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Effectiveness of using rubrics for academic writing in an EFL literature classroom

Ai Chun Yen
National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan

Set against the background of numerous changes in higher education in Taiwan and increasing numbers of non-traditional entrants to English majors, this paper examines a discipline practices approach to academic writing for a literature class. It discusses the enhancement of academic writing skills in a drama class by using instructional rubrics referred to as META (**M**echanics, Use of **E**vidence, **T**hesis/Claim, and Use of **A**nalysis). Participants (N = 42) wrote and reviewed in-class writing tasks using the rubrics. Their written work was also rated by the researcher. The goal was to evaluate the usefulness of META as a tool for participants to improve their academic writing for a literature class. The performance of students was also correlated with their level of exposure to META.

Keywords: EFL English majors; rubrics; academic writing; peer review; Taiwan

Introduction & Background

Literature in its broad sense can be classified into 3 major genres, novel, poetry, and drama. Studying literature involves the growth of logical reading skills and of an ability to place literary texts in their historical, intellectual and comprehensive analysis. Literature majors need to develop the academic skills to analyse and judge literature, to learn about literary forms and styles, and to understand the academic language of the literature community. Academic English is found in literary texts, applied in classrooms, and presented on written tests, assignments or project work. This language is content specific and is the set of words, grammar, and organisational strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher-order thinking processes, and abstract concepts (Zwiers, 2008). There is a need to bridge the divide between daily and academic practices and also, to mobilise daily and academic practices as a resource to facilitate literary knowledge. Yet, as far as Taiwanese English majors are concerned, this academic support is limited. Although these students are novice academics and thus can hardly draw upon their experience to make meaning, lecturers expect them to write critical essays with strong arguments and novel concepts without helping them reach that academic level.

Essay writing for literature courses remains a problem for students and teachers alike. While most of EFL students have had writing experience, it is important for them to realise that academic writing for a literature domain at university level is different from the practices they have so far encountered. A potential drawback of this viewpoint is the lack of a perspective on how lecturers may take students' experience in the academic world into account, and how this concern may play out in their responses to students' academic outcomes. Thus, a set of writing rubrics (referred to hereafter as META) were designed in the research reported here to scaffold EFL English majors'

academic writing in literature classes. META focuses on four key elements of academic writing, that is, mechanics, use of evidence, presentation of the thesis/claim, and analysis.

Andrade (2000) defines a rubric as "a scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work" and one which "articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor" (p. 1). Research by Schafer, Swanson, Bené, and Newberry (2001) offers indirect support to the view of students as users of assessments. They speculate that the higher test scores are the result of teachers incorporating operational definitions of achievement into their instruction in ways that were understood and used by students. This suggests that if carefully designed, rubrics can help students in goal-setting and planning. These are metacognitive strategies which support their learning and at the same time, can help them understand the goal of an assignment and support teachers in unbiased grading, giving feedback and assigning more challenging work to students (Anderson, 2003; Andrade, 2005). Thus, rubrics have the potential to help students develop understanding and skills, as well as make dependable judgments about the quality of their own works beyond traditional testing (Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). The participation of students in open discussions about standards and criteria of successful performance is also suggested (Andrade et al., 2008; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). There is also a suggestion that rubrics support learners' learning confidence like self-efficacy and self-regulation which positively affect learning (Panadero, Jonsson, & Strijbos, 2016).

Given the above support from the research literature, META was developed for use as an academic writing tool, but at the same time, as a self and peer review tool because it can teach as well as evaluate. The goal of using META was to develop participants' academic reading and reviewing skills in terms of sophistication and depth, so they would become self-regulated academic readers and writers.

Design of the Research

Participants and Setting
The study adopted a pre-post quasi experimental design with convenience sampling. The participants were 42 English majors in their second year at a university in Taiwan, who registered for an elective drama class. They were told they would learn how to read and analyse dramatic texts, and put those skills into practice for their own academic writing and peer-review.

Instruments
Instruments used in this research were two essays and the META rubrics. META was used for specific in-class assignments in terms of writing and reviewing key ideas, events, outlines and short essays. The essays were used to see how participants review papers academically before and after the META treatment. The participants' writing tasks in class were also rated by the researcher.

