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(2014)

Teaching persuasive texts: Building a language of evaluation through hedging and moderated intensification.

Literacy Learning: The Middle Years, 22(3), pp. 33-41.

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Teaching persuasive texts: Building a language of evaluation through hedging and moderated intensification

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ABSTRACT

We identify two persuasive writing techniques – hedging and intensification – that pose difficulty for students in the middle years. We use examples of student writing from 3000 work samples collected as part of a larger Australian Research Council Linkage Project, URLearning (2009–2013). To realise the effective power of rhetorical persuasion, students need to be explicitly taught a range of hedging techniques to use to their advantage, and an expanded lexicon that does not rely on intensifiers. Practical teaching tips are provided for teachers.

Introduction

The ability to construct logical, convincing and insightful persuasive texts is a vital literacy skill, but many children at the primary school level struggle to write an argument. For middle school teachers there are some common pedagogic challenges arising from the tendency of students to write effusively, making highly emotional claims that are inappropriate within the context and for the audience (Martin & White, 2005). Our aim here is to offer some understandings of the evaluative features of persuasive text that can enhance the writing of middle school students. We enliven our discussion with writing samples from classroom research.

Expositions are among the ‘elemental genres of an English-speaking culture’ (Christie, 2013, p. 14). As such, they are formally introduced to children during the primary school years and proliferate through adolescence and into adulthood. For several decades, genre approaches to literacy pedagogy have been an important part of curriculum in Australia, and teachers are conscious of the need to explicitly teach the purposes of genres, generic structures and textual features (Exley & Mills, 2012; Mills, 2005).

Within the education system, persuasion is a genre that is integral to reading and writing in school and beyond. Newell and colleagues (2011) argue ‘the ability to compose a high-quality argument, and its claims, warrants, and evidence in writing, are critical skills for academic success’ (p. 273). It is not surprising, then, that persuasive text features prominently in subject English curriculum and assessment in English-speaking countries, and in language teaching and testing for prospective international students (Coffin, 2004).

The semiotic choices we make depend on the intended audience and social contexts, which in turn, influence the degree of formality (Emmitt & Pollock, 1997). Unfortunately, many children who are beginning to write and understand the nuances of quality persuasive texts may similarly use ‘epistemic modality’ (e.g., *must stop*) and intensifiers (e.g., *definitely*) in unsophisticated ways, while making little use of hedging (e.g., *may, partially, virtually, perhaps*) to show humility and politeness in arguments, and to lower feelings of opposition among readers or addressees (Derewianka, 2011; Efstathiadi, 2010; Hinkel, 2005).

However, the good news for teachers is that students' ability to write persuasive texts can be improved with instruction (Crowhurst, 1991). In this paper, we discuss two common pitfalls of persuasive writing in the middle years, drawing on data from a larger research project. We provide examples from children's writing to explicitly address the technical and sophisticated grammatical techniques of hedging and intensification, which are vital for first language (L1) and second language (L2) learning.

Why teach persuasive writing techniques?

Given the scope of the Foundation–10 'Australian Curriculum: English', middle years teachers need to strengthen student knowledge of persuasive texts and of the language of evaluation (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2014). The relevant sub-strand of the curriculum, 'Language for Interaction', is taught from Prep (the foundation year in Queensland) to Year 10. Students as young as seven years old across Australia are required to understand the fine-grained features of persuasive texts, such as modality: 'to examine how evaluative language can be varied to be more or less forceful' (ACELA 1477). By the middle years, students are required to 'understand how to move beyond making bare assertions and take account of differing points of view' (ACELA 1502). A deep knowledge of persuasive writing is needed by Year 7 when students are expected to 'understand how language is used to evaluate texts and how evaluations about a text can be substantiated' and teachers are encouraged to help students 'build ... a knowledge base about words of evaluation' (ACELA 1782 and Elaboration). In short, the curriculum requires students to learn how to position themselves in ways that successfully align the reader to empathise with their stance on sophisticated fields of knowledge. They need to be authoritative to be convincing in their demonstration of expertise when speaking, writing and communicating persuasively in both print and digital environments.

