Common Problems in the Preparation of Non-Prose Form Presentations among Freshmen English for Communication Students

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Abstract

In the advent of technology, visual literacy is no longer exclusive to the ability to read texts or prose, but now, it also requires the effective reading of non-prose forms (graphs, charts, tables, and others). Hence, the creation of non-prose forms has become an essential skill due to the need for more efficient and more precise presentation of ideas. Specifically in the course English for Communication (ENGLCOM) students training to become future professionals are expected to prepare non-prose forms that convey condense information based on elaborate texts. Again, with the onslaught of technology, it can be noted that students have now changed their ways of preparing non-prose forms in their academic output. This study thus investigates the common difficulties students encounter in the process of translating complex prose materials to non-prose forms such as insufficient knowledge of the conventions of non-prose, poor comprehension of texts, low technological competence, and other problems. Recommendations for further improvement in the teaching of non-prose forms are extracted from identified student weaknesses.

Introduction

Communication is a fundamental aspect of the existence of every human. As society progresses, communication becomes more sophisticated. Technology plays an important role to this development and sophistication. Today, people do not just communicate through words and actions but also through photographs, illustrations, diagrams and the like. Our culture is increasingly being "represented and perceived in visual terms" (Feldman, 1977) and our mode of communication progressively being dominated by the same conditions. In fact, with the innovations in computer technology, communication has witnessed and utilized the growing mergence of text, images, and even audio and video elements in the meaning making process (Royce, 2002). Kress (2000) posits that this trend that privileges the visual has seriously revolutionized our "landscape of communication" so much so that almost all published textbooks exhibit two modes of communication: language as writing and image (p. 337).

Recognizing the increasing importance of the visual images has then prompted researchers to acknowledge the need for a heightened and expanded form of visual literacy. Feldman (1976) insists that "understanding visual images has become an *essential skill* [emphasis added] even for those who can read and write well in the language of words" (pp. 199-200) and visual literacy which extends to the Non-Prose Forms (NPFs) can no longer be considered as a mere replacement of conventional literacy which is only limited to prose forms. Emme (2001) further argues "21st century critical thinkers in teaching and research need to be opened [sic] to visual communication as a significant aspect of academic and educational work" (p. 57). Researchers in the field of arts, media, and popular culture have echoed the same sentiment and have even strongly "advocated a university curriculum that facilitates student competency in 'reading' visual images, including graphs, photographs, video, maps, and visual models" (Luke, 2003 as cited in Thomas, Place, & Hillyard, 2008).

The clamor to adjust to the visual trend is further intensified by studies that have been conducted exploring how learners and teachers employ visual literacy and how this has maximized their learning experience: Emme (2001) investigated the use of visuals in activist art education and connected this to

the promotion of the students' critical thinking skills; Kress (2000) and Royce (2002) contextualized the multimodalities in science textbooks; and researchers Place, Thomas, & Hillyard have published a two-part paper studying how visual images are used in the classroom setting to promote students' skills (Winter, 2008) as well as enhance the social context for learning (Spring, 2008). The favorable results of these studies towards the significance of visual literacy, not just within the academic setting but much more so in real life, strengthen the advocacy to train people to "see" more clearly and critically.

This insistence helps counteract the unfortunate reality observed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996 as cited in Royce, 2002) that there is still a "staggering inability on all our parts to talk and think in any serious way about what is actually communicated by means of images and visual design" (p.16). Moreover, the firm resolve to promote visual literacy in higher education addresses and assails the prevailing misconception that "language is paradigmatic for meaning and that images simply entertain or illustrate, providing a respite from serious academic work… useful only in scaffolding early literacy development, but not valuable as a tool for adolescent and adult learning" (Thomas, Place, & Hillyard, 2008, pp. 23-24).

Images and diagrams are Non-Prose Forms (NPFs) that can further enhance the writer's creative skills as NPFs enrich the meaning of any prose writing. Likewise, this can develop the readers' cognitive skills by creating a nexus of ideas between the text and the image. Suffice to say, NPFs can be a medium to enhance the holistic learning and presentation of every individual.