Sample Essays
Two essays of approximately 500 words were purposely selected from the final assignments of other literature classes; one was at undergraduate level, the other at postgraduate level. They were not offered as writing models for the participants but were used to assess how well the participants could evaluate an academic paper.

Participants did not know the background information of the two writers and were asked to review and score the two essays. The undergraduate sample was well-written in terms of sentence structure, spelling, grammar and punctuation but did not display well organised analytical elements. The postgraduate sample had multiple errors in writing mechanics, but the originality of its analysis of texts was well presented.

META Rubrics

The META rubrics are based on evidence from an earlier study of Taiwanese EFL English majors' essay writing problems in which 110 literary essays written by English majors from three colleges aged 19 to 20 were graded and analysed. META (**M**echanics, Use of **E**vidence, **T**hesis/Claim, and Use of **A**nalysis) was subjected to expert review and received a highly reliable content validity index (α = .90).

META provides a numerical score which needs to be seen in relation to the rubric's criteria descriptors (see Figure 1). It is, therefore, necessary to explain to all subjects how to work with META for their assigned tasks.

META Rubrics for Essay Writing   Scored by #_____ , Score for this essay _____

Please score your or your peers' essays according to the following categories and 5 points most for each item listed below.

	Exceeds Standard (A)	Meets Standard (B)	Close to Standard (Must Rewrite)	Below Standard=no R/W
Mechanics: Organisation, Writing Style and Conventions (M)	☐ Organisation skilfully sequences the claim(s), reasons, and evidence. ☐ Provides a concluding statement or section that skilfully follows from or supports the argument presented ☐ Skilfully produces clear, coherent writing, and few or no errors in conventions and writing style	☐ Organisation logically sequences the claim(s), reasons, and evidence. ☐ Provides a concluding statement supports the argument presented ☐ Attempts to produce clear and coherent writing, but few errors in conventions and writing style detract from understanding	☐ Attempts to create a logical organisation ☐ Attempts to provide a concluding statement the argument presented, but statement does not support thesis ☐ Attempts to produce clear and coherent writing, but many errors in conventions and writing style detract from understanding	☐ Does not provide logical organisation ☐ Does not provide a concluding statement or section that follows from or supports the argument presented ☐ Does not produce clear and coherent writing
Use of Evidence (E)	☐ Develops the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples from the text(s) ☐ Skilfully integrates information into the text selectively to maintain the idea flow and advance the thesis ☐ Skilfully assesses the strengths and limitations of each source ☐ Skilfully draws evidence to support thesis/claim	☐ Develops the topic by selecting significant and relevant facts, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples from the text(s) ☐ Integrates information into the text selectively to maintain the idea flow and advance the thesis ☐ Assesses the strengths and limitations of each source ☐ Draws evidence to support thesis/claim	☐ Attempts to develop the topic using facts and other information, but evidence is/or insufficient ☐ Attempts to integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the idea flow and advance the thesis, but information is insufficient or irrelevant ☐ Attempts to assess the strengths and limitations of each source, but misinterprets information ☐ Attempts to draw evidence to support thesis/claim but evidence is insufficient or irrelevant	☐ Does not develop the topic by selecting information and examples from the text(s) ☐ Does not integrate information from the text ☐ Does not assess the strengths and limitations of each source ☐ Does not use evidence to support thesis/claim
Thesis/Claim (T)	☐ Thesis/Claim is precise and significant to provoke thought	☐ Thesis/Claim is clear	☐ Thesis/Claim may be unclear or irrelevant	☐ Thesis/Claim is missing
Critical Analysis Presentation (A)	☐ Skilfully delineates and evaluates the argument and specific claims in cited texts, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient	☐ Delineates and evaluates the argument and specific claims, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient	☐ Attempts to delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is irrelevant and insufficient	☐ Does not delineate or evaluate claims in text

Notes and additional comments:

Figure 1. META rubrics for essay writing

Research Procedure

The research reported here was a semester-long (18 weeks) academic writing experiment using META with selected literary works. Apart from the assigned group tasks, the participants also peer reviewed with the assistance of the researcher in class. META was used as a writing aid and a review tool to learn how to write for a specific audience and how to read as academics. Participants were divided into 14 groups (3

members in each) to work on analytical writing tasks (see Figure 2). Since the in-class writing and review tasks required sharp and focused expression of thought, all subjects were asked to recall and read the rubrics criteria before working on the tasks. After an open discussion on the assigned topics, participants were asked to post their prewriting, outlines, preliminary drafts, and final drafts in the discussion forum of the university's learning management system (LMS).