Persuasive writing or argumentation skills are important not only in the current Australian educational policy context, but also in many other parts of the world. For example, in the US, the *Common Core Standards: English Language Arts* (Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association, 2013) addresses students' writing skills. This policy requires Year 7 students to 'write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence' (Literacy W.7.1). Similarly, Year 8 students learn how to 'acknowledge and distinguish the claims from alternate or opposing claims, and organise the reasons and evidence logically' (Literacy W.8.1a).

In addition, the role of argumentation or persuasion is a critical focus of instruction for learners of English as an additional language (EAL). It is a key requirement in the International English Language Testing Systems (IELTS) tests, which are a critical gateway for tertiary studies in many English-speaking countries (Coffin, 2004). For IELTS students, success typically demands acquisition of hedging and intensifying conventions that differ not only from those of their written first language, but also from conversational English (Hinkel, 2005). Middle school users of EAL confront this same challenge. With respect to the content on the language of appraisal, for example, teachers need to keep in mind that 'the use of appraisal is linked to linguistic and cultural understandings around the weight of words and what they insinuate'; moreover, early phase EAL learners 'will still be developing a basic vocabulary and may not understand the nuances between word choices' (ACARA, 2014, p. 52).

Researching writing in classrooms with students in poverty

In this paper, we draw examples of children's persuasive writing from our research with Year 6 students. Our data is drawn from a large corpus of 3000 writing samples, produced as part of a research project conducted over five years in a school with a culturally diverse student cohort, including those from families affected by poverty. The research underscored the necessity for literacy education to enable students to grapple with intellectually substantive topics and literacy practices that matter in their lives

and those of their community members (Exley, Woods, & Dooley, 2014; Luke, Dooley, & Woods, 2011; Mills, 2013).

The school was a part of the government’s accountability agenda through the Smarter Schools National Partnerships for Literacy and Numeracy program (Department of Education, 2014). In the context of compulsory testing through the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (ACARA, 2011), teachers across all year levels were particularly focused on improving students’ knowledge of genres important in schooling, including narrative and persuasive texts.

The writing samples were collected from the students at the end of the second year of the research project, and are used here to ground our analysis and discussion of common writing errors using excerpts of authentic children’s writing. The data analysis involved coding the writing samples for the following seven criteria: ideas, generic structure and language, cohesion, vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation and spelling. While coding for generic structure and language, we observed common patterns in the students’ acquisition of persuasive language features that we knew could have been addressed through explicit instruction. Given the centrality of persuasive text in the Australian Curriculum: English, we conducted further analysis and identified pedagogical strategies that may be of broader interest to educators beyond the school site. In particular, the appropriate use of hedging and intensification emerged as important themes. Our analysis here looks at some of the linguistic knowledge students need in order to communicate their stance on social issues.

What are the features of persuasive texts?

Persuasive text, sometimes referred to as argument or exposition, is defined here as a form of rhetorical production involving the identification of a thesis or claim, provision of supporting evidence, and an assessment of warrants that connect the thesis, evidence and subject matter of the argument (Newell, Beach, Smith, & VanDerHeide, 2011). Persuasive texts can take a range of forms, such as letters, web pages, formal speeches, essays, sermons, reports and testimonials. There are also a number of multimodal formats, including brochures, flyers, advertisements and pop-ups on websites. The structure of formal persuasive texts taught in rhetorical studies and in many schools typically follows the Toulmin (2003) model, as outlined in Table 1. With the increase of multimodal textual formats in the 21st century, these linguistic features and their meanings also need to be considered in relation to images, audio, spatial layouts and digital sites of display (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

Table 1. Features of persuasive texts or arguments (Adapted from Derewianka, 2011; Droga & Humphrey, 2003; Toulmin, 2003)

<p>Purpose To argue a case with appeal to evidence, sometimes with view to persuading the audience to take action.</p>
<p>Discernible features of textual structure</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Background – provides a context for your argument by introducing the issue, particularly important in more developed compositions. 2 Thesis statement – statement of position or problem that is the focus of the argument. 3 Series of arguments – logical organisation of arguments. 4 Reinforcement of position – reaffirms the writer’s point of view in light of the arguments presented.
<p>Discernible grammatical patterns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of nominalisation (changing verbs or adverbs to nouns). • Use of technical nouns in supporting evidence. • Thinking verbs or processes to express opinion directly. • Interpersonal metaphor to express opinion indirectly. • Appropriate degrees of modality. • Appropriate use of hedging and intensification. • Text connectives to introduce and link arguments. • Evaluative vocabulary, including judgment and appropriation.

