence and enthusiasm.

A vital part of our role as ESL teachers providing classroom support is to monitor the understanding and participation of the ESL students. During our discussion, we identified one child who needed very specific monitoring in order to:

- encourage a more active participation in speaking and listening when working on the small group tasks
- use the information being taught when doing writing tasks.

LESSON 3

At the beginning of each lesson, we felt it was necessary to include a quick revision of the important aspects of the previous lessons. We also encouraged the class teacher to revisit throughout the week the work that had been covered.

We stressed with the students that in order to present a convincing argument, they need to provide supporting evidence. Text 2 was revisited and the arguments identifying. It was explained that the remainder of the

paragraphs in which each of the arguments was presented was supporting evidence.

It was further explained that special words called conjunctions are used to help join the arguments to the supporting evidence. Some conjunctions are used to organise the arguments in the text (underlined in Fig. 6) and these were also explained.

Charts giving examples of some conjunctions were displayed on the classroom walls.

Connectives that show one thing is caused by another Result or Reason	Connectives that add or give alternative information Additive	Connectives that show a time link between events Temporal
Because, so, so that, since, Therefore, As a result, For this reason, Hence, Consequently	And, as well, such as, or, besides For example, Also In addition, Furthermore,	Then, after (that), When, Soon, later, Previously, First, Next, Secondly, Finally

Table 2: Classification of three groups of conjunctions

The conjunctions *because*, *and*, and *then* were put at the top of each list and it was explained that there were many other choices from each group that could be made instead. These charts remain in the classroom for easy reference.

The class then identified the conjunctions used in Text 2.

Dear Salisbury Council,

*I live in Salisbury Council area **and** I think you provide lots of good things, like the library and the swimming pool. I go to the primary school **and** it’s a very beautiful school. **However** I am feeling angry about the Salisbury Council for taking away the carparking space on the reserve opposite the school.*

Firstly, Because parents have little children **and if** parents park far away from the school people can pick the children up and take them away **and** parents cannot see **if** the children get to school safely or not.

Secondly: Now that the car park has been taken away there are never any parking spaces left **and** children have to walk a long way in the rain.

Thirdly: Parents are now being forced to park close to the school to see **if** the children get to school safely **and** the children on the side opposite of the school have to wait a long time to get out **and** it is also dangerous to open the door on the road side.

Finally: We think you should NOT get fined for parking on the reserve **because** parents have no choice.

*Lots of parents think that reserve should be a car park. I think you should listen to what people who live around say **and** change it into a car park. I hope you took some of my advice.*

Year 3 student

Figure 6: Conjunctions (in bold) used in Text 2

We discovered that this student had used *and* often and, at times, inappropriately. The class discussed where this had happened and what type of conjunction should have been used. Changing the conjunction often required a reorganisation of the clause.

When the students were first introduced to this text, they were impressed with it. Now having analysed it further, the children could see this aspect of language needed improvement.

Task

In pairs, the students were asked to choose a paragraph and rewrite it using a different conjunction from the chart—retaining the intended meaning of the text.

LESSON 4 – Modality

In this lesson, we introduced modality. In our Functional Grammar course we had studied this linguistic resource and its function as a way of expressing a speaker or writer's opinion about the probability, usuality, obligation or inclination about what they are saying.

'Modality is the general term for all signs of the speaker's opinion' (Butt et al. 1996)

This language feature is particularly important in argument writing. Its significance to the ESL learner is that it needs to be explicitly taught. We felt it could be best taught through role-play.

The classroom teacher was consulted and she chose six confident students from the class to perform the role-play scenarios planned. These scenes were relevant to the class—two of the three were based on actual student experiences—and they illustrated varying degrees of modality. The small groups were briefly coached on the purpose of the activity and the roles, relationships and status involved, and they were given an opportunity to rehearse.

Teacher input

Before beginning the role-plays, we introduced the 'modality words' (the term we used with the class) on a wall chart with a brief explanation of their function. We asked the students to take particular notice of the words used in the role-plays and see if they could hear any of the words we had just discussed.

Low	Medium	High
may	would	must
can	wouldn't	mustn't
could	should	ought to
possibly	shouldn't	have to
perhaps	probably	certainly

Table 3: Classification of modal verbal operators

We then watched the three role plays.

