

EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION OF PERSUASIVE GENRE WRITING IN THE INTERMEDIATE CLASSROOM

By

JANICE SCHUT

B.A. University of Guelph, 1976

A GRADUATING PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF EDUCATION

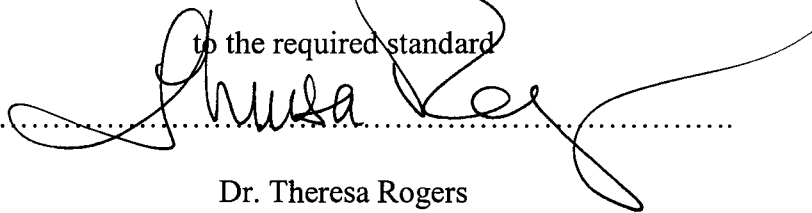
in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Department of Language and Literacy Education

We accept this major paper as conforming

to the required standard

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Theresa Rogers", is written over a horizontal dotted line.

Dr. Theresa Rogers

(Graduate Advisor)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marlene Asselin", is written over a horizontal dotted line.

Dr. Marlene Asselin

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

December 2010

Abstract

In order to understand the function of language in a culture, participants must be knowledgeable about the genres of that culture. Ethnographers have demonstrated that there are discourses which are unique to ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic groups. In order to function effectively within a dominant culture, it is necessary that language learners gain mastery over sanctioned genres. Contemporary educational theory posits that desirable cultural texts can be explicitly and purposefully taught to language learners. This teacher research study sought to examine this theory. Over the course of sixteen lessons, an intermediate class in a school in British Columbia was explicitly taught the characteristics of persuasive genre text. The students were taught the function, organizational framework, and the grammar of persuasive text. Students were assessed prior to the instruction and after the instruction. After the instruction, the performance and perspective of a small sample of students was analyzed to determine if explicit teaching of persuasive genre had produced change in the students' capabilities and attitude in relation to persuasive text. The results of this study generally support the educational theory that text genres can be explicitly and purposefully taught to language learners. This view has significant implications in light of the increasing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of populations. Text genres can be explicitly taught to students and other societal members so that they may understand and use sanctioned text genres. This knowledge empowers language learners and users to critically and actively participate in their societies.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the support, encouragement, and contributions of my fellow students in the Masters of Education program in Language and Literacy. I also wish to acknowledge the expert teaching and guidance of my instructors. In particular, I wish to acknowledge Kim Lenters for renewing my interest in genre texts which guided me to the topic for my teacher research. Also, I wish to acknowledge Dr. Marilyn Chapman for her incredible knowledge in the area of early childhood literacy and for her generosity and passion in sharing this knowledge.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Purpose / Rationale for my Study | 1 |
| Literature Review | 3 |
| Rationale for the Teaching of Genre | 4 |
| Definitions of Teaching Genre Instruction | 5 |
| Evolution of writing approaches | 5 |
| Genre approaches | 7 |
| Methods | 9 |
| Study Context | 11 |
| Participants | 12 |
| Procedures | 13 |
| Pre-instruction and post-instruction assessments | 13 |
| Instructional design | 14 |
| Data Sources | 15 |
| Analysis | 15 |
| Findings | 16 |
| Summarized Student Survey Results | 18 |
| Discussion | 25 |
| Significance | 26 |
| Limitations | 27 |
| Further Research | 28 |
| References | 30 |
| Appendices | 32 |

Explicit Instruction of Persuasive Genre Writing in the Intermediate Classroom

Introduction

Purpose / Rationale for my Study

I have taught in public school for twenty-five years. During that time, I have witnessed the emergence and retreat of a variety of instructional approaches. I entered teaching in the late 1980's, at a time when "whole language" was at its zenith as the preferred approach to literacy instruction. Whole language was a refreshing change from the skills oriented, de-contextualized instruction of the preceding two decades. Students were encouraged to bring their own life experiences to the processes of learning to read and write. The approach encouraged teachers to give their students exposure to sophisticated, diverse texts. Students were invited to immerse themselves in eclectic text forms and revel in the rich language that these texts contained. The assumption was that students would be able to naturally assimilate and produce similar texts. While this approach was successful with many students, there were consistently groups of students who struggled to master these valued text forms. Literacy skills, which are so crucial in contemporary society, eluded these students. Teachers began to ask themselves whether the whole language approach was the wide-ranging answer to literacy instruction for all students. They began to wonder if there were factors which contributed to student learning that had not been considered previously.

The ethnographic studies of the 1970's and '80's began to provide answers to teachers about why not all students were able to successfully traverse the discourses presented in schools. Landmark studies, such as the study conducted by Shirley Brice Heath, (Heath, 1983), drew attention to the unique language and literacy knowledge that students bring from their own backgrounds. Emerging research revealed that students, from backgrounds dissimilar to

mainstream society, possessed unique but disparate cultural and linguistic knowledge.

Sanctioned discourses of a society confer cultural capital upon the individuals who possess them.

Consequently, in order to be a fully functioning individual within a dominant society, a person must be able to interpret and use those sanctioned discourses.

Educational theory became heavily influenced by the work of Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978), whose cognitive theory posited that learning is a social process in which learners are guided into further knowledge and learning by a more capable mentor. Vygotsky believed that learners can be guided within their “zone of proximal development”, which is the area between what learners can do independently and what they can do with assistance.

Vygotsky’s theory generated the learning paradigm of the “gradual release of responsibility” model, (Derewienka, 2003), in which learners are explicitly taught in sequential, incremental steps by a more experienced mentor. This model for learning provides learners with opportunities to demonstrate, practice, and master their learning. An approach to language and literacy instruction developed which championed the idea that valued societal discourses can be explicitly taught to students through genre instruction.

A branch of genre instruction, called, Systemic Functional Linguistics, (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), espouses that teachers are able to scaffold students’ understanding of genre through explicit, incremental teaching. The socio-cultural orientation embodied in genre instruction, is relevant to teaching and learning in school settings as it affirms that students can be apprenticed into valued discourses, thus allowing them to be effective participants in their environments.

The focus of my research study is the effect of explicit Genre Writing instruction on an intermediate class. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the question as to whether explicit

instruction of persuasive genre writing will result in improvement in writing performance and attitude in intermediate pupils, particularly those pupils showing average or below average performance pre-instruction.

