SFL AND ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS IN ESOL

Helen Holmesglen JENKINS
(Institute of TAFE, Melbourne, Australia)
Maria Lelia PICO
(Universidad Nacional de Tucuman, Argentina)

ABSTRACT: *This paper is the result of a current collaboration by two linguist/ESOL teachers on opposite sides of the Pacific. SFL refers to the genre 'expository essay'. This term is not generally current in TESOL, whereas the 'argumentative essay' is a type of essay frequently specified and taught in English as a Second Language courses. It focuses on the production of reasoned, logical argument. The type of text structure required varies from, for example, the presentation of one point of view only to an argument that briefly acknowledges the opposing view, only to refute it. There is an overlap with the 'discussion essay', where a balanced presentation of for- and against- arguments is required, without any necessary endorsement of a position. Another variation concerns the personal-impersonal axis, ranging from a first person (and often personal experience) presentation to the impersonal stance of academic detachment. This paper reports on the use of SFL analysis as a tool for analysing model argumentative essays plus a sample of essays written by students. The students in the two groups studied have different purposes for studying English. The group in Argentina are studying English as their academic specialisation at university, whereas those in Australia are learning English as an instrument to enable them either to undertake post-secondary education in a range of fields or to re-enter a profession. These different purposes affect the use to which the SFL analyses will subsequently be put. In Argentina, where English is the object of study, linguistic findings could be of direct interest to students as well as to the lecturer. In the Australian sample, where English is a tool for study, these findings should be more for the use of the teacher, who might inform and modify his/her teaching on that basis, passing on the findings indirectly to the learners. In both cases, the SFL focus on language as meaning encourages the teacher/lecturer to offer students more than a concern with formal accuracy.*

KEY-WORDS: *SFL – argumentative - writing*

1. Introduction

How can SFL help teachers and students with argumentative essays? In October 2005, Lelia Pico asked on Sysfling: 'We devote most of the time to the writing of argumentative essays. Could you please suggest some books or articles based on SFL that could be useful for my classes?' Helen Jenkins replied that although she could not suggest sources, she would be very interested in looking into the question. Thus began the correspondence and study of texts that led to this paper.

2. Argumentative essays

First, it was necessary to decide which genre or genres we were to consider. SFL refers to the genre 'expository essay'. This term is not generally current in TESOL, whereas the 'argumentative essay' is a type of essay frequently specified and taught in English as a Second Language courses. It focuses on the production of reasoned, logical argument. The type of text structure required varies from, for example, the presentation of a single point of view ('exposition' in Martin 1992:563) to an argument that briefly acknowledges the opposing view, only to refute it. Aarts (2005) summarizes what we expect from our students:

> "a process of systematic and methodical reasoning with the aim of
> arriving at a conclusion or solving a particular analytic problem by
> formulating a set of coherent and relevant arguments."

Sometimes students are instructed to write an 'opinion essay', but the expectation is still for a series of arguments plus evidence. There is an overlap with the 'discussion essay' and its variant the 'advantages – disadvantages' essay, where a balanced presentation of for- and against-arguments is required (Martin 1992:563), without any necessary endorsement of a position. The critical point for students is that in all these essays they present a set of arguments and provide supporting evidence, putting these together in a coherent and cohesive essay. Although 'therefore … consequently … as a result …' chains may occur in the various types of argumentative essay, the construction of complex cause-effect chains is not the focus of the teaching.

3. The two samples

As this is not a statistical study, a small sample was sufficient – or rather, two small samples, one from Tucuman in Argentina and the other

from Melbourne in Australia. For each sample, a minimum of two model essays and four student essays was selected. The essays were not written for this study, but were produced in the normal course of the students' work. Most of the selected essays, whether models presented to the class or student work, indicated that we were dealing with the same types of writing. The work produced by the students in Tucuman was of very high standard, as it represented the best students at an advanced stage of their university studies. Besides, these students are specialising in English; it is their goal. The Melbourne essays were written by lower-level students who are learning English as an instrument to gain them entry to the diploma-level study of such matters as International Trade, Finance and Banking, or Hospitality. These differences have implications for the way in which the findings of this study can be applied.

The essay topics are listed in Appendix A.

