Introducing SFL Text-Based Research and Teaching in Japanese EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This study enables an understanding of how 14 novice foreign language writers at a Japanese university developed their writing competence and genre awareness during a 15-week systemic functional linguistics (SFL) text-based writing lesson.

To obtain comprehensive quantitative and qualitative insights into changes in learner awareness regarding genre writing knowledge and skills, this study had learners write pre- and post-survey and self-reflection texts for a peer-discussion essay analysis.

The results detailed the ability of learners to understand both generic structure and lexicogrammar, which were especially improved in the second and third paragraphs of the target genre text. These improvements were related to a raise in the self-efficacy and confidence of learners when writing these parts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does genre awareness change for Japanese first-year students who spend one semester in the General English for Academic Purposes writing class?
2. Of what target genre features (i.e., generic structures and lexicogrammatical choices) are EFL learners most aware?

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Systemic Functional Linguistics?

Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a linguistic theory that clarifies the relationship between social context and linguistic phenomena. SFL enables learners to understand the patterns of lexical and grammatical resource usage in each register in the production of texts for specific purposes. Traditionally, English language education in Japan has been a bottom-up system that involves the learning of target vocabulary and grammar (Nishijo, 2017). In contrast, the SFL-based English writing classes involved in this research are part of a top-down system in which lexicogrammar resources are chosen according to the "goal" of linguistic activity (Nishijo, 2017). According