META (Mechanics, Use of Evidence, Thesis/Claim, and Use of Analysis)					
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
Pre-test G & W	**Reading and Reviewing to Writing Tasks**	Mid Term	Mid Term Resit	**Reading and Reviewing to Writing Tasks**	Post-test G & W
	Short discussion (M+E+T+A) Analyse the dramatic structure of *Snow White* (two versions)			Outlines (M+E+T+analysis) Stage, stage blocking and lighting design for the new play META	
	Event talk (M+event keywords) Men's and women's talk about Minnie Wright's life (*Trifles*)			Short discussion (M+E+T+A) Analyse the dramatic structure of *The Taming of the Shrew* (2 versions)	
	Event talk (M+event keywords) Questions and doubts found with the bird cad (*Trifles*) META			Short discussion (M+E+T+A) The effects of disguise in *The Taming of the Shrew* (2 versions)	
	Event talk (M+event keywords) List the emotional verbs in Cal' monologue (*Andre's mother*)			Short discussion (M+E+T+A) Why a play within a play is unique in *The Taming of the Shrew* (2versions)	
	Event talk (M+event keywords) List the emotional verbs in Lucia's monologue (*Sample Monologue*)			Short discussion (M+E+T+A) What does the title say? (*Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death*) META	
	Outlines (M+event keywords) List convincing reasons for believing (or not) in Moony (*Moony's Kid Don't Cry*)			Short discussion (M+E+T+A) Shakespeare's days (*Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death*)	
	Outlines (M+E+T+analysis) Stage design and the stage blocking of appearance (*The Last Gasps*) META			Short discussion (M+E+T+A) Why are these women special? (*When Shakespeare's Women Meet*)	
	Outlines (M+E+T+analysis) Add a new character and explain why s/he needs to die (*The Last Gasps*)			Short discussion (M+E+T+A) Shakespeare's men? (*When Shakespeare's Women Meet*)	

Figure 2. META rubrics use sequence

The first individual short essay was the pre-test of writing (hereafter referred to as pre-testW), while the final individual essay was the post-test of writing (hereafter referred to as post-testW). Participants also reviewed and graded selected essays as a pre-test of their grading (reviewing) ability (hereafter referred to as pre-testG) in the first week and their post-test grading ability (hereafter referred to as post-testG) in the final week. Participants' performance in writing and reviewing at pre-test (without prior knowledge of the rubrics) was compared with that of the post-test (with prior knowledge of the rubrics). Participants were then asked to assess what they achieved with reference to these four META areas.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

To identify the effectiveness of META rubrics, each written segment of drama reading on the university LMS was marked by the researcher according to the stages in the META process. Through a multi-stage analysis of academic contexts, the following questions were addressed:

1. Does the META–led agenda helps the participants improve their academic peer review skills in a literature class?
2. Does the META–led agenda helps the participants improve their academic writing skills in a literature class?