4. Structure of the essays

If students are to learn to write a certain genre of essay, they first need to read and examine examples. This is so whether or not the teacher presents a strict 'text-based lesson' or series of lessons as described – indeed, prescribed – by Feez (1998) or not. Hyland (2003) points out that

> "by providing learners with an explicit rhetorical understanding of texts and a metalanguage by which to analyse them, genre teachers can assist students to see texts as artefacts that can be explicitly questioned, compared and deconstructed, thereby revealing their underlying assumptions and ideologies".

The use of multiple models enables the teacher to draw attention to variations permitted by the generic structure formulation, and so reduce the risk of slavish reproduction of a single model that Zamel (1990) warns against.

Then there is the question of register. We need to specify what the critical features of register are; for example explicit connections between sentences, how to establish tenor (and whether variation along the personal-impersonal axis is permitted), appropriate processes and participants for the field, appropriate indications of time and reality/possibility - ie, tenses and modality.

As most of the model essays used in Tucuman and Melbourne came from internationally available 'Academic writing' textbooks, they showed strong similarities. Differences were differences of genre, not of origin.

For example, the Tucuman model 'Position of women…' and the Melbourne model 'Myths support science…' both present the topic and indicate the point of view in the introduction. In the body, we find a series of arguments for that point of view, a statement of the counter position, rejection of that position, then a conclusion with a pointer to the future. Both use 'them and us' devices to align readers with the writer's view. Both use a variety of cohesive markers. 'Position of women…' uses overt text organisers - secondly, thirdly - whereas 'Myths…' uses a technique of 'set (Australian Aboriginal stories) and subset (individual instances).

The other models have features in common with these two: the same type of introduction and conclusion with 'topic sentence' paragraphs carrying the arguments in the body. The 'Technology…' essay gives only arguments in support of the thesis; there is no 'counter position and rejection' sequence. 'The West and pollution…', on the other hand, pivots each body paragraph around a 'however'; or 'but', giving first the position to be opposed, and then the writer's arguments against this position. The body thus includes similar elements to 'Women…' and 'Myths…', but organises them differently.

The student essays show evidence of modelling of and instruction in the genre. All four Tucuman essays are appropriately structured, three of them following the 'West and pollution' model of 'pivot' for-and-against paragraphs, while the fourth assigns the two positions a paragraph each, using the second of these to counter the position presented in the first. The Melbourne class used a very general essay plan pro forma, which the students were required to fill in before writing. It required:

> Introduction: general statement + thesis
> Body paragraphs: A, B, C, D, E …
> Conclusion: restatement and final; comment

The class was instructed to indicate which paragraphs were 'for', and which 'against'. They were expected to adhere to their plans, but did not always succeed in doing so.

The two better Melbourne writers produced well organised essays, with 'advantages' paragraphs preceding 'disadvantages' paragraphs. One conclusion acted as a counter-argument to the 'disadvantages' position, whereas the other ended with advice to weigh up the pros and cons before making a decision. The two weaker students both had difficulty with introductions and conclusions, one of them omitting these elements altogether. One, despite an appropriately organised plan, produced an essay of randomly organised best and worst aspects of life in his country. Both were clearly struggling towards what was required; their need for further modelling, instruction and practice is evident.

5. Theme and rheme; given and new

The essays in the sample provide few instances of marked themes. The usual thematic sequence in the clause is:

$\pm$ textual theme + experiential theme (participant)

Interpersonal themes are infrequent.

Most of the ideational themes in all the essays, model or student, are GIVEN. For continuity, the less able writers depend more heavily on 'same theme' sequences, whereas the model essays and the work by advanced students show various skills in introducing NEW thematic material, especially NEW participants.

The models and better student essays all make some use of introducing NEW material in the rheme, which is then available as GIVEN material in the following or subsequent rheme. This is a skill that can be taught …. There is one instance in the model 'Position of women…' where there is a zig-zag NEW ---> Given sequence:

T1 ---> R1 $\downarrow$

T2 ---> R2 $\downarrow$

T3 ---> R3
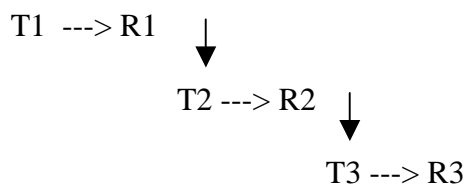
but the student essays do not provide any examples.