Literature Review

The authors cited in this literature review constitute only a few of the contemporary educators who have explored the social and cultural influences of language learning and how these influences impact literacy achievement in school. In keeping with the findings of ethnographer, Heath, in her landmark study and book, *Way with Words* (1983), the work that I review recognizes that the meaning-making structures of home language may or may not be congruent with school language structures. As expressed by social language theorists, - Kress and Knapp (1985), "Access to forms of language, kinds of texts, and levels of literacy more generally, are not distributed evenly in societies..."

The most salient premise put forth by the aforementioned researchers, and the foundational premise of my research study, is that it is possible to apprentice students into the desired structures through explicit, scaffolded instruction of genre teaching. This premise draws heavily upon Vygotskian social theory which purports that learning is a social enterprise in which a learner and a more knowledgeable mentor interact in a carefully choreographed manner that enables the learner to move beyond his current level of ability. This theoretical framework posits that teaching models of discourse is feasible through explicit, scaffolded, genre instruction. This framework constitutes the underpinning of my research study and informs the work of genre theorists aligned with the Systemic Functional Linguistic branch of genre theory.

This literature review is comprised of two sections: a rationale for the implementation of genre, and a historical overview of writing instruction in the classroom.

Rationale for the Teaching of Genre

All language has a function within a social context. To quote Hyland (2007), “Genre refers to abstract, socially recognized ways of using language” (p. 149). As Kress and Knapp (2008) assert, genre theory is “an understanding of what language is doing and being made to do by people in specific situations in order to make particular meanings” (p. 6). Language is a social construction embedded in the community or environment in which it evolves. Texts occur in all modes (oral, written, visual) and are predicated upon normative expectations developed within particular social environments. In order for a person to be a full participant in discourse within a given community, he or she must have prior knowledge and experience with the expected discourses in that community. Piagetian theory articulates that competent language participants possess schema (prior knowledge and experience) which enables them to recognize, predict, and interact with text. These abilities enable language participants to gain essential understandings of the texts that they encounter. Hyland (2007) illustrates interaction with texts with a metaphor from Hoey (2001) which “likens readers and writers to dancers following each other’s steps, each assembling sense from a text by anticipating what the other is likely to do by making connections to prior texts”(p. 150).

Given that discourses are socially embedded and constructed, there are disadvantages for learners who have not been apprenticed into valued discourses. Global factors, such as changes in immigration and emigration patterns, and global capitalism have brought amplified economic stratification and increased cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity to populations. Populations are experiencing increased incongruence between societal members’ discourses and the

sanctioned discourses of the community. Common schema and cognitive homogeneity are no longer predictable in any given population; most significantly, within school populations. As Hyland (2007) states, “These students bring different identities, understandings, and habits of meaning-making to their learning, and teachers cannot assume that students’ previous learning experiences will provide them with appropriate writing schemata for their studies”(p. 149).

Therefore, it is incumbent upon educators to recognize this exponential growth in diversity in school populations and to develop pedagogies and practices to ameliorate the gaps. To ignore the gaps, would result in ever increasing stratification of social, cultural, economic, and political power within societies. In order to stop the “pervasive culture of inequality that deskills poor and minority children”, (Gee, 2001, p. 12), it is imperative to induct and inculcate students into genres which confer cultural capital. Derewianka (2003) advocates that educators not only help students to gain mastery of common genres, but that further extensions occur, so that students can effectively analyze and manipulate genres with facility, possibly for subversive purposes, if needed. Hyland (2007) provides a quote from Christie (1987, p.30), “Learning the genres of one’s culture is both part of entering into it with understanding, and part of developing the necessary ability to change it” (p. 27).

Definitions of Teaching Genre Instruction:

It is necessary to clarify what is meant by models of genre instruction. It is helpful to look at the evolution of writing instructional approaches and to further examine the major branches of genre instruction.

Evolution of writing approaches. Traditional methods of writing instruction may be condensed into three major approaches— product, process, and genre Badger & White (2000).

These traditional approaches to writing instruction were reflective of the predominant trends in educational theory in the latter half of the 20th century.

A product approach begins with familiarization of a topic with attention to specific vocabulary and syntactical features. It progresses incrementally from simple sentence construction, into guided writing, to a final stage of free writing. Badger and White (2000) to A. Pinca's representation of this method as, "assisted imitation" (p. 154), a teaching method in which writing output is viewed as a response to stimulus input from the teacher. This approach draws heavily from conditioned learning theory which was popular in the 1950's and 60's (Alexander & Fox, 2004).

A different perspective was embodied in the process approach which gained popularity in the last few decades of the 20th century. Writing was viewed as a natural process which springs from the writer's experiences, feelings, viewpoints, etc. Donald Graves was considered by many to be the "father" of the process approach to writing which sparked the movement known as the "Writer's Workshop" approach (Graves, 1985). The aim of process writing teaching was to facilitate written expression through four stages – prewriting; composing/drafting; revising; and editing, and usually began with a brainstorming activity. Learners were considered to have equal linguistic capabilities and the goal was to help writers access their innate capacities through participation in the writing process. This approach was aligned with the view of linguist, Noam Chomsky, who regarded language as a hard wired capability which naturally developed within a language rich environment (Alexander & Fox, 2004). This perspective assumed that students developed language within a common environment with similar linguistic and value emphases.

The genre approach to writing instruction is relatively new and has its inception in the socio-cultural perspective of learning of the 1980's and '90's. Like the product approach, it provides a

structure which is transferred from the teacher to the learner. However, the emphasis is on the social context for which the writing is produced. Different types of writing are produced for different purposes and, generally, display features specific to the type of writing required. For example, recounts have a structure and contain features which are distinctive from an informational text, which differs from a personal narrative, etc. Germaine to all of the types of texts, or genres, is the focus on the purpose for producing the text. Within the genre model of writing instruction, there are three major branches.