Role-play 1

The first group role-play involved a mother and daughter. The girl demanded that she be allowed to go to the local shopping centre with her friends. She chose words of high modality such as: 'You **must** let me go!' and 'I **ought to be allowed** to go!' The mother immediately accused her daughter of not speaking respectfully and banished the child to her room.

Role-play 2

This involved two friends. The first student, while working on a homework assignment, was interrupted by her friend. The friend wanted to play but she had too much homework and wanted to get it finished. She tried all three levels of modality to ask her friend to go home and leave her to get on with her task.

She started with, '**Perhaps**, you'd **better** go home. I've too much to do.' Her friend ignored her so she said, 'You **really should** go home now.' Once again she was ignored. She finally told her friend, 'You **must** go home now!' Only after using high modality did she achieve her goal.

Role-play 3

The third role-play involved a student from the class asking the principal of the school if he would pick up some chemicals from the nearby high school so that the class could perform some science experiments. This role-play was particularly good as the student playing the principal responded with the comment, 'I'll think about it', indicating that there was a possibility but no certainty. The lack of commitment by the principal was obvious. The child requesting the assistance then started to give reasons to convince the principal about the benefits to the class in terms of knowledge and understanding of the science experiment. This further explanation persuaded the principal to give a definite answer that he would collect the chemicals.

When we discussed this role-play with the whole class, they were able to identify that the student was more successful when he used the educational benefits of the experiment as a reason to convince the principal to cooperate with them. The class could also see the type of modality that was appropriate in each context. We referred to the wall chart on which the modality words had been categorised under the headings: LOW, MEDIUM, and HIGH.

Group Activity

After these discussions, the children worked in groups of three or four. They were assigned either high, medium, or low modality and asked to plan a scenario in which that level of modality was appropriate. When everyone had finished, we watched the role-plays and tried to guess which level of modality the groups had been assigned—the roles, relationships and status had been outlined by the students at the beginning of their role-play. They had great fun and the modality words they had used were easily identified by the audience.

Sometimes the children over-used the modality words and we discussed that.

Whole-Class Activity

We then revisited Text 2 and noted the frequency of these words. Lastly, the text was read aloud, changing some of the modality from low/medium to high. The class could see the difference these words made to the message and were able to express the effect this could have on the audience.

Reflection

As teachers we had decided that the enthusiasm generated and the feedback shared from our last discussion/evaluation was a very desirable aspect of the whole process. We made it a point to spend some time together for such reflection, eg before or after school, recess and lunchtime, depending on the other meeting commitments. We all felt that the role-plays had clearly illustrated the impact of the modality used by a speaker/writer on their audience. If an inappropriate level of modality were used, an argument would possibly be less successful. The classroom teacher mentioned that she was aware of modality words in the context of assertiveness training but had not related it to the grammar.

As a footnote, a parent reported back to the teachers that after this work on modality, her son had started speaking more positively to his sister and to them, that his conscious understanding of the language had made a huge difference to his behaviour and that everyone should do what the students had done in class.

LESSON 5

Teacher Input

It was now necessary to gather suitable topics for our joint construction and independent argument writing. To do this, the children worked in small groups to brainstorm possible topics. These topics were listed on large white sheets for use during their independent construction. From the suggestions made, we felt it was important to identify those that needed factual information and thus needed some research prior to the writing. We very briefly mentioned that the success of such persuasive writing needed accurate information that was presented fairly and ethically.

The class voted on the topic they would like to use for the joint reconstruction. The topic chosen was *Should children be allowed to stay up late during weekdays?*

A planning framework was used. In groups of three or four, the students were asked to come up with arguments/reasons in support of the issue. These ideas were then collated on butcher's paper.

Example of planning framework

We used this planning sheet as a scaffold for the students and it reminded the students of the need for providing further evidence for their arguments.

EXPOSITION–TAKING ONE POINT OF VIEW

STATE PROBLEM AND POINT OF VIEW	
ARGUMENTS	SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
1.	
2.	
3.	
CONCLUSION	

Figure 7: A scaffold for an Argument (adapted from Writing: Resource Book, 1994: 138)

LESSON 6 – Joint construction

A brief review of aspects covered so far was conducted and the students' attention was drawn to the display charts which we had been adding to.