The more advanced writers do make occasional use of a GIVEN marked experiential theme as an 'introducer' of a NEW participant. For example, student A writes:

> Before the students go abroad [given], their parents [new] … will try them (sic) best to take care of their children's daily life…
> (Melb student B)

This is a skill to develop as students become more adept.

Connectives such as 'however', 'for instance' and 'furthermore' and referential terms like 'such' and 'other/another' serve not only to provide cohesion, but also as a means of introducing NEW thematic material. The better writers provide examples:

> Besides, the costs [new] to prevent catastrophes are too high.
> (Tuc student 2)

This is a tactic which can be taught by asking students 'How much after the connective is new?' and asking them to attempt the same in their own writing.

The 'Myths' model essay uses 'foreshadowing' in order to introduce themes that are in fact NEW in the text – that is, have not been mentioned directly – but are implied, and therefore can be used without reducing the coherence of the text. Readers can use shared knowledge frames, for example, that a whole implies its parts, that a set implies its subsets, or that the frame associates 'A' with 'B'. In the 'Myths' model essay, once we have 'fossils' and 'volcanoes', in a human context, 'geologists' are in the frame and may be introduced into the text without hiatus.- This is another skill to develop.

The use of 'it' and 'there' enables all NEW propositional material to go into the rheme. Students at a lower level have difficulty with the syntactic structures involved, and, although they may employ these devices, they have difficulty doing it without error. One of the model essays – 'The West and pollution' – makes extensive use (perhaps even over-use) of these devices. This is another aspect of the grammar that needs to be examined, taught and practised in the context of the types of essay we have here.

6. Connectivity

While skilful manipulation of GIVEN and NEW contributes to a smoothly flowing text, the use of logical and especially cohesive markers is a skill that appears to be more highly valued, overtly at least, in the examination and evaluation of ESL writing. Most of the writers in the sample, and all of the more advanced ones, used a range of paratactic connectives, whether coordinators or conjunctions (in the sense of Halliday and Matthiessen 2004:538), plus subordinators and embedding devices.

For any given essay length, it is obvious that shorter sentences provide more opportunities for conjunction, while multiple-clause sentences provide scope for coordination and hypotaxis. Both sets of model essays provide some indication of the difference in level of the two groups of students with whom they were used. The Melbourne models have fewer words per sentence, fewer clauses per sentence, and a higher percentage of free clauses. One of the better and one of the weaker Melbourne students produced longer sentences as measured by words and clauses. The weaker of the two, although he broke his work up into sentences, used a conversational type of chaining. Interestingly, for these aspects, the Tucuman essays happened to be much closer to the Melbourne model. It thus appears that each pair of models provided the challenge of a goal to reach.

6.1 Conjunction

The most frequent semantic categories conjunction are Add:Pos and Add:Adversative, plus some exemplifying and causal.

Two of the four model essays make extensive use of conjunction, and one of them ('Women') consistently uses text organisers to mark paragraphs. The other models use fewer conjunctions, relying on other devices for cohesion. Two of the students, one each in Tucuman and Melbourne, also use text organisers and conjunctions extensively. One of these (Melb student B) makes numerous errors of grammatical detail, yet his essay 'reads' very fluently. The overt connectivity is an important contributing factor.

The remaining students all make some use of conjunction, and all but the weakest show strong evidence of conscientious teaching and learning of a semantic range of conjunctions. The weakest students, who are still

struggling at the sentence level while attempting to construct an argumentative text, are not yet equal to this part of the task. These conjunctions are discrete items, which helps with teachability, although learners may have difficulty in mastering the semantics and usage. That they are teachable as items is evidenced by the frequency with which many Hong Kong students in Australia use 'moreover' in their writing, often when 'in addition' would be more appropriate. Lower level students may have difficulty not only with the semantics of sentence conjunctions, but with coordinators and subordinators as well.

6.2 Parataxis within the sentence

All the essays provide instances of coordination ADD:POS (usually 'and') and most have some ADD:ADVERSATIVE (mostly 'but'). This is unremarkable, and is consonant with the pattern of conjunction. The Melbourne students also use 'so', which occurs only once in the Tucuman sample.

Not surprisingly, the weaker students tend to model their writing on the chaining patterns of speech. Student D in the Australian sample, relies heavily on 'and – and – because – because' chains, although he does break them into sentences. Student A (Australia) overuses 'and'. He becomes a little more coherent only when he breaks out of the requested genre into personal recollection – but he continues to rely on 'and.'