Genre approaches. Proponents of the “New Rhetoric” approach believe that writing must occur in authentic, real-life contexts. In this approach, learning occurs in natural settings through a sequence of trial and error as the learner acquires the demands of the genre. New Rhetoric theorists purport that “writing is always part of the goals and occasions that bring it about, and it cannot be learnt in the inauthentic context of the classroom” (Hyland, 2007, p. 151). However, a problem with this perspective is that, learners unfamiliar with the required genre, struggle outside the sheltered, scaffolded, environment of the classroom. Critics of this approach would argue that genre learning should be accelerated with explicit support offered by effective teachers who help learners categorize and analyze texts.

A major branch of genre writing instruction is an approach called English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP considers that genres belong to occupational or academic communities and function to communicate the practices of these specific groups. The genres of specific groups contain specialized language and text frameworks. Similar to the New Rhetoric approach, in ESP, genre is regarded as functioning in real-life applications; however, proponents of the ESP approach advocate that learning occur by explicit teaching of the required texts. Hyland (2007) refers to the power conferred upon teachers to meet the needs of their students when they

understand that written texts can be acquired, used, and modified by members of occupational or academic groups.

For the purposes of my study and for general classroom instruction within school settings, the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach has the most practical application. This approach has its foundations in Hallidayian functional Linguistics and Vygotskian socio-cultural theories of learning. These theoretical foundations integrate well with each other as both view language and learning as social processes situated in unique and specific cultural and environmental contexts (Hyland, 2007). The SFL approach will serve the aim of my study as it supports the premise that teachers are able to scaffold students' understanding of genre through explicit, incremental teaching.

The SFL approach is a model which links rhetorical patterns such as narratives, recounts, arguments, etc. to the contexts in which they are used. Genres are presented as being purposeful, sequential, and displaying specific grammatical features. The meanings of texts are "realized through the lexical and grammatical choices being made" (Derewianka, 2003, p. 139). Derewianka (2003) encourages teachers to extend their students comprehension of genre usage by helping them to "become aware of how the grammar is creating particular meanings relevant to the genre in question" (p. 140).

Although genres are represented by general rhetorical patterns, it is understood that it is not required that texts adhere discretely to one particular genre, but can be hybrids or a combination of genre types. Generally, instruction is organized around a theme and is considered to be most effective when enabling participation in authentic, real-life activities.

Congruent with a Vygotskian perspective of learning, genre instruction is presented in sequential, incremental steps which gradually afford the learner more opportunities to

demonstrate, practice, and master their learning. The socio-cultural orientation embodied in genre instruction, is relevant to teaching and learning in school settings as it affirms that students can be apprenticed into valued discourses, thus allowing them to be effective participants in their environments.

Methods

The reason that teacher research was chosen for the study is that it is a paradigm which encourages and enables teachers to play a dynamic, contributing role in changes to pedagogical and curriculum practices in education. It is a method for practitioners to shape policy – to change teachers from passive cogs in a system to catalysts for change which they consider meaningful. O’Connell Rust (2009) describes teacher research as, “a bridge connecting research, practice, and educational policy.” (p. 1882)

Teacher research is a form of empowerment for individual teachers as they discover more about their own beliefs and practices. Teacher research heightens the professional status of teachers as they develop a stronger, broader knowledge base and a sense of their own acumen. In the article, *Teacher Voices* (Grisham, et al., 2000), teacher research is described as a, “constructivist model of learning for adult learners. Dynamic changes trickle down to student learning – one based on a model of inquiry that teachers become familiar with through their own research” (p.10). The implication is that teacher research can, and will have far reaching effects in the way that students are viewed and treated as learners.

Teacher research practices are relevant and timely because the structures of inquiry, reflection, and analysis address the immediate needs in teachers’ classrooms, as opposed to “ivory tower” scholarly initiatives. Teacher research demands a shift away from the traditional condition of teachers operating within the confines of their isolated classrooms and moves

towards a model of collaboration and communication within a larger professional community. Through this method, greater distribution of knowledge, responsibility, and leadership is possible, and the probability of positive educational innovation is increased.

The overarching purpose of the research study was to develop Grade 5 students' knowledge of the function, organizational framework, and grammatical structures embedded in persuasive genre texts through explicit instruction.

Instruction in structured genre writing was given to an entire Grade 5 class in a colleague's classroom, commencing the last week of November 2009 and ending the first week of March 2010. In total, the instructional unit was comprised of 16 lessons. The entire class participated in the activities and worked in co-operative social groupings for much of the instructional time. Lessons generally occurred twice per week; however there were interruptions in this schedule due to Christmas concert preparations, fine arts performances, and fieldtrips, etc.

The primary resource for this unit was the First Steps Writing Resource Book, Canadian Edition, created by the Education Department of Western Australia. The aims and objectives are stated in the resource book's introduction. They are to, "help teachers focus on the explicit teaching of different forms of text; writing processes, strategies, and conventions; and the contextual aspects associated with the act of composing texts" (Education Department of Western Australia, 2008, p. 1). The resource book provided guiding principles for instruction, while most of the materials for student activities were teacher- made.

Parent consent and student assent forms were sent by the classroom teacher prior to instruction, in mid November 2009. The returned permission forms were kept in her possession during the instructional period from end of November 2009 until mid March 2010. The co-

researcher had no knowledge of which students had permission granted on assent and consent documents until after the completion of the instructional period.

Study Context

The study occurred in a grade 5 classroom in a public school in the lower mainland of British Columbia. In January 2010, the research study school's population numbered 360 pupils. The student population had 30% of its pupils classified as English Language Learners. There were 44% of students who spoke a language other than English at home. There were 15 divisions in the school, including two half day Kindergartens, and a Grade 6 Intensive French class. I have taught at the school for seven years, since 2003, both in the capacity of a primary classroom teacher and as a learning support teacher. The students at the school are quite familiar with me as I have had opportunities to teach lessons in their classrooms or to instruct some students in small groups.

The immediate area has experienced steady residential construction. The school has experienced a more than doubling of its population since its opening of 165 pupils in 2001. The socio-economic level is relatively high according to the statistics listed by the Fraser Institute in the annually published Foundation Skills Assessment report. Parents' average education level is listed as exceeding 14 years; however this may not reflect the information of families who live in secondary suites. As the school population has increased, there has been an increase in the needs of the students for extra literacy support. At the time of the study, approximately 18% of the student population received direct pull-out Learning Assistance from the district allocated 2.5 learning support teachers.

