

USING COOPERATIVE LEARNING TO TEACH VIA TEXT TYPES

George M. Jacobs and Seah-Tay Hui Yong

Email: george@vegetarian-society.org; huiyong@nygh.moe.edu.sg

Abstract

This article offers ideas as to how students can collaborate as they learn about and utilize a variety of text types (also known as rhetorical modes). The article begins with explanations of the teaching of text types and cooperative learning. The longest section of the article consists of examples of ways that students can use cooperative learning techniques to work together to expand their knowledge of text types and to use that knowledge in their writing.

Introduction

In this article, we explain how the power of students working together can be harnessed as one means of teaching language via text types (also known as rhetorical modes), a focus of Singapore's current English Language syllabus. We begin with brief introductions to the teaching of text types and to cooperative learning. The bulk on the article consists of examples of the use of various cooperative learning techniques as tools to help students work together to expand their knowledge of text types and to use that knowledge in their writing.

Teaching Via Text Types

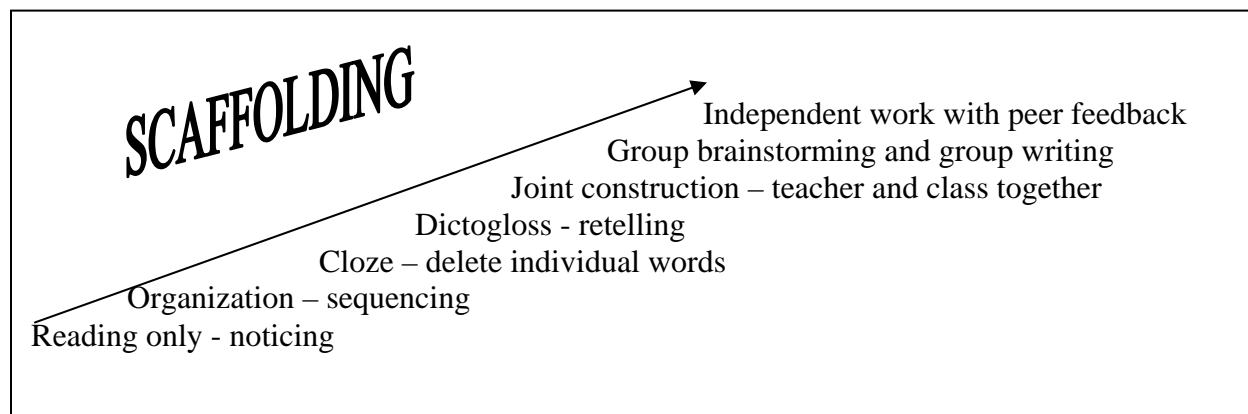
At the heart of our use of text types as an organizing principle is the view of language as a tool for achieving goals (Halliday, 1985). In other words, humans (and other species) use language to accomplish purposes. These purposes and the ways people accomplish them vary according to the context. Each of the various text types developed and took its present form and continues to evolve as humans use language, in this case English, to achieve various purposes, for example, to explain (Explanations), to tell what happened (Recounts), to instruct (Procedures) or to convince (Expositions).

In addition to the purpose to which a text type is put, each also has characteristic features grouped into two categories: organizational structure and language features. Organizational structure involves the typical parts of texts in that text type and the way they are ordered. Language features includes such areas as the grammatical features commonly associated with that text type. Vocabulary also plays a role here.

Insights from the analysis of text types offer useful knowledge which helps our students in their writing, as well as their reading, of written text types. We find that students can fairly easily grasp the characteristics – purpose, organizational structure and language features – of text types and then apply this information to their writing.

A concept we use in building student understanding of text types is Whole-Part-Whole. This means that we start with whole texts in a particular text type. Students first read and understand the texts. Next, they analyze these whole texts by identifying and working with the particular parts - the organizational structure and language features – of the texts. Then, with us, with peers and on their own with feedback from us and peers, students create their own whole texts in that particular text type, always bearing in mind the purpose which that text type has been developed to serve (Burns & Joyce, 1997).

This Whole-Part-Whole process plays out along a scaffolded cline involving initial tasks in which our students create no language of their own and ending with tasks in which students create entire texts from scratch using their knowledge of the text type, the content area of the text and their knowledge of their intended audience. Intermediate tasks students undertake as they ascend the cline include reassembling texts that have been placed out of order, replacing individual words that have been deleted, recreating a text that has been read to them and working with the teacher and classmates to create a new text.