6.3 Hypotaxis

Enhancing hypotactic relations are the most frequent. The favoured semantic group is cause-condition-concession, of which all essays provide multiple instances. 'If' and 'because' are common. However, frequency of use is not necessarily a virtue, as the conversational chaining mentioned above shows; use has to be appropriate to the register.

The other types of circumstantial clause are LOC:TEMP and PURPOSE, and very little else, whether in the model or student texts. The weaker students are semantically restricted.

Three of the four models and all but the two weakest Melbourne students use projecting clauses. In some instances, a specific speaker is given ('Dr Symonds' in the 'Nuclear' essays), but more often the speaker is vague and general, or omitted altogether. As this is a useful device for

introducing material while at the same time disclaiming responsibility for it, it is a device that students need to learn.

The sample provides only a couple of instances of hypotactic extension – while, whereas - while hypotactic elaboration (non-restrictive relative clauses) is rare in this sample. Although infrequent, the more advanced writers especially need to have control of these two types for occasional use.

6.4 Embedding

Whereas the model essays and advanced student writers use various types of embedding, the weaker writers either avoid it altogether or concentrate on one type. Most of the sample essays include examples of THAT clauses in identifying structures. However, student A (again) uses them over and over again, always in the context:

'The best/worst aspect is [CLAUSE]' (with THAT omitted).

His essay provides only one other example of embedding.

Among other types of embedded clauses, post-nominal restrictors, whether with a WH word or to-V, occur in most essays, and although they are not always perfectly formed, appear to be a relatively early type of embedding.

Certain constructions that are valuable for giving prominence and making appraisals are restricted to the model and more advanced essays. These are:

It is [ADJECTIVE] that …

It is [NOM GP] that …

and WHAT nominalised clauses.

Teachers need to assess students' 'readiness' (Pienemann) for these; students struggling with clause and complex sentence construction are clearly not 'ready', and a strongly argued and emphatic essay is too much to ask of them. WHAT clauses occur only in the two model essays used in Australia (one in each), and little weight can be attached to their absence from the rest of the sample. Besides, as the Longman Grammar

of Spoken and Written English 1999 indicates, they are infrequent in academic writing. Yet for giving prominence, they can be useful in argument. Pointing this out should be sufficient for advanced students.

7. Transitivity

Participants and groups of participants may be distinguished in terms of the processes in which they engage. Indeed, the essays in the sample do differentiate, most of them strongly, among participants according to the roles that they assume. Generally, in these essays, material (mostly intransitive) and relational (mostly attributive) predominate. One major distinction in these essays is that between human beings on the one hand and phenomena, abstractions and nominalisations on the other. The essays, in other words, show strong but not always skilful cohesive harmony (Hasan 1984).

With the caveat that some differences might be wholly attributable to field, we offer the following observations on transitivity in our sample:

> Human, overt: tend to be actor in MAT;INTRANS, some BEHAVIOURAL And MENTAL, a few VERBAL; the weakest writer in particular also has them as carriers of ATTRIB.

> Human, covert and inderterminate: 'people,' impersonal 'you', omitted agents of MAT and VERBAL passives, implicit actors in embeddings that do not require a grammatical subject. Eg:
> 'You can see …', 'It is claimed that…', 'No one can deny…', 'Money has to be spent', 'The problem of storing nuclear waste.'

> Phenomena, abstractions and nominalisations: occur in RELATIONAL clauses, especially as carriers of an attribute, but also some MATERIAL. Eg: '*The facilities* for developing country schools would be better' and 'Fossil fuels are becoming scarce.'

The VERBAL (and MENTAL) instances of vague and covert speakers play an important role in positioning the speaker in relation to his/her subject matter, and are rarely, if at all, found in the weaker essays. These aspects of the grammar, that is, passives and embeddings, need to be taught through explicit grammar teaching plus the analysis and emulation of model texts in order to help student writers indicate their stance on points in the discussion. The model texts and more advanced student essays do use these devices.

The weaker writers also depend relatively strongly on REL:ATTRIB; indeed, the weakest restricts himself to ATTRIB – half with 'be' omitted

– and MAT. The other writers, whether model or student, all make use of REL:IDENT, but not necessarily skilfully. One of the weaker student uses it repeatedly in the structure:

> The best aspects living in my country is the food is very nice and the weather are not changingable (sic).