to Nishijo (2017), in order to choose suitably goal-oriented lexicogrammar resources, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of each relevant resource. Since English education in Japan already places great importance on this understanding, it is possible to build on an existing foundation (Nishijo, 2017). In SFL, language and position are seen as resources. That is, language and its uses are not viewed in terms of the correctness of usage relative to grammatical rules; rather, they are viewed in terms of how social activity is expressed in language, and how language is shaped by social activity (Sano, 2012).
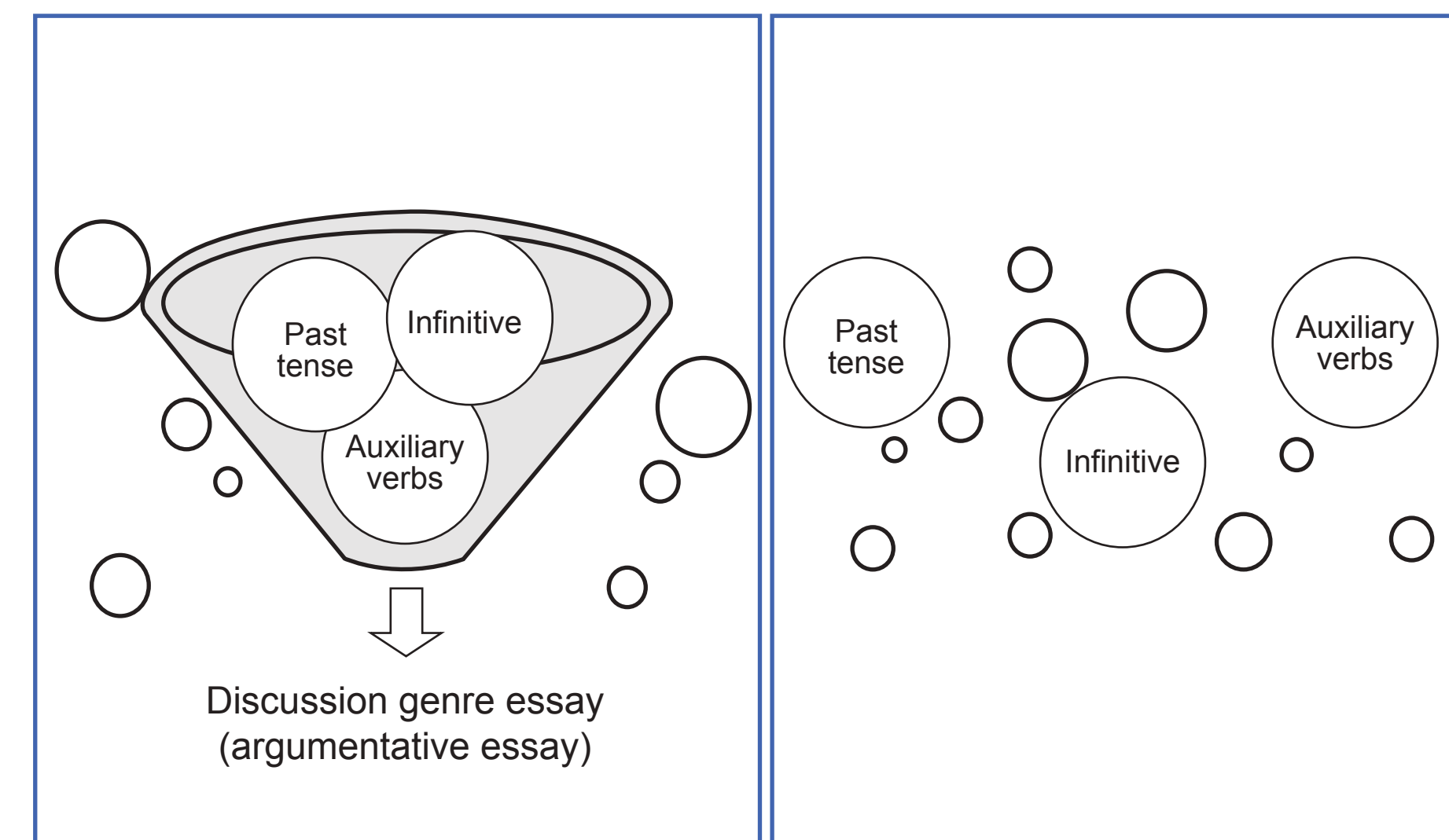
Figure 1. The left image depicts the Genre based approach, in which learners choose the vocabulary semiotic resources deplaning on the genre purposes. The right image depicts traditional grammar based teaching in Japan (Nishijo, 2017, p. 261).
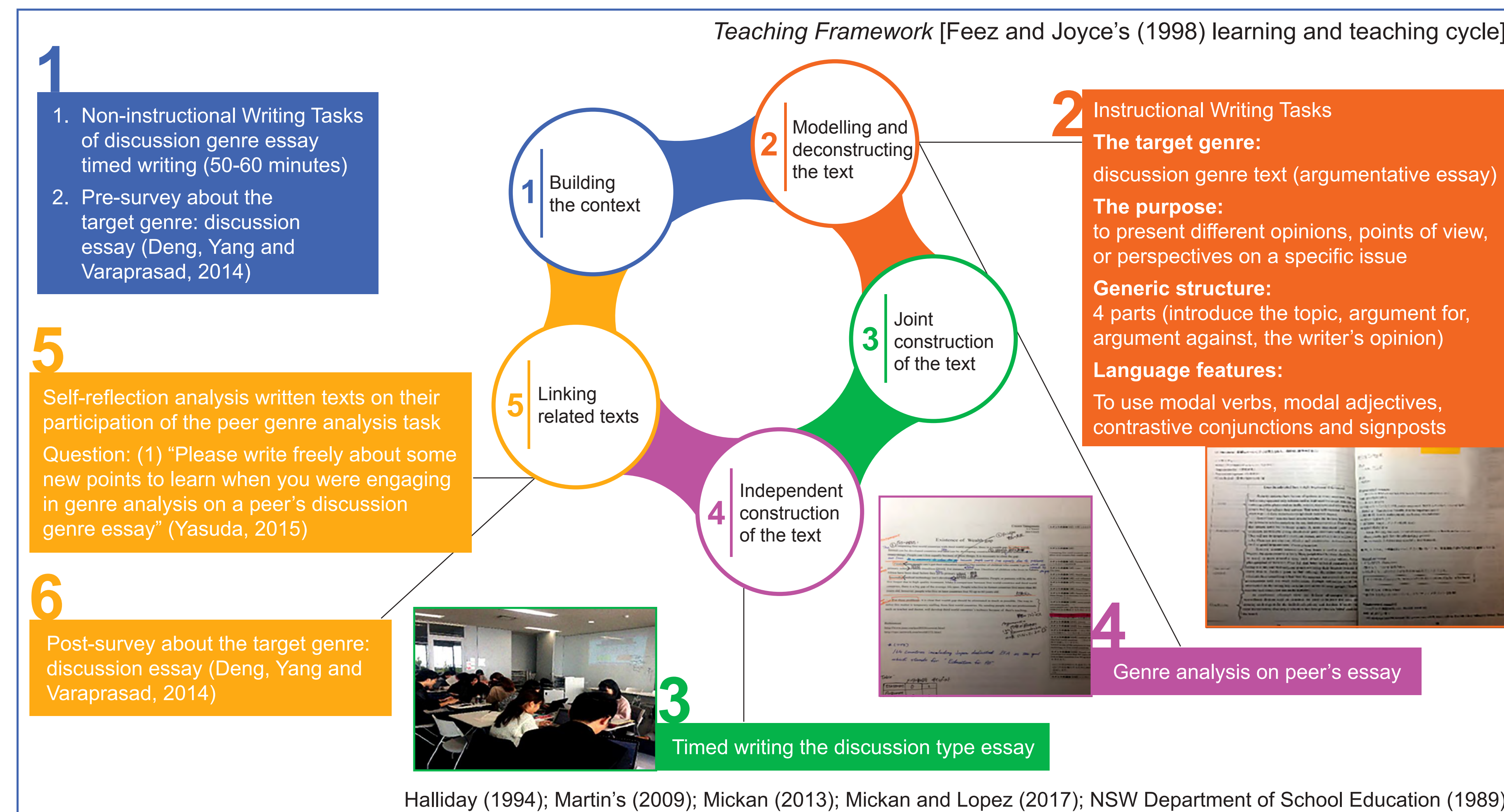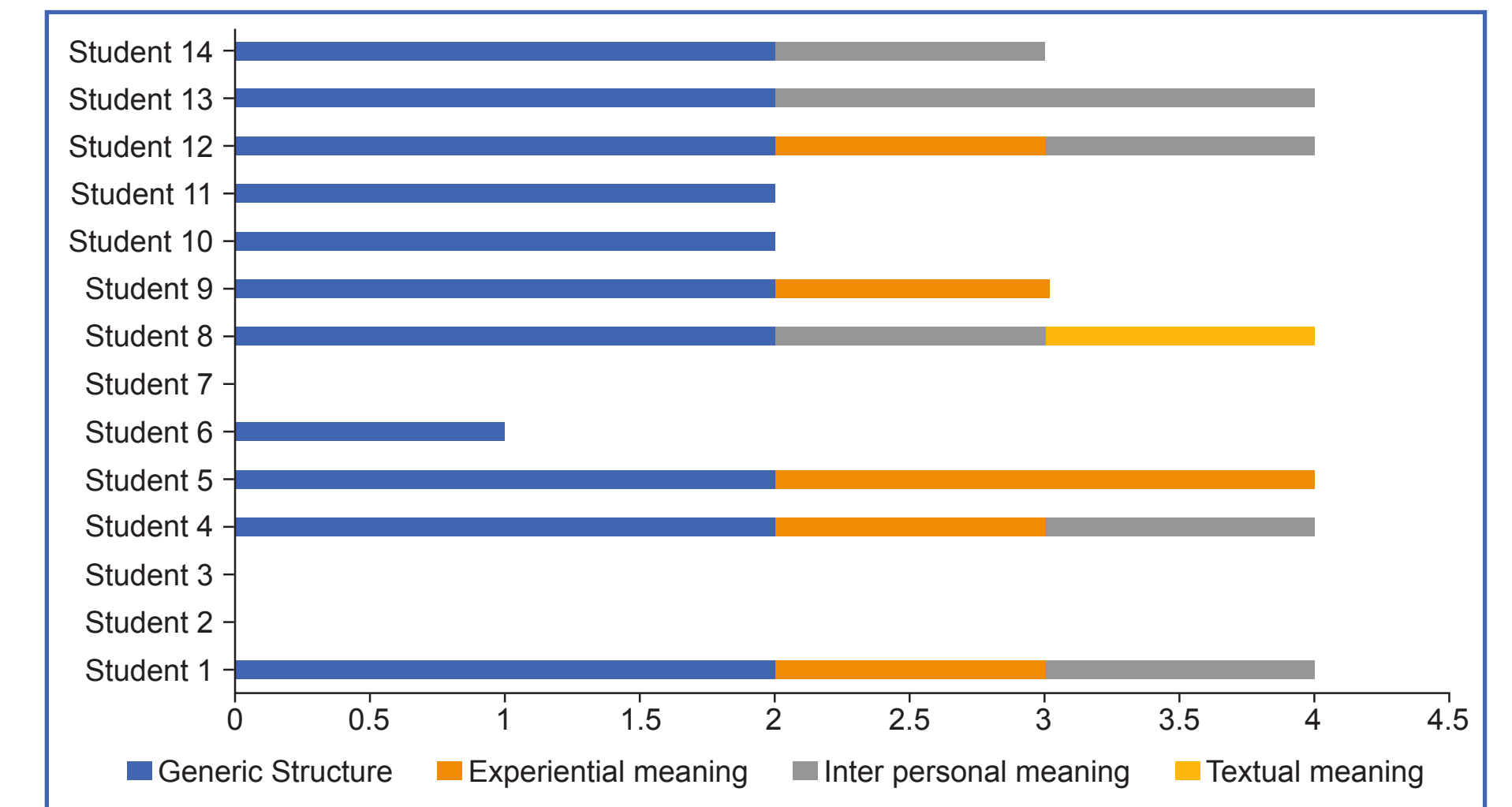
METHODS