The Grade 5 class, in which the study was conducted, contained 25 pupils, with 11 pupils classified as English Language Learners and one child diagnosed as having a learning disability.

Of the Grade 5 class, 8 pupils, or 32% of the class attend learning support assistance for one hour each day, four times per week where they receive extra literacy support.

Participants

The entire Grade 5 class participated in the instructional unit. At the end of the instructional period, a purposeful sample of four students was chosen for analysis. This sample was comprised of four grade 5 pupils who were initially assessed as being in the Beginning or Developing stages of the First Steps Rubric for Writing to Persuade. The criteria for selection was based on initial achievement performance and was not influenced by gender or any other criteria, other than the evidence of positive permission granted by both students and parents for inclusion in analysis. The study sample size was kept deliberately low, at 4 out of 25 pupils, simply to keep this nascent attempt at teacher research manageable. As is probably typical of most research studies, procurement of required consent documents was not as high as expected, with only 13 of the 25 pupils having all necessary documents. Of those 13 pupils, 4 pupils, who met the pre-instruction assessment criteria, were selected for analysis. To protect the identities of the four pupils, pseudonyms are assigned to each pupil. Any and all information pertaining to the four students will be referenced by using their pseudonym. Following is a chart, briefly outlining the gender, ethnicity, and first language of the sample students:

Figure 1: Chart showing Study Participants

| Student | Gender | Ethnicity | First Language |
|---------|--------|-------------|--|
| Dan | Male | Caucasian | English |
| Pav | Male | East Indian | Punjabi – new immigrant to Canada – 1 year |
| Joel | Male | Caucasian | English |
| Sara | Female | Filipino | Tagalog / English -immigrant to Canada – 2 years |

Procedures

All students in the Grade 5 class participated in the instructional unit on Persuasive Genre Writing and in the pre and post-instruction assessments.

Pre-instruction and post-instruction assessments. A pre-instruction persuasive essay was written by all of the Grade 5 students on November 30, 2009 and a post-instruction persuasive essay written on March 1, 2010. An hour was allocated for each essay. Before the pre-assessment essay, the students were introduced to the concept of persuasive text and provided with examples. The class brainstormed potential topics. The format for the post-instruction assessment was the same, with students brainstorming and choosing their essay topics. Additionally, a researcher-made survey was administered by the classroom teacher shortly after the final post-instruction essay. The purpose of the survey was to gain insight into the students' perspective of the instructional intervention – their level of engagement; their opinion as to whether their attitude and performance has improved specific to persuasive genre texts; and

whether they believe that there will be a “spill-over” effect into other writing tasks. Please see Appendix A for the researcher-made student survey.

Instructional design. The purpose of the instructional unit was to scaffold students’ understanding of persuasive genre text through a series of lessons which provided gradual release of responsibility to the learner. Early in the instructional implementation period, the students were provided with models of persuasive texts, using books such as, “Should Children Choose Their Bedtimes” by Tony Stead and “Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus” by Mo Willems. The First Steps Writing Resource Book provided an example of persuasive text titled, “Should Dolphins be Held in Captivity?”

After gaining familiarity with persuasive genre, the students were asked to engage in shared writing experiences within groups of three, in which they assumed a position on an issue relevant to themselves, such as should they choose their own bedtimes. Students were asked to record their position and provide three to four arguments to support their position.

Over the course of the next few lessons, they continued to work in groups of two or three students, engaging in activities such as selecting advertisements from magazines and evaluating whether or not the advertisements were effectively persuasive, creating their own visual advertisements for real or imaginary products; some groups of students created a public service announcement on poster board, and all students kept individual logs of examples of persuasive texts, occurring in all modes, in their environments. All student products were kept and some were evaluated for the purpose of classroom reporting.

A shared writing experience involved the students choosing the timely topic of whether the 2010 Olympics were detrimental or beneficial to the community in which it was held. Students and teacher collaboratively composed an essay providing both sides of the argument and

supporting each position with evidence. Another shared writing experience pertained to an essay topic chosen by the students on the harmful effects of drug usage. The students provided arguments and evidence for the position that drug usage was harmful. The completed essay provided a model which demonstrated the structure and grammar of a persuasive text. Students were provided with the First Steps rubric for Persuasive Writing and asked to evaluate the essays produced in the classroom. Students were asked to process the information on the First Steps rubric, focusing in on the functional, organizational, and grammatical features of persuasive texts.

Data Sources

The primary data sources used for analysis were the pre- and post-instruction essays and a student survey which was completed after the instructional implementation period. Student products, such as collaborative persuasive poster ads, small group written analysis of magazine ads, small group written arguments for or against a topic, and individual student logs recording examples of persuasive text in their environment, were kept in the event that they would yield further information to be used in the study findings. Students' work was assessed, using informal classroom rubrics, during the instructional period for the purpose of providing feedback to the students.

Analysis

The two main data sources, the pre and post-instruction essays and the student survey were used for analysis. Pre- and post-instruction essays, written by the four students in the analysis sample, were assessed using the First Steps Rubric: Assessing Writing to Persuade. Performance

on the pre- and post-instruction essays was compared to determine if there had been improvement in the sample students' abilities to create a persuasive essay. The **snapshot** descriptors for the categories of this rubric are as follows:

First Steps Rubric: Assessing Writing to Persuade

| Beginning Stage | Developing Stage | Consolidating Stage | Extending Stage |
|---|---|---|--|
| Can state the purpose and audience of texts to be composed and includes basic organizational features of simple forms used to persuade. | Is aware of the purpose and audience when composing texts and uses a partial organizational framework of a small range of forms used to persuade. | Considers the purpose and audience to select specific vocabulary and uses appropriate organizational frameworks to compose a variety of forms used to persuade. | Crafts forms used to persuade by selecting vocabulary and manipulating organizational frameworks to suit the context of the writing event. |

Please see Appendix B for the entire First Steps Rubric: Assessing Writing to Persuade.

Student survey responses of the four sample students were examined to determine if there were trends evident in the students' perspectives of their participation in the instructional unit and changes in performance from the pre and post-instruction assessments.