Constructing and using REL: IDENT is something for us to teach our students as they learn to write discussions and arguments.

8. Modality

> "One of the main purposes of communicating is to interact with other people: to establish and maintain appropriate social links with them" (Thompson 1997:38).

Such an interaction has different purposes: either influencing others' opinions, providing information, explaining our attitudes, sharing our feelings, etc. But the message we try to convey is not always either positive or negative. There is a space in between which is covered by modality. If the commodity being exchanged is information, modality relates to how valid the information is in terms of probability or usuality. If the commodity is goods-and-services (offers and commands), modality refers to the degree of obligation on the other person's side to carry out a command or inclination of the speaker to fulfil the offer (Halliday's 'modulation').

Modality shows the speaker's commitment: "the degree to which the speaker commits himself or herself to the validity of what s/he is saying" (Thompson 1997:60).
In English, modality is expressed through modal verbal operators or by a mood adjunct. In the essays analysed (both models and students' productions), the use of modal verbal operators is more common.

8.1 Model Essays

The Myths.essay includes 2 instances of *should* (suggestion) and 2 of *would* (possibility). Then there are instances of *can, could, would, might* and *to be to* showing possibility. The level of modality is quite low in this essay, as factual information is presented.

The Technology.essay includes no modal verbs in the introduction as facts are presented there. But in the rest of the paragraphs modal verbs

are widely used. Most of these verbs show a mid degree of likelihood (7 instances of *can*); others refer to ability (*can, be able to* and the phrase *have the capability to*) and the conclusion includes the use of *will* which implies a high level of certainty. "Predictions are based on a certain premise, which may be a given situation, a general principle, or even a hypothetical situation" (Lock 1996:196). They are typically about the future.

In the West and Pollution essay there are instances of the uses of modal verbs related to possibility (*can, could, would*). The third paragraph includes ought to so as to denote moral obligation, while the last paragraph include suggestions and necessity (*should* and *need)*.

The Women essay uses few modal verbs, and restricts them to obligation ('…yet it *must* be done') and hedges.

8.2 Students' essays

If the students' productions are considered, a wide difference is noticed as regards the use of modality. The students who have reached an advanced level in writing (Tucuman) mostly make use of verbs denoting possibility (*may, can, could*) as they include information about the possible consequences of the main topic. *Should* is used to provide some suggestions or pieces of advice. There are some instances in which *will* is used to show certainty in the information provided and *must* reinforces the idea of obligation. Modal verbs are appropriately and accurately used.

The essays written by lower-level students (Melbourne) present two opposite degrees of modality use. On the one hand, the best of these essays (Melb B) shows what might be considered an over-use of modality: *can* (7), *will* (5), *migh*t (1), *should* (1), *must* (1), *need* (1), *likely to* (1), *going to* (1). This essay 'reads' fluently, and the modals are not inappropriate; perhaps the student wants to disclaim responsibility on the information he is providing. An example of less appropriate use is provided by Melb C, who repeats 'you *can* go/see/buy'. Then, when he steps 'out of genre' into reminiscence, he focuses on normality with 'frequent use of 'usually'. At the other extreme, in the Melb D essay, there is an almost complete lack of modality use, as only 2 instances of *can* for possibility are included. In fact, this essay includes so many semantic and structural errors that it is quite hard to understand its content. Furthermore, at this level it is difficult for a student to make an

adequate use of hedging, whether with modals or by other means. Here, then, is another teaching point.

9. Conclusion

There are, of course, many other aspects of these essays that were noted in passing but have not been touched on here. Appraisal is one example, cataphoric reference is another, adapting the wording of the set topic to the student's own text is a third, but smaller, point. Then there is the major question of grammatical accuracy. The very best of these student essays require very little editing, but others, even the best of the Melbourne writers (Melb B), would find his work spattered with about fifty red marks when his work was returned by his conscientious ESOL teacher. Yet this writer, as mentioned before, produced a confident, well structured essay that 'read' well.

These essays demonstrate that learner writers can and do learn to structure the larger elements of language, such as essays and paragraphs, although the weaker students show just how much needs to be learnt. When their repertoire of grammar is limited and their control of it insecure, they are unable to perform the larger task required of them. They do show partial learning of the genre requirements, however.