Participants

Fourteen first-year students (F = 8, M = 6) from an EFL classroom at a large private university in Japan were selected to participate in this study, which took place over one semester of the 2017 academic year. The social practices of students in this classroom involved the improvement of English proficiency in order to participate in a study abroad project a year later. For that purpose, they were required to write argumentative essays. Most students were at an intermediate proficiency level (CEFR B1), and had little experience with either the genre-based writing approach or peer essay analysis.

Data Sources

1. Non-Instructional and Instructional Writing Tasks (pre 2017/04/13, post 2017/07/05)
2. Writing self-reflection analysis texts on their participation in the peer genre analysis task (2017/07/13)
3. Pre and Post- Survey (pre 2017/04/17, post 2017/07/20)

Teaching Framework [Feez and Joyce's (1998) learning and teaching cycle]

1
1. Non-instructional Writing Tasks of discussion genre essay timed writing (50-60 minutes)
2. Pre-survey about the target genre: discussion essay (Deng, Yang and Varaprasad, 2014)

1 Building the context
2 Modelling and deconstructing the text
3 Joint construction of the text
4 Independent construction of the text
5 Linking related texts

2 Instructional Writing Tasks
The target genre: discussion genre text (argumentative essay)
The purpose: to present different opinions, points of view, or perspectives on a specific issue
Generic structure: 4 parts (introduce the topic, argument for, argument against, the writer's opinion)
Language features: To use modal verbs, modal adjectives, contrastive conjunctions and signposts

5 Self-reflection analysis written texts on their participation of the peer genre analysis task
Question: (1) "Please write freely about some new points to learn when you were engaging in genre analysis on a peer's discussion genre essay" (Yasuda, 2015)

6 Post-survey about the target genre: discussion essay (Deng, Yang and Varaprasad, 2014)

3 Timed writing the discussion type essay

4 Genre analysis on peer's essay

Halliday (1994); Martin's (2009); Mickan (2013); Mickan and Lopez (2017); NSW Department of School Education (1989)

RESULTS

1. Pre- and post-survey mean value: The awareness of (a) understanding the generic structure, (b) lexicogrammar, and (c) learners' self-efficacy were improved.

Group	Questions	Mean		SD	Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test (exploratory)		P-value
		Pre	Post		Pre	Post	
a. Understanding the generic structure	3 I fully understand how to write Paragraph 2 and Paragraph 3 of the last essay.	2.93	3.79	0.997	0.014	0	0.016*
b. Understanding the linguistic features/lexicogrammar	6 I fully understand the elements (nuance regulation, textual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and experiential meaning) that are required in the Body of the last essay.	2.50	3.29	0.855	0.002	0.013	0.026*
c. Awareness of possessing strong writing abilities	10 I am particularly good at writing the body section of the last essay.	2.36	3.14	0.745	0.001	0.001	0.038*

2. Pre- and post-survey mean result: Group (4) Factors that improved abilities were decreased.

Q17 I think that reading books improved my writing ability.

Q18 I think writing essays similar to the last essay increased my writing ability.

These results may indicate that learners in this study did not have enough input in the target genre texts during the lessons.

RESULTS (CONT.)

Student 14, Student 13, Student 12, Student 11, Student 10, Student 9, Student 8, Student 7, Student 6, Student 5, Student 4, Student 3, Student 2, Student 1
0 0.5 1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4 4.5
■ Generic Structure ■ Experiential meaning ■ Inter personal meaning ■ Textual meaning

3. A comprehensive qualitative self-reflection sheet and an analysis of the learners' meaning-making choices indicated changes in their genre awareness.

Increasing learner awareness in terms of lexicogrammar, such as experiential and textual meaning, was a challenge for teachers in this study. However, most learners obtained an understanding of the generic structure of the target genre. All segments of the lexicogrammatical features of the genre discussion texts were explained during the lessons.

Learners tended to focus on the particular language towards modal verbs. However, they paid less attention to particular lexicogrammatical elements used in order to express the writer's opinion/modality, such as those in the following fixed phrases: *It is possible that, It is certain that.* This also involved explanations about the construction of conjunctions in their self-reflection analysis sheets.

CONCLUSION

How does genre awareness change for Japanese first-year students who spend one semester in the General English for Academic Purposes writing class?

Through the learning cycle, peer essay, and interaction with the target text, the learners improved their (1) Understanding of the generic structure and lexicogrammar, and (2) Awareness of possessing strong writing abilities.

Of what target genre features (i.e., generic structures and lexicogrammatical choices) are EFL learners most aware?

Generic structure > Interpersonal meaning > Experiential meaning > Textual meaning

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