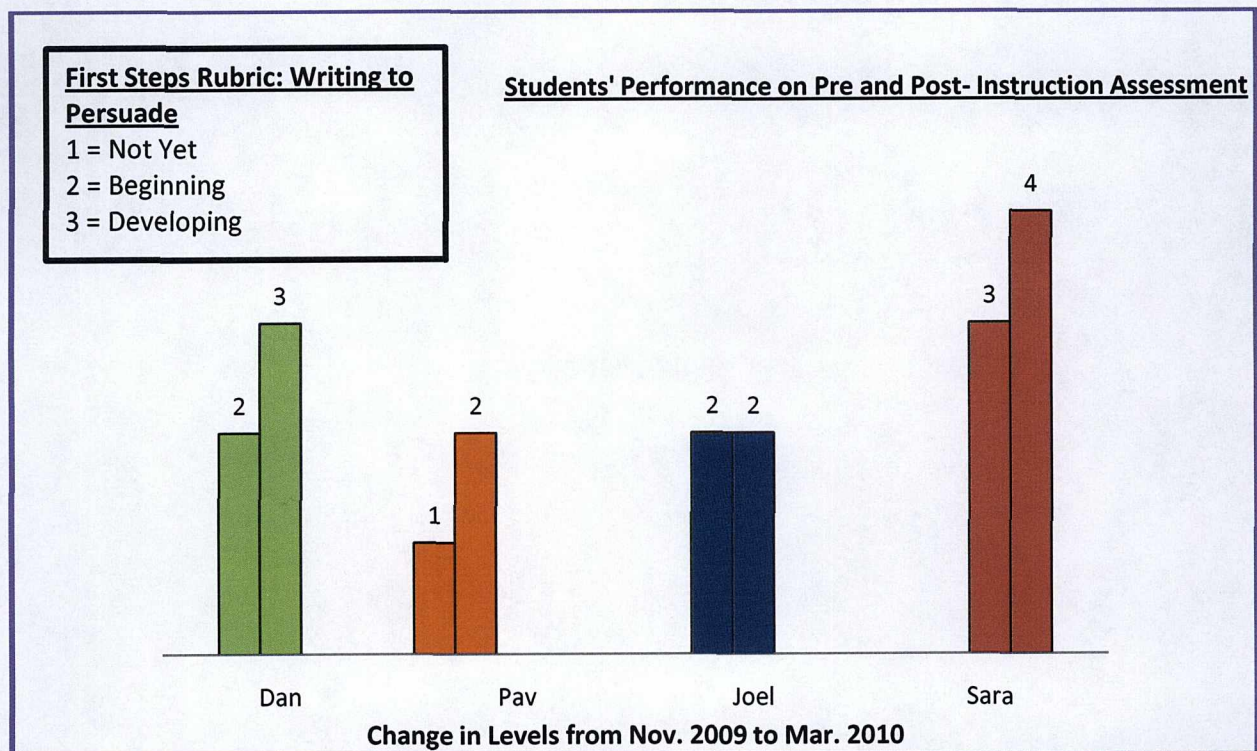
Findings

Of the four sample students, three attained one category level higher on the First Steps: Writing to Persuade Rubric between the pre- and post-instruction assessment. One student, Joel did not show an increase in category level. The following table and figure show the November 2009 and March 2010 performance levels for the four students:

Figure 2: Table of Students' Pre- and Post-instruction Performance

| Student | First Steps Rubric Nov. 30. 2009 | First Steps Rubric March 1, 2010 |
|---------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Dan | Beginning / Developing | Developing |
| Pav | Not yet at Beginning Level | Beginning |
| Joel | Beginning | Beginning |
| Sara | Developing | Consolidating |

Figure 3: Graph of Students' Pre- and Post-Instruction Performance



In addition to findings based on performance between pre- and post-instructional essays, the student survey provided insight into the students' perspectives on how they perceived the instruction on persuasive genre writing and whether they believed that the instruction had improved their ability to write in the persuasive genre and other genres, as well. Following is a chart showing students' summarized responses to survey questions.

Summarized Student Survey Results

Question # 1: How did it feel to engage in lessons about persuasive genre text? (Engagement)

| Dan | Pav | Joel | Sara |
|--|----------------------------|---------|--------------------------------|
| Positive: liked collaborative learning | Positive : no reason given | Neutral | Positive: liked resources used |

Question # 2: Did the genre lessons help you to understand how to write in this genre? (Concept Attainment)

| Dan | Pav | Joel | Sara |
|---------------------------------|-----|------|-----------------------------|
| Yes: referred to advertisements | Yes | Yes | Yes: teacher explained well |

Question # 3: Do you think that your ability to write in this genre has changed over the past eight weeks? Please provide examples or evidence to support your opinion. (Performance)

| Dan | Pav | Joel | Sara |
|----------------------------|-----------|----------------------|---|
| Yes: Can write "alot more" | No change | Yes: more persuasive | Yes: definitely – compared first and last |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--------|
| | | | essays |
|--|--|--|--------|

Question # 4: Do you think that your ability to write in other genres is effected? Provide an explanation for your opinion. (Generalization to other genres)

| Dan | Pav | Joel | Sara |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| No: just another "type" | Yes: wishes to write in other genres | No change in other genres | Yes: "tips" can be used in other genres |

Question # 5: Has your attitude about engaging in writing tasks changed after eight weeks of genre instruction? If this is the case, please explain. (General attitude change)

| Dan | Pav | Joel | Sara |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|--------------------------------------|
| Yes: feel "braver" | No change | No change | Yes: cites change in enjoyment level |

Following is a more detailed explanation of the performance of the four sample students on the pre and post- instruction essays and of their responses to the written survey:

Dan. Dan's pre-instruction essay, which was assessed at the Beginning/Developing level, pertained to why his parents should let him have an I Touch. He was able to state a clear position. "I should have an I Touch". He was able to provide two reasons to support his position. "...my brother has one (I Touch)", and, "I will take care of it". He was able to provide evidence to support his argument that he would take care of the device by indicating that he had never broken an electronic in his life. Dan was assessed as performing at the

Beginning/Developing stage on his pre-instruction assessment, because he showed little organization in presenting evidence to support his reasons and no ability to preview his arguments in his introduction. The essay was written in a personal, subjective style and lacked a formal, objective voice which is an indicator of a strong persuasive essay.