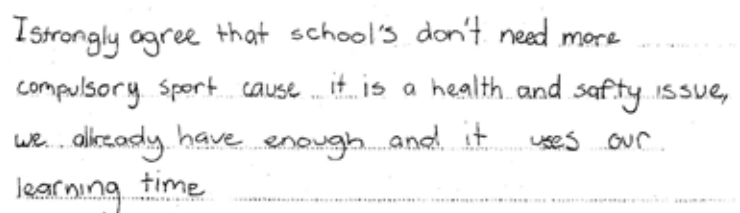
The terms analytical and hortatory are sometimes used to distinguish two fundamental differences in persuasive purposes and strategy (Coffin, 2004). An ‘analytical exposition’ (persuading that) presents a well-formulated objective claim or thesis, while the relationship between writer and reader is typically interpersonally distant. In contrast, ‘hortatory exposition’ (persuading to) aims to convince the reader to respond in a certain direction – to take social action. In such persuasive texts, the interpersonal relationship between reader and writer is often more ‘charged’ (Coffin, 2004; Martin, 1989).

Likewise, we can distinguish between one-sided and two-sided arguments. A two-sided argument (discussion) must weigh up evidence in a balanced way, both for and against an issue, whereas a one-sided argument (exposition) makes no serious attempt to consider the opposing view (Coffin, 2004). One-sided and two-sided arguments can be either analytical or hortatory.

While there are discernible features of persuasive texts, it is important for teachers to acknowledge that there are no ‘pure; or normative genres or rigid text structures’ (Anstey & Bull, 2004). Approaches to teaching persuasive texts can offer a variety of models of persuasive texts, demonstrating and describing a range of possible generic boundaries. This is essential, particularly when we consider the hybrid forms of persuasive texts that circulate in digitally mediated environments, such as in the context of persuasive blogs, forums and online chat. The use of authentic models of persuasive texts provides children with a diversity of exemplars, thereby guarding against the problem of some ‘ideal’ exemplar being granted unwarranted ‘authority’ (Green, 1987); furthermore, it makes it easier to demonstrate the features of text structure that are modified across different modes and media (Mills, 2005).

What we found: Pervasive problems in students’ persuasive writing

Figure 1 is a writing excerpt by a Year 6 student at our school research site. The students in this class were required to argue for or against the need for more compulsory sport in schools. The persuasive structure followed the Toulmin (2003) model: a thesis statement, three arguments with evidence, and a conclusion. The child’s opening paragraph or thesis statement is indicated in Figure 1.



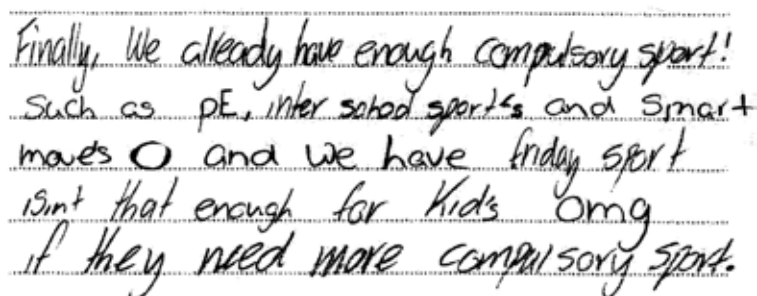
I strongly agree that school's don't need more compulsory sport cause it is a health and safety issue, we already have enough and it uses our learning time

Figure 1. Excerpt of Year 6 student text: Overuse of intensification

In this student’s thesis statement, the adverb *strongly* is used with the verb *agree* to intensify agreement with the position that more compulsory sport is not needed. This is combined in the same sentence with the unnecessary adverbial intensifier, *definitely*. While it could be argued that the student is demonstrating a definite stance on the issue, it highlights two of the common pitfalls when learning to write persuasive texts – overuse of intensification and the absence of hedging.

