Syllabus Development on Writing English News Stories for Kasetsart University Students, Thailand

Udomkrit Srinon[1], Peter Robert White[2] & Wisut Jarunthawatchai[3]

[1] English Department, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus, Thailand

[2] School of the Arts and Media, Faculty of Arts, Design & Architecture, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia

[3] English Department, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus, Thailand

Correspondence: Udomkrit Srinon, English Department, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus, Thailand.

Abstract

An English syllabus was developed on writing English news stories for the English for Journalism course in the second semester of the 2014 academic year at Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen campus, Thailand. The study focused on the development of material for writing hard-news and feature stories. The sample consisted of 154 students who had majored in English. The development and analysis of the syllabus for the course used a book titled *English News: Reading and Writing* developed by Peking University Press (2008). The analysis implemented current news stories in the course for their social and cultural contexts. The findings indicated that the designed curriculum worked well to some degree but that it was limited by the students' lack of familiarity with writing news stories. We suggest various actions: 1) to further develop students' writing ability, the lecturer should integrate more comprehensible inputs and material apart from those in the book; and 2) the news input material could be sourced from current news stories around the world with particular attention to Appraisal Framework (Martin & White, 2005) and the learning cycle proposed by the Sydney genre-based school (Martin & Rose, 1994), which are the main approaches under systemic functional linguistics, focusing on metafunctions (field, mode, tenor), the context of situation and the context of culture.

Keywords: English syllabus development, writing English news stories, systemic functional linguistics

1. Introduction

1.1 Development of English Newspaper Writing

Studying English using different media, especially newspapers, is a challenge for teachers and students. However, writing a news story and presenting it in English is also a way that can improve students' language abilities. Nonetheless, developing a writing course based on English newspapers is a long process that needs good materials and support from teachers. The development of English writing using newspapers involves many components including authorial voice, good language and linguistic structures, and clear meaning, which are mainly shaped in the journalistic style (Martin & White, 2005, 2007; Thomson & White, 2008).

Courses directed at developing writing literacy often address a diverse range of somewhat unpredictable topics. Often they have as their primary focus the production of "essay" style texts, such as academic or proto-academic writing of the type typically required in the arguably artificial context of school and university examinations. While the proposed teaching resources would not in any way be meant to replace such materials or courses, they would nevertheless constitute an alternative with certain advantages.

First, the range of topics to be covered would not be randomly determined but would instead reflect the established subject-matter concerns of news and lifestyle journalism—for example, accidents and disasters, crime, the environment, politics, science and medicine, social welfare, celebrity, fashion and the entertainment industry. As a result, students would be developing their knowledge in areas of current interest and controversy. Second, they would be developing their command of the linguistic resources associated with textual types which

are of obvious social significance (texts of a type with clear potential to inform or entertain the general public and to influence public opinion and belief), a command which is likely to be of practical benefit for students who undertake careers requiring that they communicate with a mass audience. Therefore, it is possible that as a result of this obvious "practicality" and real-world connection, students may engage more readily with the subject matter and language learning needed if they are to successfully produce such media texts, thereby enhancing their overall literacy development.

1.2 Novelty of the Project

The project was novel in the following ways. There are currently available teaching resources designed to develop students' ability to read media texts and, in some cases, to analyze and critique such texts. Materials of this type include some practical news-writing activities and exercises. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no published material currently available where instruction in the analysis and production of media texts is part of an integrated, linguistically informed program directly enhancing overall literacy development. Similarly, there is no material available that provides either a careful and systematic account of the linguistic properties of exemplar texts or a syllabus with a pedagogically principled progression in the students' mastery of key communicative functions.