Adapted from Derewianka (1995)

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a teaching methodology that offers “principles and techniques for helping students work together more effectively” (Jacobs, Power, & Loh, 2002, p. ix). In other words, cooperative learning is much more than just putting students together in groups and asking them to work together. Instead, cooperative learning principles help us understand what is involved in helping groups succeed, and cooperative learning techniques embody those principles in an attempt to provide structure for student interaction (Baloche, 1998, Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

We present a number of cooperative learning techniques later in this article. The two key cooperative learning principles are individual accountability and positive interdependence. Individual accountability is the feeling among group members that each has responsibility for the group’s success. Each must share in the group’s work and each must learn. Groups are not judged solely by the quality of the products they produce but, even more so by how much they have helped to strengthen each individual group member. For instance, if a group of our students has worked together and written an excellent composition, we are happy, but the group has not finished its work until each member of the group could also write an excellent composition.

At the heart of cooperative learning is the principle of positive interdependence. This means that the group members feel that they sink or swim together, that what helps one group member helps them all, and anything that hurts one group member hurts them all. A kind of yin-yang relationship exists between individual accountability and positive interdependence. Individual accountability puts pressure on group members to learn and to help others learn, while positive interdependence provides support to group members as they take the risks inherent in the learning process.

Teachers can attempt to promote a feeling of positive interdependence in a number of ways, including:

- a. group members have a common goal(s)
- b. group members are all rewarded if the group achieves its goal(s)
- c. the group works together to overcome an obstacle
- d. each group member has unique resources
- e. each group member plays a different (perhaps rotating) role
- f. group members share a common identity as members of their group

Cooperative Learning Techniques for Teaching Text Types

This section presents ten cooperative learning techniques and illustrates how they can be used to teach about text types. The predominant text type focused on is Procedures; however, cooperative learning techniques are generic, with most techniques being applicable to the teaching not only of any text type but to the teaching of any subject, e.g., mathematics or science, and any age level, from preschool to university, or achievement level, from the highest to the lowest scorers.

A few caveats should be stated before introducing the ten cooperative learning techniques:

1. Techniques can be modified.
2. There are more than 100 cooperative learning techniques, with teachers and others developing new ones every year. In this article, we present just a small sample.
3. In the teaching of any one text type, you will probably not want to use all ten techniques.
4. While we are strong supporters of cooperative learning, we also see an important role for teacher input and other modes of learning.

The ten cooperative learning techniques are presented in accordance with the cline (discussed in Section 1) which takes students from reading whole texts in tasks in which they do no writing, to tasks in which they work with parts of texts and finally to tasks that involve independent creation of whole texts, i.e., Whole-Part-Whole.

1. Lesson 1 is a noticing task. Circle of Speakers (Jacobs, Power, & Loh, 2002) is the cooperative learning technique used. Circle of Speakers encourages individual accountability, one of the two cooperative learning principles highlighted in Section 2, by asking each student in a pair to take a turn to tell what they notice about the task they have read. Noticing can be done in two ways. In deductive noticing, as seen in Rajan, Jacobs, Loh, and Ward (2002), the characteristics of a text type are taught before students are asked to notice those characteristics in

a particular text of that text type. In inductive noticing, as seen in Ellis and Gaies (1999), without prior instruction, students attempt to derive their own list of characteristics of a text type based on analysis of a text of that type.

2. Lesson 2 involves another noticing task, as we believe noticing can be an important tool in lifelong learning. Here, the cooperative learning technique is Same-Different (Kagan & Kagan, 1998). This technique helps students develop the taxonomic skills that scientists employ in analyzing different organisms and phenomena, such as biologists who attempt to develop a taxonomy of plants. Same-Different promotes the central cooperative learning principle of positive interdependence (see Section 2) by dividing resources among the group members such that each has a different text, with the group's (in this case a group of two) success dependent upon information about both texts.