In order to answer research question 2, six research hypotheses were set (Figure 3). The dependent variable is A while the independent variables are M, E and T. It is assumed that all independent variables will positively influence the dependent variable according to the stages in the META process. The hypotheses are:

1. Participants' knowledge on writing **m**echanics (**M**) leads to good use of **e**vidence (**E**) for their academic writing in the literature domain;
2. Participants' knowledge on writing **m**echanics (**M**) leads to precise **t**hesis/claim statements (**T**) for their academic writing in the literature domain;
3. Participants' knowledge on writing **m**echanics (**M**) leads to critical **a**nalysis (**A**) for their academic writing in the literature domain;
4. Participants' good use of **e**vidence (**E**) leads to precise **t**hesis/claim statements (**T**) for their academic writing in the literature domain;
5. Participants' good use of **e**vidence (**E**) leads to critical **a**nalysis presentation (**A**) for their academic writing in the literature domain;
6. Participants' precise **t**hesis/claim statements (**T**) lead to critical **a**nalysis presentation (**A**) for their academic writing in the literature domain.
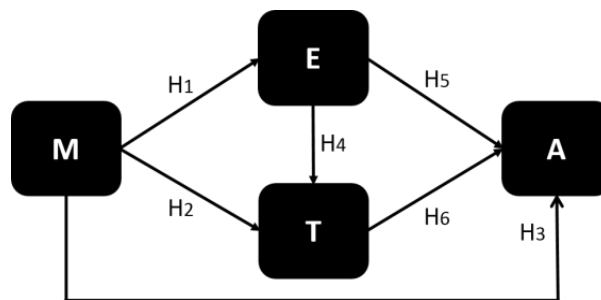

Figure 3. Research hypotheses

Findings

Peer Review Performance Differences
In-class peer review was an essential part of this course since it served as an opportunity for participants to read and write as academics. To see if participants' peer review skills meet META standards, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the participants' peer review results in the pre- and post-testGs with and without the META rubrics (Table 1). Since the undergraduate sample in the pre-testG was well written with respect to writing mechanics, most participants scored high marks for all categories (M: 4.10, E: 2.95, T: 3.40, A: 3.55) in the pre-test (without knowledge of META). This is probably because participants considered good language skills were critical for a good literary essay regardless of the META rubrics. However, the scores for the postgraduate sample in the pre-testG were very different (M: 2.36, E: 2.40, T: 2.55, A: 2.43). The average mean score was comparatively lower than that of the undergraduate essay in the pre-testG due to the multiple errors in writing mechanics.

Table 1. Paired samples statistics and paired samples test on essay grading results

		M	N	SD	t	Sig. (2-tailed)			M	N	SD	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	**M**pre**UG**	4.10	42	.656	2.39	.022	Pair 5	**M**pre**PG**	2.36	42	.485	-.684	.498
	Mpost**UG**	3.79	42	.415				**M**post**PG**	2.43	42	.501		
Pair 2	**E**pre**UG**	2.95	42	.379	12.30	.000	Pair 6	**E**pre**PG**	2.40	42	.497	-11.73	.000
	Epost**UG**	1.69	42	.517				**E**post**PG**	3.86	42	.683		
Pair 3	**T**pre**UG**	3.40	42	.544	13.54	.000	Pair 7	**T**pre**PG**	2.55	42	.504	-16.76	.000
	Tpost**UG**	1.93	42	.342				**T**post**PG**	4.40	42	.497		
Pair 4	**A**pre**UG**	3.55	42	.504	14.04	.000	Pair 8	**A**pre**PG**	2.43	42	.501	-19.80	.000
	Apost**UG**	1.86	42	.521				**A**post**PG**	4.29	42	.457		

Table 1 also clearly presents the marked decline in the participants' given scores for the undergraduate essay after META treatment in terms of the writing mechanics. Significant score differences were also found for the postgraduate essay but they had increased by the post-testG.

The way participants read an academic paper was clearly different after the META treatment. All META mean scores dropped for the undergraduate sample in the post-testG (M -.310, E -1.262, A -1.476, and T -1.690). But, on the contrary, all META mean scores went up for the postgraduate sample (M +.071, E +1.452, T +1.857, and A +1.857). These results suggest that the META-led agenda had a significant effect on participants' review skills for a literary essay. Writing mechanics are not the only META factor used in reviewing a paper. This implies that the more participants apply the META rubrics, the more their awareness about each perspective will increase. In other words, META-led agenda will help the participants improve their academic peer review skills in a literature domain.