De La Salle University-Manila, as an esteemed tertiary institution in the Philippines, likewise recognizes the importance of honing its students' visual literacy, realizing the need for its graduates to not only read NPFs later on in their respective professions, but to actively create them as well. Hence, the basic course English for Communication (ENGLCOM) devotes one whole week (4 sessions / 6 hours) solely for the instruction and application of NPFs.

The current study aims to move one step further: to investigate the participants' visual literacy in not just perceiving a visual stimulus, but requiring them to translate it into another non-prose form that fits a specific prompt. It is as Royce (2002) has asserted: "making sense of (and constructing texts) requires the ability to understand the combined potential of various modes of making meaning" (p.

192). And as Kress (2000) has asserted, the work of the text maker (or as in this case the creator of NPFs) is transformative and is a reliable indicator of a person's visual literacy. On the basis thereof, this study hopes to answer the following research questions:

1. How efficient are the students in interpreting and creating NPFs?
2. What are the common difficulties students encounter in translating complex prose material to NPFs?
3. What are the implications of these results to the teaching of NPFs and the creation of NPFs?

Methodology

Materials

This study based its key lecture on the textbook (*Critical Thinking Through Reading and Writing*, Chapter 3: The Non-Prose Forms) used in the course. One of the Tables from "Beyond Stereotypes: Rebuilding the Foundation of Beauty Beliefs (Findings of the 2005 Dove Global Study) Commissioned by Dove, a Unilever Beauty Brand" was used as the prompt for the activity. Lastly, this research likewise used the non-prose interpretations of the prompt done by the students.

Instruments

The researchers established the criteria for evaluating the non-prose interpretations done by the students by identifying problem areas distinct in the preparation of NPFs: Understanding the Prompt, Interpreting the Data, Manipulating the Data, Deciding on the Right NPF and Manipulating the Software. These Problem Areas were, in turn, rated according to the following: Excellent, Average and Poor.

The researchers also created a short survey form examining the aspects of the task that the students found easy and difficult. This self-evaluation serves as an assessment of how students perceive their own performance.

Participants

The participants were first year college students from eight English 1 (ENGLCOM) classes in De La Salle University-Manila. Each class had an average of 20 students each and had a mix of male and female students from different colleges.

Procedure

1. As part of the topics for discussion in the ENGLCOM subject, a lecture based on the textbook used in the course (Critical Thinking Through Reading and Writing, Chapter 3: The Non-Prose Forms) about the use of and how to interpret NPF was given by the teachers.
2. An assignment using the prompt was given to the students with the instruction to interpret and to illustrate the prompt using an appropriate NPF through the use of a software.
3. Upon submission of their works, the students were asked to fill-out a survey form exploring the aspects of the tasks they found easy and difficult.
4. The NPF assignments were sorted, discarding as not valid the manually done NPF illustrations.
5. The valid NPF illustrations were sorted and categorized based on criteria as:
   a. Excellent when it used appropriate NPF, included complete and accurate data, summarized data and addressed the prompt.
   b. Average when it used appropriate NPF but failed to summarize the data, and showed insufficient knowledge of NPF conventions
   c. Poor when it misinterpreted the prompt, used inappropriate NPF, and showed poor knowledge of NPF conventions.
6. The frequency count of results fitting into each category was tallied and its percentage computed.
7. The areas of difficulties were noted and tallied.
8. The self-reported areas of ease and difficulty were also counted.

Results and Discussion

Although strict instructions were given to the students for the preparation of their NPFs, many students still failed to comply with the requirement of using the computer to create their assignments. Hence, only 145 papers were deemed acceptable for study. These papers were then sorted according to the quality of the NPF created.

A. The Students' Efficiency in Interepreting and Creating NPFs

Table 1. *Ranking of Students According to the Quality of their Non-Prose Forms*

Ranking	*f*
Excellent	12 (8%)
Average	94 (65%)
Poor	39 (27%)
T	*145*

Table 1 summarizes the three classifications of the students according to the quality of their NPFs. As can be seen above, the Excellent group barely even reached 10% of the total number of participants, while the Poor group is more than twice the number of the excellent group. This result is quite alarming because despite the week-long teaching and practice tasks, very few exhibited the expected proper output: using the appropriate non-prose form; including complete and accurate data; summarizing the data; and addressing the prompt. Furthermore, the Poor group misinterpreted the prompt, used inappropriate non-prose form, and displayed poor knowledge of the NPFs conventions. Overall, the proficiency of the students in translating data into appropriate and comprehensible NPFs is clearly insufficient, thus needing further assistance.