What we teach and test, and when, is largely imposed on us by the institutions for which we work. Ideally, we might tailor the genres more closely to the students' stage of development so that students are not subject to demands that their command of grammar will not allow them to meet. Courses do tend to be structured this way, but courses and individual students are sometimes 'out of phase'.

To sum up (as our student essays sometimes say), we set out to discover what applicable findings an SFL analysis of these essays might reveal. Our analysis:

- Confirmed the importance of model essays to clarify the genre, and of explicitness about the text structure required.
- Showed the relevance of frames for making use of implicature.
- Confirmed the difficulty that lower level learners have in producing introductions and conclusions.
- Confirmed the difficulty that lower level learners have in structuring paragraphs with a 'topic sentence'.

- Showed the need to develop a range of skills for introducing new thematic material, especially new participants.
- Confirmed the importance of teaching a range of conjunctions, but also highlighted the importance of avoiding over-dependence on these for textual continuity.
- Showed the need to teach 'it' and 'there' to enable all propositional material to go into the rheme and to focus emphasis.
- Showed student writers associating different types of participant with a different range of processes, but also the limited range of process types used by weaker writers.
- Showed the need for skill in implying human agency without necessarily stating it. This can be useful for disclaimers, among other things.
- Showed the need to develop lower level students' ability to construct clauses with non-human actors, carriers, etc, instead of impersonal 'you' or vague 'we'.
- Showed the need to develop students' skill in expressing modality, especially as a hedging device.
- Showed that weaker students need to be able to reduce redundant material in rhemes.
- Showed that more advanced students have scope to develop rheme-rheme links.

Finally, how can we act on this information? As mentioned in the introduction, our students are studying English for very different purposes.

The Tucuman students would benefit from some theoretical background about SFL. Already they have been introduced to the concept of Theme (unmarked and marked) to help them notice how ideas are developed in one of the models and they showed great interest. One limitation is that they are not introduced to SFL in other subjects, but SFL as a tool for examining and developing their own work can be helpful to them independently, whatever the subject. This knowledge should also be useful for their professions once they have finished university and for any students planning to teach English, it should be considered vital. The scope with these students is twofold: SFL as a tool for the lecturer helping them develop their skill in English, and theoretical understanding of SFL for wider application elsewhere.

In Melbourne, teachers can use insights from SFG without focusing on theory - and also avoiding daunting terminology. Thus a teacher might direct students' attention to the beginnings of sentences, and ask them to look for continuity from one sentence to the next, and to find how something that does not follow in that pattern is introduced into the text.

When it comes to processes, these students can consider whether anything is happening, whether people etc are doing things, or whether the text is mainly describing the way things are, what they are like, and so on. They can look at the participant roles of people, things, ideas etc in terms of whether they are doing anything (or are being 'done to'), saying something, thinking, or just 'being'. As these students are struggling to increase their general vocabulary, one has to be careful not to overburden them with metalanguage that often bewilders native speaker English teachers.

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APPENDIX A

The 4 model essays represent different fields of knowledge and activity. The titles are:

In Tucuman:

- 'Although the position of women in society has improved, there is still a great deal of sexual discrimination.' Discuss. In Stephens, Mary 2000: **Proficiency Writing.** Italy: Pearson Education Ltd.
  (Referred to as <u>Women)</u>

- 'The West and Pollution' . In Gude, K. and M. Duckworth 2003: **Proficiency Masterclass.** Oxford: Oxford University Press
  (Referred to as <u>West)</u>

In Melbourne:

- 'Modern technology'. In Oshima, Alice and Ann Hogue 1991: **Writing Academic English** 3rd ed. Longman
  (Referred to as <u>Technology)</u>

- 'Myths Support Science; Science Supports Myth.' Personal document.
  (Referred to as <u>Myths</u>)

The student essays:

In Tucuman:

- 'Nuclear Power as a Solution'
  (Referred to as <u>Nuclear)</u>. Written by St1, St2, St3, St4

In Melbourne:

- 'Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of undertaking tertiary study overseas'
  (Referred to as <u>Study</u>). Written by students A, B, D

- 'What are the best and worst aspects of living in your country?'
  (Referred to as <u>Aspects</u>). Written by student C.