Intensifiers, sometimes called ‘boosters’, include terms such as emphatics (*totally, extremely*), amplifiers (*a lot, forever, strongly, definitely*), universal pronouns (*all*), and negative pronouns (*nothing*) (Hinkel, 2005). Often, students who are beginning to write persuasive texts violate the communicative norms by being too blunt, simplistically certain, or perhaps even naïve (Efstathiadi, 2010, p. 181). The inappropriate use of intensifiers is a common problem in student writing because these lexical terms are easily transported from their use in casual speech contexts, and can appear as generalisations or overstatements if used unreflectively and without moderation (Hinkel, 2005).

Another example of the overuse of intensification is provided in the writing excerpt in Figure 2, from a Year 6 student on the same topic of compulsory school sport.



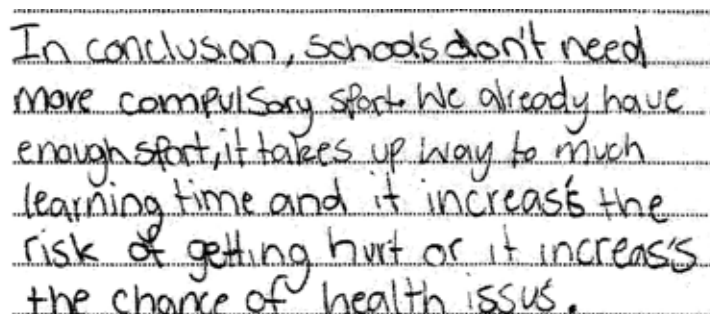
Finally, We already have enough compulsory sport!
Such as PE, inter school sports and Smart
moves O and we have Friday sport
isn't that enough for kids omg
if they need more compulsory sport.

Figure 2. Example of inappropriate use of intensifiers from informal contexts

Our focus here is on the use of the informal exclamatory abbreviation from online discourse 'OMG'. Intensification is also evident in the misuse of the exclamation mark in the first sentence. There is the need here for socially appropriate use of hedging and reduced intensification to temper claims – common problems in L1 and L2 students' formal academic writing (Hinkel, 2005).

A second pitfall in students' persuasive writing is lack of awareness of epistemic modality, which is sometimes called a 'face-management theory of politeness' (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Coates, 2003; Efstathiadi, 2010, p. 181). This theory addresses the use of interpersonal meta-discoursal features called hedges to 'save face' in delicate situations or arguments to lower feelings of resistance experienced by the reader, or to protect oneself in case later proven to be wrong (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Efstathiadi, 2010, p. 181). The use of hedging enables the speaker to keep a balanced attitude while constructing a potentially face-threatening text, such as giving advice on complex, controversial and difficult topics without violating the norms of politeness. These norms vary, depending on social and cultural context, and include important considerations, such as tenor – the relationship between the writer and the audience.

Consider the excerpt in Figure 3, from a different Year 6 student who, while drawing on some emotionally effusiveness terms, later demonstrates some use of hedging to temper claims in the final sentence.

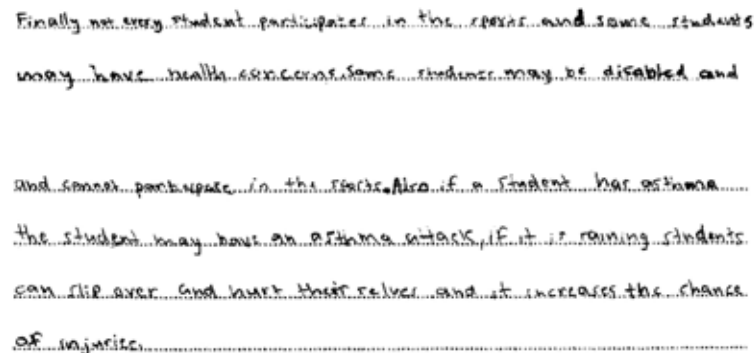


In conclusion, schools don't need
more compulsory sport. We already have
enough sport, it takes up way to much
learning time and it increases the
risk of getting hurt or it increases
the chance of health issues.