Correlations of the META Skills in Academic Writing

To see if there is any correlation among participants' META skills, their group writing performance was compared according to the level of exposure to META. The summarised results shown in Figure 4 indicate that for the pre- and post-testWs, 4 out of 8 correlations were statistically significant and were greater or equal to $r(40) = .314^*$, $p < .05$ and $r(40) = .313^*$, $p < .05$, two-tailed respectively. There was no correlation between participants' writing mechanics and use of evidence skills respectively, $r = .293$, $p = .060$ and $r = .234$, $p = .136$. However, their writing mechanics had a positive correlation with their thesis/claim delivery in the pre-testW, $r = .580^{**}$, $p = .000$, while there was no correlation in the post-testW, $r = .234$, $p = .061$. Also, positive correlations were found between their writing mechanics and use of analysis in both testWs, $r = .237^*$, $p = .034$ and $r = .535^{**}$, $p = .000$.

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
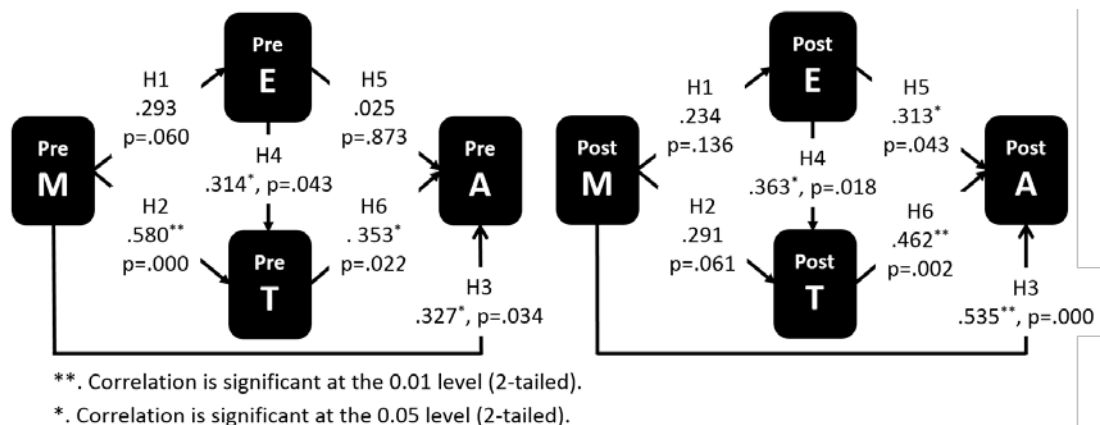*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Figure 4. Summary of META correlations (pre- and post-tests)

In both pre- and post-testWs, participants' knowledge on the good use of evidence were positively correlated with the progress of thesis/claim statement writing and their literary analysis. With one exception in the pre-testW, no significant correlation between evidence use and analysis was observed in the first writing, $r = .025$, $p = .873$. This might be because participants did not realise that effective use of textual evidence is vital to an analysis essay. Thus, a regression analysis was conducted to predict to what degree the participants' literary analysis skills are based on their evidence supports and thesis/claim delivery after the META treatment. Table 2 shows that when evidence supports and thesis/claim delivery are used as predictors, the R-value between literary analysis skills and evidence supports and also between literary analysis skills and thesis/claim delivery is .943.

The significant regression equation was found ($F(2, 5)= 20.175$, $p=.004$), with an $R^2=.890$. That is, participants' analytical skills were positively influenced by their use of evidence and thesis/claim delivery. Both evidence supports and thesis/claim delivery account for 89% of the variation in literary analysis skills. Precisely, participants' predicted literary analysis score from their uses of evidence and analysis predictors is equal to .193 +.114 (E) + .750 (A) when their evidence use and thesis/claim delivery are marked one point from the META rubrics.