3. Positive interdependence is encouraged in a similar way in Lesson 3, which focuses on the organizational structure of the text type. Within-Team Jigsaw, the cooperative learning technique on display in this lesson, is a variation of the better known Jigsaw (see <http://www.jigsaw.org/index.html>, retrieved 23 December, 2003, for details). Students need to tell each other about their pieces of the text and then explain where they believe their pieces go in the text. To succeed, students need not write a single word, but unlike in the noticing tasks, students must place the text pieces into an appropriate sequence.

4. Lesson 4 increases student contribution to text reconstruction while still providing a great deal of support. Students write individual words that fill blanks in the texts. The cooperative learning technique is Numbered Heads Together (Kagan, 1994). Crucial with this technique is that students not only tell each other their answers but also the reasoning behind their answers. Research suggests that when students give each other only answers, neither the giver nor the receiver benefits, but when students give each other explanations along with answers, both benefit (Webb, Farivar, & Mastergeorge, 2002).

5. Moving further up the cline toward independent writing, when students do Dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1990), they work in pairs to write a complete text. However, this text does not contain their own ideas. Instead, students are retelling a text that is read aloud to them by the teacher. Unlike in standard dictation, in Dictogloss, as can be seen in Lesson 5, the teacher does not speak slowly enough or repeat often enough for students to copy the text word-for-word. Thus, students' recreation of the text will be different from the original in some ways, but it should be faithful to the original in terms of main ideas and characteristics of the text type.

6. Demonstrations by teachers can be a useful means to promote learning. In Joint Construction (Lesson 6), the teacher leads the class to create a text in the text type being studied. The cooperative learning technique Write-Pair-Square-Share offers one means of involving students in this teacher-students collaboration.

7. Teaching via text types fits well with the Process Approach to writing. The first phase of the writing process involves generating ideas. Reading helps students find ideas, and the reading that students do at early steps in the cline will be helpful here. Students can also generate ideas by engaging in debate. However, most debates are winner-take-all, uncooperative affairs.

Fortunately, a cooperative twist on the standard debate format has been developed. It is called Cooperative Controversy (Johnson & Johnson, 1999) and is explained in Lesson 7.

8. After generating ideas, the next phase in the writing process is to write a first draft. Part of this drafting involves finding the proper vocabulary with which to present ideas. At the same time, finding vocabulary can also help in the search for ideas. Forward Snowball (Kearney, 1993) is a cooperative learning technique that aids the generation of both ideas and vocabulary. Lesson 8 illustrates how Forward Snowball works.

9. Collaboration can be useful in all phases of the writing process. In Lesson 9, students use the cooperative learning technique Circle of Writers (All at Once) to help each other write first drafts. Each student works alone to begin and end a text, but the middle portions of their first drafts are written by their groupmates.

10. Even when students have reached the upper right end of the cline and have written a text independently, a role still remains for collaboration. Indeed, professional writing, even that which appears to be single-authored is normally the result of collaboration between writers, on one hand, and editors and others, on the other hand. Peer Feedback on Writing in Lesson 10 provides ideas for how peer power can come into play in the editing phase of the writing process.

[Click Here to See Lesson Plans 1-10](#)

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented a small number of ideas on the use of cooperative learning to teach writing via text types. Teaching, like learning, is an inherently creative process. Thus, alone or in collaboration with their own peers (their fellow teachers) and/or their students, the readers of this article will no doubt develop or have already developed their own ways of using the power of peers to help students learn to write. Cooperative learning principles provide a measuring device via which we can judge our efforts at promoting such peer collaboration.

In addition to the two cooperative learning principles described in Section 2 of this article – individual accountability and positive interdependence – other principles have been offered. Let us close this article with one of these other cooperative learning principles: cooperation as a value. This principle suggests that cooperation provides not just a method for learning, i.e., it addresses not only *how* people learn, but cooperation can also be an important content area for students to learn about, i.e., cooperation can sometimes be the *what* and the *why* of learning. Purpose lies at the heart of text types, because people use language to achieve their purposes. We suggest that cooperation offers an essential purpose for language use.

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George Jacobs
JF New Paradigm Education, Singapore
george@vegetarian-society.org
www.georgejacobs.net

George JACOBS teaches cooperative learning and language education to teachers, and uses cooperative learning when teaching ESL to students. He edits the newsletters of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (www.iasce.net) and TESOLers for Social Responsibility. Corwin Press published his most recent book on cooperative learning.