The second aspect of the project—the longitudinal study of student literacy development—was also novel. While there have been many studies on the development of literacy in academic writing (for example, research in English for academic purposes or applied linguistics), to our knowledge there have been no studies on literacy development in the context of media text production. Our current project provides the first findings relating to how students develop command of the meaning-making resources associated with such texts. These findings have significance for literacy development research more generally.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this project was to develop and use a syllabus and materials focusing on the verbal styles, text types and communicative purposes associated with news, current affairs and lifestyle journalism. The first stage of the project involved the development of new teaching materials informed by principles associated with genre-based pedagogy, that is, an approach where

(1) skills in reading, listening, grammatical awareness, speaking and writing are developed together with a view to enabling students to produce effective, well-formulated texts of various types (in this case, texts which apply in news and lifestyle journalism) and where

(2) a teaching and learning cycle is used that is explicit regarding the field of knowledge associated with these texts, the social purposes they serve, the ways in which they are typically structured and their typical stylistic properties (the kinds of meanings and the linguistic resources writers need to command if they are to produce effective texts).

Specifically, these teaching materials provided students with a guide to both the analysis and production of mass media texts. We used real-world journalistic texts drawn from local English-language publications as material for discussion and critique and as models or exemplars of the various genres and writing styles which students would seek to emulate. The materials also supplied scenarios to form the basis of practical media text-writing exercises and activities. The teaching package included material dealing with the contexts in which the texts were produced, the way in which they were structured, their distinctive use of language, the social purposes they served and their potential to influence people's attitudes and beliefs.

3. Literature Review

Writing a news story is a challenging task for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. However, it is a fact that this task of writing is still difficult for students because it is a special genre that has different purposes and characteristics from other kinds of writing; it needs special elements such as voicing, linguistics styles and audiences (Thomson & White, 2008; White, 2009).

Many studies have advocated the development of students' writing of news stories (Aiex, 2000; Anggraini, 2020; Antepara, 2003; Chandler, 1990; Dycus, 1996; Kitao, 1996; Trang & Linh, 2018; Wiratno, 2018). However, little attention has been paid to the studies of how EFL students develop their command of meaning-making resources. To gain a better view on students' news-story writing in some different contexts, we offer the following critical review of recent studies.

Trang and Linh (2018) considered whether the school newspaper, *The SFLook*, resulted in its members' improved writing and reported the students' self-evaluation of the impact of the project. The study examined the students' (N

= 20) pretest and posttest before and after a 12-week action to assess their writing performance. A questionnaire was delivered to investigate students' attitudes towards their work for the newspaper. The findings indicated that the newspaper had reinforced its members' writing skills and that their motivations for writing were bound to external factors. The study suggested further applications of student-run newspapers in various educational contexts. It is argued that this study helped improve students' attitudes towards different aspects of news writing.

Anggraini (2020) investigated the contribution of vocabulary mastery to the news-writing skill of students in Indonesia. The study used a quantitative approach with a distributional correlational method. The study's population included students of the 2014 FBS UNP Indonesian Language and Literature Study Program. The sample consisted of 51 people selected by a simple random technique using the Taro Yamane formula with a precision of 10%. The data were collected using a news-writing skill test and a vocabulary mastery test. Based on the analysis of the research data, the author concluded that vocabulary mastery contributes to news-writing skills. Thus, the results of this study have implications for learning news writing skills. If vocabulary mastery and journalistic knowledge are not considered in learning, students' news writing will be less competent. Thus the study suggested that students increase their vocabulary mastery and that lecturers and teachers build students' vocabulary by increasing reading assignments. The study concluded that building vocabulary competence is needed for students when they learn to write a news story.

Wiratno (2018) conducted a research study on teaching news writing in English to two different classes of English Department students. Twelve students from the Diploma Programme and 12 others from the Undergraduate Programme enrolled in the course, English for Journalism, were selected to participate in this research. The author observed that teaching of this kind requires a unique strategy because students are faced with the problem of news content on the one hand and of how to convey the content on the other. In addition to strengthening the news content through field observation and interviews of the source of information, students should create suitable kinds of genre at the discourse level and select appropriate types of lexicogrammar at the clause level. News falls into the recount genre, but there are usually some sub-genres embedded within this larger genre. How concepts of genre work and how lexicogrammar should be employed in teaching English news writing were the focus of Wiratno's study. The results of this research show that regardless of the different learning performance of the two groups of students, it is evident that in transferring field knowledge to a well-arranged news piece consisting of relevant sentences, students in the different classes need knowledge of both text organisation associated with genre and linguistic skills associated with lexicogrammar choices.