Table 2a. Regression statistics on use of evidence and thesis/claim to critical analysis skills: model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
					Change Statistics				
1	.943[a]	.890	.846	.360	.890	20.175	2	5	.004

Notes:
Predictors: (Constant), Post **T**hesis/Claim (T), Post Use of **E**vidence (E)
Dependent Variable: Post Use of **A**nalysis (A)

Table 2b. Regression statistics on use of evidence and thesis/claim to critical analysis skills: coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	SD Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	.193	.530		.364	.731	-1.170	1.556
	PostE	.114	.297	.110	.382	.718	-.650	.878
	PostT	.750	.255	.847	2.947	.032	.096	1.404

Note: Dependent Variable: Use of **A**nalysis (A)

These results show that the participants' evidence use and thesis/claim delivery are the influential writing factors for literary essays. Participants' writing mechanics would not lead to good analytical skills; however, with the good use of evidence and strong thesis/claim, they are likely to get progress un their analytical performance. As participants developed their writing skills, they are also likely to change their perspectives for peer review with META. This can further explain why participants' review results were significantly different between pre- and post-testGs.

Writing Performance Improvement
Participants' academic writing performance improvement was expected after the META treatment. The mean scores on META were tested by the simple linear regression analysis to see how well the time of study predicts the META performance. META (expressed in points scored) was the dependent variable that was to be estimated from the independent variable, study time (expressed in weeks). As shown in Figure 5, the participants' META scores ranged from 1 to 4 points in 18 weeks. Their group writing was measured every other week. Nine observations were made from their average scores to see how their META skills developed correspondingly. The regression lines were determined: M, $y = 0.117x + 1.833$, where X is the study time in weeks, and Y is the M score in points, so as to E, $y = 0.125$ (study time) $+ 1.972$; T, $y = 0.167$ (study time) $+ 1.111$; and A, $y = 0.142$ (study time) $+ 1.250$.

The study time explained a significant proportion of the variances in the writing mechanics, $R = .904$, $F(1, 7) = 31.182$, $p = .001$; use of evidence, $R = .822$, $F(1, 7) = 14.538$, $p = .007$; thesis/claim delivery, $R = .939$, $F(1, 7) = 52.500$, $p = .000$; and literary analysis, $R = .896$, $F(1, 7) = 28.493$, $p = .001$ (see Figure 5).

On the basis of the data, the predictor had a significant correlation with each predicted factor. Participants' academic writing skills positively improved after a period of study time with the META rubrics. Respectively, significant regression equations on the META rubrics were found with $R^2 = .82$, $R^2 = .68$, $R^2 = .88$ and $R^2 = .80$, which means participants' academic writing potential growth order is thesis/claim delivery, writing mechanics, analytical presentation and, lastly, use of evidence. That is to say, participants made most progress in thesis/claim delivery and then writing mechanics. This confirms the hypotheses that the participants' literary essay writing skills have been improved by, and their knowledge on academic writing is correlated with the META-led agenda.
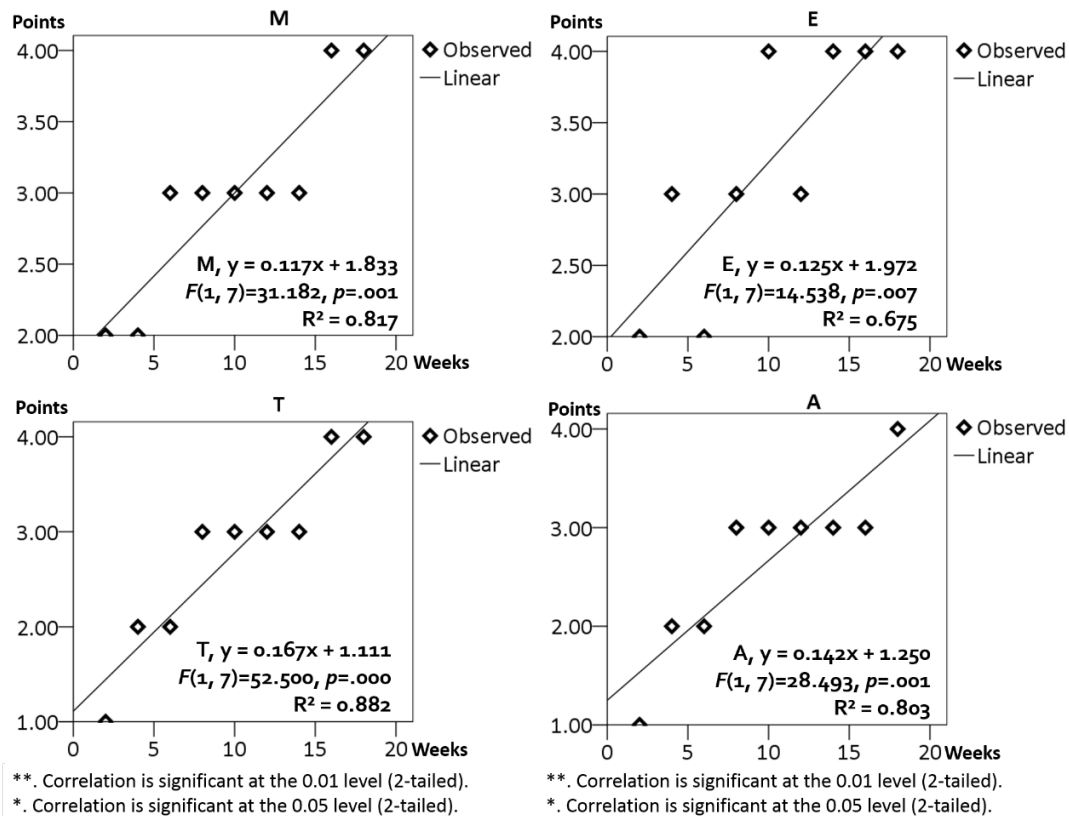
Figure 5. META regressions