Seah-Tay Hui Yong
Nanyang Girls' High School, Singapore
huiyong@nygh.moe.edu.sg

SEAH-TAY Hui Yong is senior teacher at Nanyang Girls' High School in Singapore, where she teaches English, writes curriculum, and mentors fellow teachers. She organized a cooperative learning network among secondary school teachers in Singapore and recently presented a workshop based on this article at the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (www.iasce.net) conference in Singapore.

Appendix A – Recipe for Cooking Instant Noodles (adapted from Rajan, Jacobs, Loh, and Ward, 2002)

Preparing Instant Noodles
(Serves 1)

Materials

One packet instant noodles

500 cm³ water

One small pot

1 pair of chopsticks or fork

1 medium-sized bowl

Steps

First, boil the water in the pot. Second, open the packet of instant noodles and remove the sauce packet. Third, pour the noodles into the boiling water, making sure that the plastic packet does not touch the water. Fourth, open the sauce packet and pour its contents into the boiling water with the noodles. Fifth, use the chopsticks or fork to gently stir the mixture. Allow the mixture to boil for one minute and then, carefully pour the soup and noodles into the bowl. Wait three minutes for the dish to cool. Finally, enjoy your delicious noodle soup.

Appendix B – My First Attempt at Cooking

My First Attempt at Cooking

Dad was nowhere to be found. Instead, there was conspicuous note on the fridge door, “Out on an urgent errand for your mom.” Out? Where’s lunch? I opened the microwave in anticipation; nothing was there. I scanned the fridge for at least some leftovers I could heat up. No such luck.

I groaned. I had just come home famished after a long day at school. “I suppose I’ll have to cook a packet of instant noodles myself,” I thought. Having seen others do it numerous times before, I had no doubt that I would soon be feasting on a hearty lunch. I even planned to add a few pieces of seaweed and wasabi to make it a special meal. I would prove to myself and my parents that the whole year of home economics lessons was not in vain.

Smiling smugly to myself, I took out a pot and filled it with water at the sink. Then, careful not to spill the water onto the floor, I transferred the pot to the stove. It was a little tricky as I was never allowed to turn on the gas stove before, but I finally got a fire going. Feeling the tummy rumble, I decided to turn it to the maximum while I went to change into something more comfortable.

When I returned to the kitchen, I panicked when I saw the pot boiling over, spilling water all over the stove. “Oh dear, I’ll have to clean that up later,” I grumbled to myself. Still, undaunted, I quickly tore open a packet of instant noodles, scattering a few bits across the kitchen floor in my haste. I popped the noodles into the boiling water, only to watch aghast as it boiled over with a greater vengeance. A little scream escaped my lips before I rushed to turn down the fire.

“What’s next? What’s next? Oh yes - the sauce!” By now, looking like a demented scientist, I hurried to cut open the sauce packet before emptying its contents into the pot over the noodles. Grabbing a pair of chopsticks, I stirred for what felt like eternity but was probably only a minute or two.

The stomach rumbled again. So I decided that I had enough of stirring and turned off the fire. I fished the noodles into a bowl and carefully poured some soup over them.

By then, I was so hungry, I could not be bothered with the seaweed or wasabi. In fact, afraid that I would drop the bowl as it was so hot, I stood there at the stove and began tucking in. It was just a bowl of plain, slightly overcooked instant noodles, but it was one of the most delicious meals I have ever had.

Appendix C - Feedback Checklist for Procedures Texts (adapted from Rajan, Jacobs, Loh, and Ward, 2002)

Purpose:

- ___ 1. Will this text enable readers to cook the dish?
- ___ 2. Does reading the recipe make your mouth water?
- ___ 3. Any suggestions for making the dish tastier or easier to make?

Organizational Structure

- ___ 4. Will the title capture readers' interest and/or make it clear to readers what kind of dish is described?
- ___ 5. Are the materials and ingredients needed to cook the dish named in the appropriate order?
- ___ 6. Are the steps needed to cook the dish listed in the appropriate order?

Language Features

- ___ 7. Are action verbs used?
- ___ 8. Are commands used?
- ___ 9. Are sufficient details given on matters such as how much, what size and other characteristics of the materials or the steps? (Tools for providing details include adjectives, adverbs and quantifiers.)
- ___ 10. Are connectors of sequence used?