Dan's post-instruction essay, which was assessed at the Developing level, pertained to the importance of being active. Dan opened his essay with a question, "Should you be active?" He responded to this question with a position, and a rationale. His response was, "Yes, being active helps you stay fit." In the introductory paragraph, he stated two additional arguments to support his position. Dan stated that, "When you're active, you'll have friends...." Additionally, "when you are active, you'll have something to show off." Dan was able to elaborate on his three arguments in three supporting paragraphs.

He exhibited a criterion indicative of the Consolidating stage, in that he was able to present his reasoned arguments in a systematic way, but still showed little evidence for the assertions made. Dan did show considerable growth, in that he previewed his arguments in his introductory paragraph, and he reiterated his main points in his concluding paragraph. However, the essay was written in a predominately personal perspective, with no appeals to authority. Consequently, the final essay was assessed as being at a Developing level.

Dan's responses to the student survey were positive on most measures - engagement; concept attainment; performance in relation to the specific genre taught; and general attitude. Dan's opinion that his ability to write in the persuasive genre had changed was supported by his stated evidence that he could, "write a lot more". He reported a post-instruction change in attitude towards engaging in writing tasks with the statement, "Yes, I'm a lot more brave to enter a writing task". The measure for which Dan did not report a change was in relation to whether

instruction in persuasive genre text affected his ability to write in other genres. His response indicated that he did not think that his ability to write in other genres had been effected by explicit instruction in persuasive genre.

Pav. As a beginning English language learner, Pav was not able to meet the Beginning level criteria of the First Steps rubric on his initial assessment. He stated a position in his title, “Why my parents should let me have video game”. However, after this statement, he did not provide a rationale for his position. He described his current situation, by explaining, “My parents don’t let me have video game because my brother always keep on and off”.

In his final assessment, Pav showed progress in that he was able to take a position that drug usage is harmful because, “drugs can damage your brain and your lungs and heart”. Although his essay was lacking in evidence for the stated position and argument, he was able provide information as to why people take drugs. He indicated that people take drugs to make themselves cool, to help them solve problems, and to make themselves popular. Pav’s essay aligned with the criterion in the Beginning stage of the First Steps Rubric: Writing to Persuade, in that he presented information which did not support the stated position.

Pav’s ability to communicate in written English was obviously impacted by his rudimentary English language skills. However, his post-instruction essays demonstrated growth in its structure and position statement.

Pav’s developing English language skills may have contributed to his incongruent responses on the written student survey. His discrepant responses to survey questions may indicate that he did not fully understand the questions.

He indicated that he liked the lessons and that they helped him understand how to write in the genre. Despite the positive responses regarding engagement and learning, he indicated that learning about persuasive genre did not change his general attitude toward writing tasks and that his ability to write in the persuasive genre had not changed over the eight weeks of instruction. In response to the question of whether he thought that his ability to write in other genres had been affected, he wrote, “Yes, I want to write in other genres”. His last response clearly does not answer the question posed.

Joel. Joel’s pre- and post-instruction essays were both assessed as being at the Beginning stages of the First Steps rubric. Joel’s initial essay was pertaining to a personal topic of why his parents should permit him to have a bike. His pre-instruction essay stated four reasons that he should have a bike; ability to exercise; ability to have fun; ability to go to the park with friends; and ability to compete with friends at the skate park. However, there was very little organization to the essay and Joel’s reasons were not supported with evidence for his arguments.

Joel’s final essay had a global theme of whether animals should be kept in captivity. His essay contained ideas which could form arguments and evidence for his position. However, the essay did not show evidence of the structure of an effective persuasive essay. His essay began with rationale of why captivity can be detrimental to reintroducing animals into the wild. Joel’s main argument focused on humans reintegrating animals into environments which lack the necessary diets and climates for specific animals. He ended his essay with a position statement and a hook: “Therefore, I do not think animals should be kept in captivity. What do you think?” Much of the explicit classroom instruction was directed at the organizational framework of a persuasive essay. Joel’s post-instruction essay did not demonstrate that he had learned or applied the framework.

On the student survey, Joel's self-assessment showed positive responses on the measures of performance and learning. He indicated that his ability to write in the persuasive genre had changed. He stated, "I think that my ability to write in this genre has changed over time because my writing has become more persuasive". He also stated that, "The genre lessons did help me understand how to write in this genre". Joel indicated that he did not think that his ability to write in other genres had been affected by the instruction. Joel's assessment of his engagement in the lessons was neutral. He stated, "I felt okay during the persuasive genre text. It was kinda fun, kinda not." Also, he indicated that his attitude toward engaging in writing tasks had not change after the eight weeks of genre instruction. On the measures of engagement and general attitude change, Joel's responses were neutral.

Sara. Sara's initial essay was assessed as being at a Developing stage. Sara's stated position was that her parents should let her have an I Touch. She stated arguments as to why she should have an I Touch. She stated, "I will stop whining about boredom"; her parents would benefit because, "if they are bored, they can listen to the music"; and I will be careful with it and take good care of it". During this pre-instruction write, there was little structure to the essay. Arguments were presented in an arbitrary manner, with little elaboration.

Sara's post-instruction essay, which was assessed as being in the Consolidating stage, began with her position that animals should not be kept in "isolated areas". In the introductory paragraph, she previewed that she would give reasons for her position and that the reasons would be supported by evidence. The next three paragraphs began with the linking words: first of all, secondly, and lastly, which demonstrated that she was attempting to use grammar indicative of

persuasive text. She was able to state her arguments sequentially, with her strongest argument occurring first.

Her first argument was that animal captivity causes death. She provided an example of a recent instance of a trainer being drowned by a whale during a live show. She appealed to authority by presenting opinions which was prefaced by the words such as, “Experts say...” and “Scientists have proven...” Her essay showed attempts to move her persuasive essay out of the realm of a personal, subjective perspective to a more generalized, objective style. She used linking words, such as “therefore”, to indicate cause and effect. There was considerable growth between Sara’s pre and post-instructional essays, primarily in the tenor of the final essay, but also, in the organizational structure of the final essay.