We returned now to the joint construction of the topic chosen the previous lesson. The audience was identified as well as the degree of modality needed.

The children then voted on the four most convincing arguments for this issue.

During the modelling stage, different coloured pens were used to highlight the different language features which had been taught so far.

Throughout the joint construction, we constantly interacted with each other, eg

- Does this make sense?
- How shall we write this?
- Can we use a different word here?
- Is this how you spell this word?
- Let's look at the charts and find a suitable word.

This was done as a way of showing some of the 'thinking' processes involved in writing and modelling the importance of continually re-reading to check for flow and making sense. If the students gave us suggestions which were in a highly spoken form, we would suggest a change so that it was expressed in the more appropriate written style. This valued their contribution but at the same time we were indirectly modelling nominalisation. Because the students were continually involved in providing input, they felt a sense of ownership when the work was completed.

Text 3
Should children be allowed to stay up late during weekdays?

I believe that I should be allowed to stay up later during week days.

There are many reasons to support my argument.

Firstly, I think I am old enough to stay up later because as you get older, you need less sleep.

Secondly, I need more time to do my homework because the homework demands are greater.

Thirdly, staying up later allows me to spend more time with you. As I get older, I will be spending more time with my friends and the time we have now is very valuable.

Finally, more documentaries are on later at night such as Witness, therefore by watching these programs I can increase my general knowledge.

In conclusion, I would like you to consider my request to stay up later on school nights.

Figure 8: Jointly constructed text

This text played an important role for the children in terms of guiding them during their independent construction, regardless of the other texts modelled.

For their independent writing in the following week, the children were asked to choose a topic—they were able to refer to the collated brainstormed topics.

LESSON 7 – Independent Construction

Before the children started their writing, we discussed the following checklist evaluation sheet—taken from SNAP workshops. This established what was expected and it was to be included in their profile book along with their first draft and good copies. During the students' independent construction, we were available to children to help and clarify any concerns.

WRITTEN ARGUMENT CHECKLIST		
Student Evaluation		
Have I ...		
1	Made a position statement? (eg: I believe...; In my opinion...)	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Given relevant arguments supporting the statement? (eg: Firstly,...; Another argument ...;)	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Summed up and restated my position? (eg: Finally,...; In conclusion, ...; For these reasons, ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Organised the Argument so that it has the correct structure of: your position– arguments – restatement?	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Used paragraphs to organise my Argument? (Started on a new line for each separate reason)	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Supported the arguments with evidence?	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Used the right kind of language? – modality that is appropriate for the audience – a range of conjunctions eg: firstly, furthermore etc	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

8	Checked that my spelling and punctuation are correct?	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Written my final draft neatly?	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	Had my final draft edited by a buddy?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student's Comments:		
Teacher's Comments:		
Parent's Comments:		

Figure 9: Argument genre checklist

Overall evaluation

As ESL classroom support teachers reflecting back on the unit of work covered, we feel it was successful.

The students demonstrated in their writing that the concepts which had been taught were understood by most.

We can also say we observed that the students felt a sense of confidence in their writing due to the new skills they had learnt.

The students can see the value, purpose and importance of learning these new writing skills. Since having worked with the Year 6/7 class, we have been approached by several teachers in our school and welcomed into classrooms to share our new knowledge and skills.

We have since covered units of work in Discussion and Procedure writing, using similar time lines, formats etc.

It is also very rewarding to see that the classroom teacher has 're-visited' the Argument genre. Her class is entering a competition and, as part of the competition, the class must write a letter (*Why should this class win a computer?*) and she felt confident enough to do this without our support.

References

- Butt D, Fahey R, Spinks S and C Yallop (1995) **Using Functional Grammar: An Explorer's Guide**. Macquarie University, Sydney: NCELTR.
- Education Department of Western Australia (1994) **Writing: Resource Book (in the First Steps Series)**. Melbourne: Longman.
- Metropolitan East Disadvantaged Schools Program. (1992) **The Action Pack**. Erskineville, NSW: Metropolitan East Disadvantaged Schools Program.
- Wing Jan L (1991) **Write Ways: Modelling Writing Forms**. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.