B. The Students' Common Difficulties Encountered in Translating Prose to NPFs

In order to provide this much needed guidance, the specific weaknesses were determined. The study reveals the following:

Table 2. *Common Difficulties of the Students in Producing Non-Prose Forms*

Common Difficulties	*f*
Understanding the prompt	159 (43%)
Manipulating the software	118 (32%)
Deciding on the appropriate non-prose forms	42 (11%)
Knowledge of the non-prose forms conventions	34 (9%)
Interpreting the data	19 (5%)
Manipulating the data	2 (1%)
Total Responses	*374*

Table 2 presents the common difficulties that students encounter in producing NPFs. As shown, the most dominant problem among the students is the understanding of the prompt garnering almost 50% of the total number of times the listed difficulties occurred. The majority of the cases failed to summarize the data asked in the prompt. The prompt only asks for the activities avoided by *Asian* women when they feel badly about their looks. However, most still included non-Asian countries and/or separately presented the three Asian countries, thus revealing the lack of understanding of the prompt given.

Another salient area of difficulty is the apparent lack of skill in manipulating the software (Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Word, SAS, Paint, and others). This fact is manifested in a lot of outputs showing handwritten variables and 2-page presentations. These two indicators are what students resorted to most likely because of unfamiliarity with the technical aspects of the software: (1.) they did not know how to input certain essential variables; and/or (2.) they are not aware of how to condense the data into a one-page non-prose form. Interestingly, the students may know the conventions of a non-prose form like the necessary variable to include as well as the placement (thus their handwriting attempts), but it is the lack of skill in the use of the technology that hinders them from executing the task properly and presenting the appropriate output.

Table 3. *Self-Reported Competencies and Difficulties of the Students*

Aspects of the Task	Easy	Difficult
Understanding the prompt	*63%	19%
Interpreting the data	*70%	22%
Manipulating the data	40%	35%
Deciding on the right non-prose form	49%	45%
Manipulating the software	*59%	30%
Phrasing labels and titles	57%	20%

Table 3 displays the perceived levels of ease and difficulty of the students in accomplishing the different aspects of the assigned non-prose form task. It can be quickly noted that they generally find the task easy (with the Easy column consistently garnering higher percentages than the difficult column in all aspects of the task). Surprisingly, the top two areas of difficulty the researchers noted earlier are apparently part of the top three easiest aspects of the tasks according to the students' self-evaluations: more than half of the total participants considered both understanding the prompt and manipulating the software as "easy." This result is quite troubling for it reveals the students' baseless/misguided confidence on in their own skill in creating NPFs.

C. Implications of the Study

Visual literacy transcends mere comprehension of conventional prose but requires the keen perception of non-prose texts (Feldman, 1976). Failure to acquire this literacy may cripple them as a communicator in a world increasingly dominated by visuals (e.g. tables, charts, maps, graphs, exhibits, and other forms). The different fields of specialization such as business, engineering, information system, liberal arts and others require both prose and NPFs in the creation and negotiation of meanings (Royce, 2002). Hence, it will be highly challenging to function as credible professionals if they cannot perceive nor construct clear and comprehensible NPFs.

In consideration of the foregoing, this study clearly reveals the need to enhance the instruction of NPFs in order to ensure that students would truly develop their visual literacy. The non-prose form instruction must be accompanied by basic technological instruction since this study reveals that even if the students have been exposed to the NPF conventions, without proper knowledge of the software and the functions of its features, they may not be able to produce the appropriate and complete NPFs. In relation to that, varied activities are also suggested in order to immerse the students with the visual literacy they need to acquire.

Conclusion

As communication is getting more complicated, it is vital that education stakeholders find ways and strategies to make it simple yet precise. This paper highlights the importance of visual literary in line with interpreting and creating NPFs and data commentaries. Based on the results, there is a need to enhance the instruction of NPFs to further develop students' visual literacy. Further, NPF instruction must be accompanied by basic technological instruction. Imperatively, should students' visual literacy remain stagnant, they may fail to function as credible professionals in the future.

Reference list is subject access request.