Sara’s responses to all questions on the student survey were positive. Sara’s responses were more specific than those of the other three pupils. In terms of engagement, Sara indicated that she liked reading the books which were part of the lessons, and she indicated that she liked engaging in the poster activity. In response to the question of whether her ability to write in the persuasive genre had changed, Sara stated, “Yes. My persuasive writing has definitely changed. I compared my first writing to my new essay and the (new) essay is definitely better.” Her response indicates that she used a comparison strategy to evaluate a change in performance on her pre and post-instruction essays. Sara indicated that she thought that information presented about persuasive texts could be applied to other genres as well. Sara communicated a distinct change in attitude about engaging in writing tasks, with the statement, “Before I didn’t really enjoy writing, but this has made me feel better about writing.”

Discussion

The Systemic Functional Linguistics approach to genre instruction endorses the idea that teachers are able to scaffold students' understanding of genre through explicit, incremental teaching. Genres are presented as being purposeful, sequential, and displaying specific grammatical features. The function and meaning of texts are attained through their organization and features. The purpose of explicit instruction in genre is to enable language participants to gain essential understandings of the texts that they encounter.

During the course of this study, much of the explicit classroom instruction was directed at the function and organizational framework of persuasive genre. The change in written performance for three students was a positive gain of one stage as assessed by the teacher, using the First Steps Rubric: Writing to Persuade. The findings indicate that three of the four sample students showed improvement in the organization of their persuasive essays. This resulted in their post-instruction essays being assessed at one stage higher than their pre-instruction essays. Three students were able to demonstrate that a persuasive text must clearly indicate a position on a topic and that the organization requires that the position be followed up with arguments and evidence which support the position. One student, Sara, was successful in embedding an "authoritative voice" into her essay and in demonstrating a range of linking words which are a grammatical feature of persuasive texts. This brought her performance one stage up into the Consolidating stage.

As mentioned previously, explicit instruction, of genre text, was instrumental in scaffolding three of the four students' understanding and production of persuasive texts. A fourth student,

Joel, showed no significant gain. Unlike the other three students, who indicated a positive response to the instruction module, Joel's student survey indicated a neutral level of engagement. However, this study did not gather sufficient information to identify the reasons for Joel's lack of engagement and progress. Questions about factors contributing to Joel's lack of progress surfaced after study findings were examined. It may be that Joel required a more authentic context for engaging with, and producing persuasive text than the study design offered. It may be that Joel's engagement and performance were impacted by personal factors. In order to ascertain if these or other factors played a part, further investigation, such as a post-study oral interview, would be helpful.

Significance

In support of the principles espoused by the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach to genre instruction; this study supports the theory that students are able to increase their understanding of common societal genre frameworks through explicit, sequential instruction. The capacity of explicit genre instruction to improve learners' abilities to understand and use valued discourses is significant in that it enables individuals, from outside of the mainstream, to become effective language participants. Given the increasing diversity of school and general populations, this has significant positive implications for individuals who are learning the language of a new country and for learners who may not have the same background knowledge as those of the dominant culture. Explicit instruction in genre texts, within the school system, has the potential to help students, from a variety of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, develop critical understanding and effective usage of texts sanctioned by their societies. This lays the groundwork for a more egalitarian society in which a greater number of individuals can be active participants.

This study demonstrates that explicit genre instruction can effectively scaffold learning for students whose backgrounds are linguistically and ethnically different from the dominant culture. This assertion is supported by evidence of gains made by two students, Pav and Sara, who were not born in Canada, and whose first language is something other than English.

Additionally, this study demonstrates that explicit genre instruction can assist students in understanding and utilizing the power of persuasive texts as a communication form. This is evidenced by the study participants' post-instruction choices of essay topics. All students chose topics of wider relevance – active living; animal treatment; issues pertaining to drugs - for their final essays, as opposed to the narrow, personal issues of their initial essays. This trend indicates that the students gained understanding of persuasive texts as a genre which can be utilized to achieve important changes in their environment. The indication is that deeper function of persuasive genre, as an agent for change in the world, was understood and demonstrated by the students' final essay topics.

Limitations

This teacher research is limited in scope in that it used a small number of students for analysis. Consequently, the findings cannot be extrapolated to a large population. In order for there to be definitive findings, a much larger sample group must participate.

Additionally, the findings of this study did not conclusively support the assertion that all students will improve in their ability to understand and use genre texts. Of the sample of four students, three demonstrated improvement as assessed by the teacher researcher using the First Steps Rubric: Assessing Writing to Persuade. The study findings would be considered more reliable if there were additional assessors to verify the assessment results.

There were limitations in the instructional design. I was not the classroom teacher. Consequently, my ability to give descriptive feedback, in response to student work, was not as consistent and, of a scale, that would be the case if I had continuous access to the students.

Additionally, the study could have been more informative in its findings if the question and instructional design had more narrowly focused on specific aspects of explicit genre instruction, such as teaching function or organization or grammatical features, as opposed to all three aspects.

Further Research

This teacher research study provides questions for further research. One question which begs examination is what additional factors were present in the case of the student who did not improve in his understanding and usage of genre texts.

The role of socio-economic level could form the basis for studies of explicit genre instruction. In addition to performance, factors such as socio-economic level could be identified for examination in study analysis. If socio-economic level was determined to impact student learning of genre texts, then further studies could examine what additional supports, in addition to explicit genre instruction, are needed to achieve improvement across all socio-economic levels.

The role of specific languages could form the basis for studies of explicit genre instruction. The role that specific languages play, in the learning of genre texts, could provide a basis for further study analysis. For example, a study could examine whether a student whose first language is Punjabi would demonstrate the same level of performance change with genre text, after instruction, as a student whose first language has Anglo origins, such as German.

The role of specific cultures could form the basis for studies of explicit genre instruction. For example, would a student raised in First Nations culture demonstrate the same level of change as a student raised in an eastern culture? Findings from these studies would yield more questions in an attempt to discover the best way to meet the learning needs of specific populations.

An additional question which emanates from this study is the correlation between performance and engagement. Generally, student engagement is linked to performance. A study of explicit genre instruction could examine if there is a link between engagement, as reported by students, and assessed change in performance.