Cheney (2013) investigated the journalists' perspective on the impact social media has had on their profession, and on how they perform their role. A series of interviews conducted with journalists also looked at the participants' beliefs about the change in audience interaction. Cheney investigated interactivity with the audience and the rise of the citizen journalist, as well as the journalists' preferences for working with social media. The paper validated the conclusion that social media had drastically altered journalism, while noting the contrasting beliefs on whether they had interfered with or advanced the profession.

Opgenhaffen and d'Haenens (2011) examined the impact on learning of the use of multimedia, interactivity and hypertext in internet news reporting. A knowledge experiment (N = 53) revealed that the use of multimedia, interactivity and hypertext applications in online news indeed had an effect on recognition and cued recall, taking into account the level of difficulty of news content as well as users' Web expertise. Experienced Web users benefited from online features only if the news content was difficult, whereas the presence of online features resulted in a drop in inexperienced users' knowledge. Inexperienced internet users benefited most from online features when the news content was easy, whereas in the latter case the scores of expert users tended to fall. This study provides insight into the way online features impact the cognitive load and attitudes concerning news content and how these variables might mediate learning from online news. Online journalists could put these findings to their advantage when producing online news stories.

From the review of the above studies, we argue that writing a news story needs knowledge of both text organization (genre) and linguistic choices including vocabulary. We propose that providing students with various materials about news writing and wide ranges of meaning – choice resources enhances students' media literacy. This means students have an opportunity to learn to be effective young journalists by the way in which they are provided with explicit and sufficient learning resources regarding news-story writing.

4. Method

In our study, one author, serving as the lecturer, presented the syllabus and materials through different stages of news-story writing, which covered hard-news stories and feature writing in the 2014 academic year. Then the lecturer looked closely at the components of the courses and materials from the two dimensions of hard-news

and feature writing. For the hard-news section, the course provided an opportunity for students to study the components of the news style. In the middle and at the end of the course, the students worked in groups to present their written works in class. The students who were chosen for the sample were the fourth-year students majoring in English.

During the course, before the midterm examination, the lecturer invited a TV journalist to participate in a seminar held for the students. The purpose of the seminar was to provide the students with an opportunity to listen to a journalist recounting his work experience as a news agent. The main content of the seminar was about how to write and translate a news story from English into Thai. All students from all sections joined the seminar out of curiosity.

In the first stage, we analyzed the syllabus that was provided to the students. The syllabus used in the class was based on a text produced in China called *English News: Reading and Writing* (Peking University Press, 2008), whose cover is shown in Figure 1. The book covers writing hard-news story and features. One of the authors, who was the lecturer in the current course, followed the guidelines in the book but created new assignments which were more suited to current local and world situations for the students. The assignments were based on the five W's (Who, What, Where, Why and How) and on the teaching and learning cycle as proposed in the Sydney genre-based school (Martin & Rose, 1994) which covers three main steps: deconstruction of the text, joint construction of the text and free independence of the text, as summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Book developed by Peking University Press (2008)
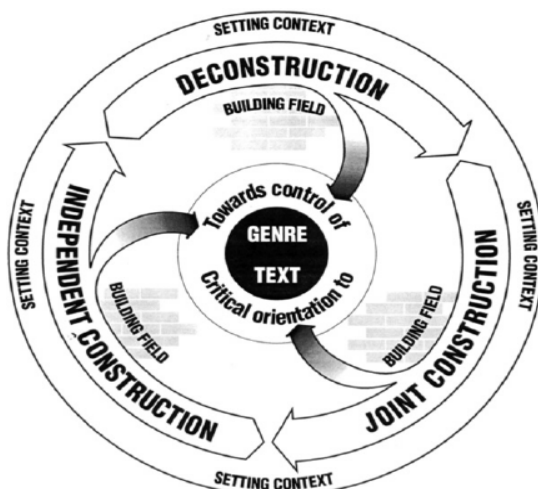