Figure 3. Year 6 writing excerpt showing some beginning use of hedging

While the student inappropriately draws on the adverbial phrase 'way too much' to indicate quantity, the modal phrases 'it increases the risk' and 'it increases the chance' are examples of attempts to limit or moderate claims in formal writing. This example of hedging indicates a moderated degree of probability, acknowledging that there are associated risks of sport, as opposed to certain injury. Students need to be taught when and how to use hedging to project honesty, modesty and due caution (Swales, 1990). The example in Figure 3 can be contrasted with other Year 6 texts in which students claimed erroneously that a consequence of more sport is that 'You *will* get an asthma attack' or that refraining from sport '*will* stop you from getting badly injured'.

There are a number of different hedging devices used in persuasive writing, including modal adverbials of indefinite frequency (*sometimes, occasionally*), indefinite pronouns (*someone, anyone*), epistemic markers or modal phrases (*relatively, it is my belief, maybe, perhaps, I know, I think*), possibility hedges (*hopefully, in case*), down-toners (*merely, relatively, sufficiently*) and lexical hedges (*most, more, less*) (Efstathiadi, 2010; Hinkel, 2005). Other lexically-advanced adverbs commonly used in formal persuasive texts include down-toners, such as *fairly, scarcely, mildly, virtually, partly* and *partially* (Efstathiadi, 2010). An example of another kind of hedging device, modal auxiliaries, is shown in Figure 4.



Finally not every student participates in the races and some students
may have health concerns some students may be disabled and
and cannot participate in the races. Also if a student has asthma
the student may have an asthma attack if it is raining students
can slip over and hurt their selves and it increases the chance
of injuries.

Figure 4. Example of modal auxiliaries (hedging) in Year 6 student writing

In this example, the student attempted to introduce some modal auxiliaries of varying intensity, such as *may, cannot, may have*, and *can* (*may be disabled, cannot participate, can slip over, may have an asthma attack*). This is strengthened by the use of ‘if-then’ statements (if a student has asthma, then ...) that specify the conditions under which the negative consequence might ensue.

Modal verbs or auxiliaries are an important semiotic device to indicate degrees of certainty, which could be represented as a gradient from low to high (Martin & White, 2005). Modal auxiliaries that indicate high modality include auxiliary verbs such as *must* and *ought*. Words showing median modality are those such as *shall, will* or *should*. Modal auxiliaries that indicate low modality are words such as *can, may, might* or *could*. Moderated use of modality that is appropriate to the audience takes time and practice to develop as it involves making valid, fair and measured judgements about personal relationships and how to interact with others in socially appropriate ways (Martin & White, 2005).

Encouraging students to use varied and moderated modal auxiliaries to avoid emotional effusiveness is an important, yet neglected, skill. As Hinkel (2005) argues, writing guides for higher education and college students often address ‘hedging’ as the use of ‘limiting modifiers’ (Beason & Lester, 2000; Hacker, 2002; Lunsford, 2003), but often do not discuss how to use intensifiers correctly other than advise about their placement in a sentence.

The power of persuasion

Teaching students how to compose persuasive texts or written arguments is undeniably ‘complex and demanding’ (Newell, Beach, Smith, & VanDerHeide, 2011, p. 277). The ability to construct persuasive written texts involves shaping statements that may lead to real change of the status quo, as opposed to simply arguing for the sake of arguing. This requires increasingly sophisticated and nuanced understandings of semiotic choices of modality, hedging and measured use of intensifiers that are appropriate to the audience, supported by deep level knowledge of the subject matter (Newell, Beach, Smith, & VanDerHeide, 2011). In particular, young writers and L2 writers need support in making appropriate lexical choices using hedging in scientific and academic writing to convey appropriate levels of politeness and tentativeness in drawing conclusions, as face-saving (Hinkel, 2005). Speech and conversations include a much higher number of intensifiers and overstatements than academic

writing, making it particularly important for students to become aware of these differences in their persuasive writing (Hinkel, 2005).