Contemporary educational theory supports the idea that learners, who possess linguistic, cultural, ethnic, or socio-economic backgrounds different from the prevailing society, can be explicitly taught the sanctioned discourses of that society. This teacher research study examined this theory on a small scale. Additional research in explicit genre instruction is needed to expand both our understanding and our ability to effectively respond to the needs of language learners.

References

- Alexander, P. A., & Fox, E. (2004). A Historical Perspective on Reading Research and Practice. In (Ed.), *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading (5th ed.)* (pp. 33-68). : International Reading Association.
- Badger, R., & White, G. (2000, April). A process genre approach to teaching writing. *ELT Journal*, 54. n.2, 153 - 160.
- Derewianka, B. (2003). Trends and Issues in Genre-Based Approaches. *RELC Journal*, 32, n. 2, 133 - 154.
- Education Department of Western Australia. (2008). *First Steps Writing Resource Book, Canadian Edition* (. 26 Andrew Place, Toronto, ON, M3C 2T8: Pearson Education Canada.
- Gee, J. (2001). Reading, Language Abilities, and Semiotic Resources: Beyond Limited Perspectives on Reading. In J. Larson (Ed.) (Ed.), *Literacy as snake oil: Beyond the quick fix* (p. 7 - 26). New York, NY, USA: Peter Lang.
- Graves, D. H., (1985). All Children Can Write. *Learning Disabilities Focus*, 1, n. 1, 36 – 43.
- Grisham, D., Albright, L., Berger, S., Kozub, R., Loughman, P., Sanchez, C., & Sullivan, A. (2000, August). Teacher Voices: Research as professional development. *Reading Online*, 4 (2).
- Halliday, M. A., & Matthiessen, C. (2004). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (ed.). London, Great Britain: Hodder Headline Group.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with Words*. New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Hyland, K. (2003). Genre-based pedagogies: A social response to process. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12, 17 - 29.

- Hyland, K. (2007). Genre pedagogy: Language, literacy and L2 writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16, 148 - 164.
- Kress, G., & Knapp, P. (2008). Genre in a social theory of language. *English in Education*, 26, Issue 2, 5 - 15.
- O'Connell Rust, F. (2009, August). Teacher Research and the Problem of Practice. *Teachers College Record*, 111, Number 8, 1882 - 1893.
- Rubin, R., & Galvan Carlan, V. (2005, May). Using writing to understand bilingual children's literacy development. *International Reading Association: The Reading Teacher*, 58, no. 8, 728 - 739.
- Stead, T. (2007). *Should Children Choose Their Bedtimes?* 175 Hillmount Road, Markham, Ontario, Canada, L6C 1Z7: Scholastic Canada Ltd.
- Thwaite, A. (2006). Genre writing in primary school: From theory to the classroom, via First Steps (1). *Australian Journal of Language & Literacy*, 29, n. 2, 95 - 114.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Willems, M. (2003). *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* 114 Fifth Ave., New York, New York, Hyperion Books for Children.
- Wyatt-Smith, C. (1997). Teaching and Assessing Writing: an Australian Perspective. *English in Education*, 31, n. 3, 9 - 22

Appendices

Appendix A

End of Unit Survey

Name _____

My Experience with Genre Writing Instruction

Please respond to the following questions by circling the response which is closest to your feelings. :

I enjoyed learning and engaging in lessons which taught me about persuasive genre text.

Strongly agree Agree Agree Somewhat Do not agree

I feel that the genre lessons helped me to understand how to write in this genre.

Strongly agree Agree Agree Somewhat Do not agree

I believe that my ability to write in this genre has improved over the past eight weeks.

Strongly agree Agree Agree Somewhat Do not agree

I believe that my ability to write in other formats has improved.

Strongly agree Agree Agree Somewhat Do not agree

I feel more positive about engaging in writing tasks.

Strongly agree Agree Agree Somewhat Do not agree

Assessing Writing to Persuade

Students are in the stage where they display most behaviours.

| Beginning Stage | Developing Stage | Consolidating Stage | Extending Stage |
|--|--|---|--|
| <p>Can state the purpose and audience of texts to be composed and includes basic organizational features of simple forms used to persuade</p> <p>The writer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> writes an opening sentence that states a personal position presents information that may not maintain the stated position provides little or no justification for viewpoints, e.g., "I don't think they should chop down trees" includes information that is more personal opinion than evidence writes a final statement that may not refer to the position taken uses language close to speech, e.g., "The team think" uses vague vocabulary, e.g., good, bad, nice uses a limited variety of linking words, e.g., and, then, but | <p>Is aware of the purpose and audience when composing texts and uses a partial organizational framework of a small range of forms used to persuade</p> <p>The writer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> writes an introduction that states a position includes arguments in an arbitrary manner providing some supporting evidence, e.g., "I don't think they should chop down trees because..." attempts to generalize; however, includes some personal statements concludes with a personal statement, e.g., "Therefore I don't think it is fair because..." uses personal or subjective language begins to choose vocabulary for effect uses a limited range of linking words to do with problem and solution or cause and effect, e.g., however, although, on the other hand | <p>Considers the purpose and audience to select specific vocabulary and uses appropriate organizational frameworks to compose a variety of forms used to persuade</p> <p>The writer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> writes an introduction that clearly states the position to be taken presents reasoned arguments in some planned or systematic way, but with limited supporting evidence for each assertion made attempts to conceal a subjective viewpoint is able to generalize information attempts to summarize with a paragraph that reinforces the position adopted uses an impersonal style, e.g., "Trees should not be chopped down. Trees provide..." chooses vocabulary for impact, e.g., remarkable, evil uses a range of linking words to indicate cause and effect, problem and solution, compare and contrast | <p>Creates forms used to persuade by selecting vocabulary and manipulating organizational frameworks to suit the content of the writing event</p> <p>The writer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> writes a clear, precise thesis that states the position taken and previews the arguments that will follow presents a well-researched argument selecting emotions and evidence in an attempt to influence the reader generalizes to authenticate the argument, e.g., "Vehicles pollute the air" writes a final paragraph that reiterates the main points with an evaluative conclusion uses appropriate style to suit purpose and audience selects vocabulary to influence the reader writes cohesively using appropriate linking words |