Figure 2. Genre pedagogy cycle (Martin & Rose, 1994)

The lecturer used this cycle to teach the different stages of writing to students for both hard-news and feature stories throughout the semester. In addition, after being taught the story-writing components, all groups of

students presented their works, and the lecturer provided them with feedback for further development on their final drafts. At the end, all groups of students submitted their written works to the lecturer.

5. Analysis and Results

The material presented in the first stage involved activities associated with writing hard-news stories. The second stage involved feature stories using the main guideline of the journalistic style. The following is our analysis of the book used in the class.

5.1 Components of the Chapters on the Hard-News and Feature Story

The book consisted of 20 units: Unit One, An Introduction to Journalistic Writing; Unit Two, Tips for Clear Writing; Unit Three, Headlines; Unit Four, Leads; Unit Five, Special Leads; Unit Six, The Inverted Pyramid; Unit Seven, Quotations; Unit Eight, Lexical Features; Unit Nine, Grammar Issues; Unit Ten, Capitalization and Punctuation; Unit Eleven, Feature Story; Unit Twelve, Column Writing; Unit Thirteen, Editorial; Unit Fourteen, Interview; Unit Fifteen, Obituaries; Unit Sixteen, News Release; Unit Seventeen, Broadcast Writing; Unit Eighteen, In-Depth Reporting; Unit Nineteen, Conferences and Speeches; Unit Twenty, The Ethics of Journalism.

5.2 Sub-Components of the Chapters of the Hard-News and Feature Story

Each chapter in the book consisted of two main components: Part One, Reading and Part Two, Writing. The book started with an introduction to journalistic writing which provided an outline of vocabulary building and background knowledge, reading skills and writing skills, and tips for clear writing, followed by exercises. The next section focused on headlines and leads. The lecturer attempted to follow the guidelines in the book and developed the syllabus by adding more current news stories to the course to update those in the book. He took the news stories from the Bangkok Post (online edition), one of the long-established English newspapers in Thailand. This news source was selected because it was the English newspaper with the greatest readership in the country. Then he assigned the students in different groups to write their own news stories for the midterm assignment based on current situations in their community. They presented their works at different stages and received feedback from the lecturer.

Figure 3. Samples of students' hard-news stories

Part One of the feature-writing unit first focused on reading an article on identifying images of galaxies (a news story from VOA). Then new words and expressions were provided and exercises were presented. The unit included supplementary reading on Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic (a news story from VOA). Part Two of the unit presented the topic of writing power on a feature story. The section consisted of I. Introduction; II. Preparation; III. Structure; IV. Personality in a feature story; V. Feature story writing tips. It concluded with writing exercises. To keep up with current issues, one of the authors who was the lecturer in the course, attempted to integrate current feature stories from online resources such as the Bangkok Post, the Nation and CNN. Then he divided the students into different groups to present their own feature stories to the class as the final session of the course.

Figure 4. Samples of students' feature stories

In an analysis of the components of chapters, we found that the lecturer used only two parts of the book (hard-news story and feature story). Other chapters were not included in the course because of the limited course duration and their extensive contents. Our analysis also indicated that adding current news stories to the course was essential because such stories can encourage students to improve their learning rather than use past stories or stories which were not updated.

The analysis also indicated that it was hard to follow the structure of the chapters, as the students and the lecturer had to create their own writing process of story construction because the book contained many chapters which did not match with the time spent on the course. Thus topics such as editorial and broadcast writing were omitted. This allowed the course to focus on two main types of writing (hard news and feature stories).