The need for hedging and careful use of intensification becomes more apparent when particular audience identification is kept in mind. In addition, students need to be taught the specific informal and highly presumptive intensifiers that should be avoided, such as *completely*, *really*, *totally* and *no way*. To realise the effective power of rhetorical persuasion, students need an expanded lexicon that does not rely on intensifiers and which employs a greater range of advanced hedging techniques to use to their advantage (Hinkel, 2005).

Taking action: Teaching tips for persuasive writing

Recognising these common patterns in students' acquisition of persuasive language features is a beginning. However, considering the place of explicit instruction in addressing the needs of students is also important. In what follows we suggest several activities for teachers to adapt to their own contexts.

Activity 1: Editing informal intensifiers

1. Provide the class with a list of sentences that use highly presumptive and informal intensifiers, redundancy, incorrect capitalisation, informal language, emoticons and exaggerated exclamation marks. For example, 'There is no way that children should be ever, ever, ever allowed to buy red candies at school. In fact, that is totally, absolutely, ridiculously crazy and it SHOULD NOT HAPPEN!!!! ☹'
2. Edit the sentences together on an electronic whiteboard or other large writing surface, sharing the pen, and asking the students to provide limiting modifiers, avoiding informal language and emotional effusiveness, and using correct capitalisation and punctuation.

Activity 2: Indefinite pronoun dice game

1. Each small group will need a die and a container of plastic figurines (e.g., people or animals).
2. Students take turns rolling the die and collecting figurines (a '4' entitles them to 4 figurines, a '2' to 2 figurines, and so forth).
3. When the container is empty, the students select a sentence strip with the indefinite pronoun that best describes their winnings.
 - a. I have *few* of the [people/puppies ...].
 - b. I have *many* of the [people/puppies ...].
 - c. I have *most* of the puppies [people/puppies ...].
4. Students justify their choice of sentence strip.
5. The winner(s) is (are) the student(s) with the correct sentence strip, not the most figurines.

Activity 3: Sentence hedge skits

1. Students work in small groups.
2. Each group is given a written scenario containing a hedging sentence adverb. In the following examples, adverbs of desirability are used to show the writer's evaluation of the events in the rest of the sentence.
 - a. *Unfortunately*, the other team scored a goal at the last moment.
 - b. *Luckily*, our team scored in the final moments of the game.
 - c. *Thankfully*, she found her lost iPad.
 - d. *Sadly*, she never saw her iPad again.

3. Groups prepare a one minute skit, acting out their scenario. The other students have to decide which scenario they have acted out.
4. Extension activity: Students write scenarios for the other groups to act out.

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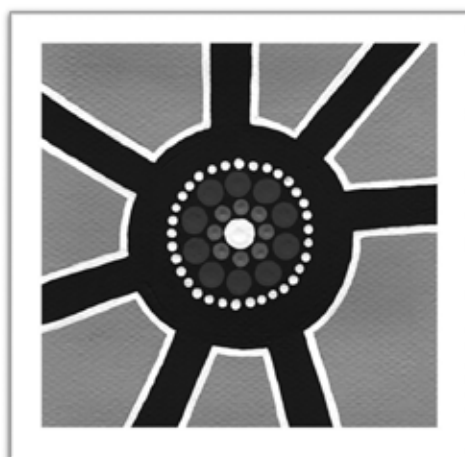
Karen Dooley lectures in English curriculum studies in the Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology. Her recent research has looked at critical literacy in early years classrooms in a school affected by poverty. She is an author of an upcoming book, *iPads in the early years: Developing literacy and creativity* (Michael Dezuanni, Karen Dooley, Sandra Gattenhof, Linda Knight).

CAPITALISING ON CURIOSITY:

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