Discussion

The focus in this research is on student orientation to META progress and interpretation of writing tasks, through conceptualisation of a distinction between surface, strategic and deep approaches to academic writing. This META-led agenda experiment clearly presents participants' learning objectives and includes specific assessment tasks that writers and reviewers should complete during the session. META allows participants to spot weaknesses in their assigned writing tasks and offers them strategies to avoid and fix their shortcomings. Academic writing skills in a literature domain is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The use of META enables participants to highlight the value of the claim presented in their writing tasks and to express their attitude towards it.

META helps the participants stay on task during the writing and reviewing session. Thus, by employing META stances, participants efficiently interact with their readers and were able to present themselves as competent writers. From the peer reviewer point of view, a dominant feature of academic writing is the requirement to switch META practices from one category to another, to deploy a repertoire of academic writing practices appropriate to assigned tasks, and to handle the literary meanings and analysis that each evokes. This instructional approach to academic writing takes account of the contextual component of META, and this in turn has important implications for an understanding of student learning which involves adapting to academic ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge.

However, raising participants' awareness of conveying their analytical arguments in various ways is also crucial. Since academic writing is more than presenting a collection of facts, it also presents writer's views and manners (Hyland, 2005). Therefore, in-class

writing and review tasks with META were important for participants in this research, as they established a diverse and valuable resource for the construction of convincing arguments and the expression of appropriate stance. These skills not only pave the way for further studies in the use of instructional stances but also offer some constructive implications for teaching EAP/ESP.

Conclusion

According to Lea and Street (1998), academic literacy practices, constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study. The investigation reported in this paper represents an initial attempt to discern how instructional rubrics applied in an EFL literature programme contribute to the growth of the participants' academic writing skills. Essay writing poses a considerable challenge to most EFL students. Academic literacy researchers such as Lillis, Harrington, Lea, and Mitchell (2015) point out that students in higher education programmes certainly bring with them prior experience or practices of constructing knowledge, which may contrast with the literacy practices in their academia. Thus, proper support to help learners work at all stages of the academic skills is important.

There are two important conclusions from this research. First, participants lack a set of analytical skills that can be dealt with practically with designed scaffolds in a literary class. Second, participants see the importance of developing their own identity as readers rather than simply acquiring the skills to become academic writers. Both are difficult issues which occur in in this context and beyond and for which META may eventually provide a conceptual framework for guiding students to overcome these difficulties.

About the author

Dr. Ai Chun Yen is an associate professor at the National Dong Hwa University in Taiwan. Her primary research interests in recent years have been centred around content area literacy, especially analysing how readers respond to texts; and pre-service teacher education in language arts, particularly, working with pre-service teachers to investigate the STEAM project and the successful conditions for its implementation.

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