We found that the teaching and learning cycle proposed by the Sydney genre-based school worked well in the course context and greatly helped students complete their written works. In this paper, we considered the implications of the curriculum and components of the units of learning and teaching (rather than focusing on generic news structures) while students were producing their news stories. We will report our generic structure analysis in a later paper which will shed light on how students construct their texts. Srinon (2009) argued that generic structure analysis was useful and helped students become aware of typical structures that are embedded in different text types.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

From our analysis of the book used in the course, we concluded that teaching students to write news stories requires a systematic procedure. Specifically, to improve students' writing ability, the lecturer needs to get students involved with material from different sources and that has clear social purposes. Using the five W's and the teaching and learning cycle can help students learn and understand things around them. Accordingly, we offer the following major conclusions from our study.

We observed that integration of current news materials worked better than older materials in the teaching and learning context in terms of writing news stories. Integration of current and updated materials helped students more effectively when they wrote their news stories.

Using the five W's and the teaching and learning cycle helped enhance students' learning and comprehension in terms of reading and writing news stories. This is shown by the fact that the students had a chance to be exposed to the explicit teaching and learning by the lecturer and peers when they wrote their news stories.

We saw that the news-writing ability of students improved significantly because they had a chance to face different word choices, styles, language structures and appropriate genre and register.

We also found that students' writing of news stories improved because they were provided with sufficient materials needed for the genre of writing a news story. Therefore, we suggest that students' written outputs might be presented to the public as one of the indicators of the development of students in the course. This would reinforce student pride in their own work. In addition, the course should commence with teaching generic news structures and social purposes rather than jumping straight into the content. In this regard, White (1998) stated that the modern news report has distinctive textual characteristics which equip it to naturalize ideologically informed judgements about social significance and the moral order. This argument can be observed in the work of Feez et al. (2008) in that media literacy gives us a sense of a realism about our world, in which people have different backgrounds and viewpoints. Therefore, it is essential to start with analyzing textual characteristics which might lead us to different views of journalistic discourse.

7. Implications and Recommendations

From our study, we derive some points to be implemented and recommended for future studies.

We recommend that the teacher or department create a new syllabus which focuses on more current news stories to encourage students to be more interested in the course. In this regard, more news from various sources (both national and international newspapers) should be used to support students' learning the relevant processes and actually writing news stories more effectively.

We also suggest that since writing a news story requires more experience and time in the course, the lecturer should allow greater time for students to work, which may result in more effective outcomes. Promotion of ongoing writing outside the class is needed to help students become aware of real-world situations and contexts. This is in accordance with the fact that news stories provide a wealth of material for the ESL classroom or in other contexts (Antepara, 2003).

In addition, we recommend that applying the findings of this paper might be expanded by considering various factors such as students' writing background and their culture and beliefs, which might have some effect on their learning outcomes. Following the feedback on our study that was given at an international conference on Systemic Functional Linguistics in Vietnam (2017), the lecturer could use different news sources from Europe, such as English newspapers in Germany, to obtain greater variety in the news stories that might encourage students to engage with different parts of the world and their ideologies. The most important outcome from our study was that it is clear that using the teaching and learning cycle is useful for the lecturer and students. Consequently, more extensive promotion and support of the teaching and learning cycle is needed to ensure that students can learn how to write news stories more effectively.

We recommend that there be a continuing development of the materials for the course, and the course should provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate their written news projects in different forms of communication, such as online platforms or live presentations in front of public audiences outside the university context. In this regard, they might be given more time to rewrite their texts, focusing on the correct use of the language style used in the news and voicing of their authority. This will help students realize how they can involve themselves in their community.

Finally, we suggest creating a news-practice community as a must for students who join the course in the future. This could help support the success of students who desire a journalistic career after graduation. To this end, the department and the lecturer of the course should invite experts and scholars to address the importance of journalistic issues as part of the course syllabus, which will further help students become successful in their English news writing.

Acknowledgements

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