

# Scaffolding an intervention for essay writing

**A B S T R A C T** This article reports on a series of language activities which were implemented to improve first-year students' writing skills in a South African university. These activities focus on writing skills in literature courses, with specific emphasis on organising and supporting an argument. They were specifically designed on the basis of observations in tutorial lectures and test responses, as well as the principles of constructivism and OBE (outcomes-based education). This article will discuss the design of these activities as well as students' written responses. Based on this explorative analysis, the article aims to suggest areas for future research.

**Keywords:** scaffolding, constructivism, essay writing, tutorials

## 1. Introduction and research aims

This article reports on the design, implementation and evaluation of three language activities, which aim to improve first-year students' ability to organise and support an argument in literary essays (on poetry, prose and drama). These activities were based on observations in first-year literature courses, especially tutorial lectures, during which students were able to make insightful verbal comments on the literature under study, but failed to do so effectively in written assignments and tests (written between 2007 and 2008).

The research is justified by the fact that written activities, as a method of formal assessment, require students not only to demonstrate the knowledge/skills they have acquired, but to organise this information according to academic criteria. Thus, the demonstration of content-related knowledge/skills and the ability to organise it in an academic fashion may be viewed as concurrent competencies. It is, therefore, imperative that students develop these skills in order to progress to second- and third-year level. Three language activities were designed to achieve this goal in tutorial lectures. The article will discuss their design and implementation, as well as their efficiency, on the basis of a pretest-posttest analysis of students' essay writing skills.

The article will begin by reviewing the influence of OBE's assessment procedures on the design of the activities. Then, the New Academic Tutorial Programme (NATP) will be discussed, as

it served as the context in which the research was conducted. Thereafter, the procedures of each activity will be reviewed. Finally, students' written responses to these activities will be discussed, by reference to a pre- and post-test. It should be noted that although these activities can be adapted to any first-year literature course the examples cited in this article will focus on poetry.

## **2. Theoretical and contextual background**

### *2.1 Assessment in Outcomes-Based Education (OBE)*

This section will discuss the assessment principles of OBE, as they exerted a strong influence of the design of the activities.

Firstly, assessment in OBE 'should be directed at achieving definite learning outcomes' (Jacobs, 2004:60). Secondly, when directing learning experiences toward these outcomes, the following principles should be borne in mind: 1) all students can succeed – albeit not necessarily with the same strategies and 2) educational institutions play a crucial role in creating environments which are conducive to effective learning (Du Toit & Du Toit, 2004:4). With regard to the first point, the language activities discussed in this article were based on the following specific outcomes:

- Specific objectives: to acquaint students with the prescribed poems and texts  
to improve ability in reading critically and with comprehension  
to improve ability in writing clearly and methodically
- General objectives: to broaden students' awareness of the role of language  
to foster awareness of social and cultural issues (cf. Brooks & Lovisa, 2008:3)

With regard to the second point, students were only required to complete the activities after the instructions had been clarified in class. Furthermore, social interaction was used as a pedagogic tool to enhance students' learning experiences in a safe environment (discussed in section 2.2). Finally, learners' development was supported with a series of 'embedded support devices' (Lo & Shu, 2005: 47), which are discussed in section 4.1.

### *2.2 The New Academic Tutorial Programme*

This initiative was launched in 2007 by the University of the Free State's Department of Student Training and Development in order to improve students' academic performance. It aims to provide a context in which students can master specific outcomes outside the confines of traditional classrooms. More specifically, it is designed to provide a place for students to express and address specific concerns, especially through social interaction (cf. Maor, 2005; Hellermann, 2005; Smith, 2006). For this purpose, classes are subdivided into groups of between fifteen and twenty-five, and assigned to one tutor.

The tutor functions as a specially trained facilitator who designs class activities and guides discussions in a flexible manner that still allows for the achievement of specific outcomes. As such, the programme is built on recommendations for a more flexible classroom discourse – as advocated by Mehan (1985), and White and Lightbown (1984). For this reason, the less flexible I-R-E (initiation-reply-evaluation) sequences, identified by Mehan (1985), are avoided.

For example, although the tutor still produces an 'initiation act', followed by a student's 'reply' – the opportunity to 'evaluate' is left to other students. Practically, therefore, instead of affirming or rejecting the 'reply act', the tutor encourages fellow students to 'reply' and/or 'evaluate', thus facilitating group discussions. However, when appropriate, the tutor is also able to guide interactions more directly – especially for assessment purposes (in which case I-R-Es are sometimes useful – cf. Macbeth, 2003).

Furthermore, the NATP's instructional methods are significantly influenced by three, interrelated, educational perspectives. Firstly, the programme is influenced by the communicative approach. Since this approach includes 'a bewildering array of ideas and approaches – some of them contradictory – all marshalled under the communicative banner' (Richards & Skelton, 1989:233) a degree of clarification is required. In the NATP, students are frequently provided with opportunities to partake in discussions which mimic natural/authentic conversations (cf. Belchamber, 2007; Qing-xue & Jin-fang, 2007). This is done by structuring activities that allow students to select the topic of discussion (albeit sometimes within the limits of a demarcated set of alternatives), as well as the next speaker. During these discussions, students are encouraged to express a variety of speech acts (making statements, asking questions, providing advice), although a degree of emphasis is placed on the development of rhetorical skills, such as the ability to express and support an argument. Students are also encouraged to foster a sense of community, by interacting in small groups (Maor, 2005; Jacobs, 2004; Hellermann, 2005; Smith, 2006; Killen, 2000).

Secondly, the NATP is firmly situated in a constructivist approach, as articulated by Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, Bruner and Neisser (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). This approach is considered as particularly advantageous to the development of students' ability to 1) negotiate meanings and achieve learning outcomes through social interaction in 2) flexible and friendly environments (Castle & Rogers, 1993). However, since educators may be confused by the dizzying variety of definitions of constructivism (Brokensha, 2007; Philips, 1995), a narrower demarcation of its principles is required. The principles employed in the NATP are succinctly summarised by Smith and Ragan (1999:15):

Knowledge is constructed from experience

Learning results from personal interpretation of knowledge

Learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience

Learning is collaborative with meaning negotiated from multiple perspectives

Finally, the NATP is situated in OBE. Therefore, it is 'learner-centred' and 'future-oriented' (Van der Horst & McDonald, 1997:13). This implies that although teacher authority remains an irrevocable characteristic of education (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001; Pace & Hemmings, 2007), classroom activities can and should be designed to involve the student actively (Van der Horst & McDonald; 1997; Geyser 2000). It also implies that education should develop skills which enable students to become responsible citizens, who are able to play active roles in the country's economy (Jacobs, 2004).

### *2.3 Prior learning*

It is important to mention that all the students who attended classes with this researcher/facilitator (including poetry, drama and prose) had already completed a course which included essay writing, amongst other skills. Therefore, it is assumed that the basic characteristics of an essay (the nature of an introduction, paragraph and conclusion) are already known to the students. The exercises outlined below are mainly focused on providing students with an opportunity to apply basic knowledge, in a systematic and increasingly autonomous manner. Specific emphasis is placed on the ability to organise content-knowledge (as obtained from formal and tutorial lectures) according to the criteria of an academic essay.

## **3. Methodology**

The intervention discussed in this article was divided into three language activities and are labelled – for the sake of convenience – as the ‘email’, ‘bullets’, and ‘complete essay’ activities (discussed in section 4).

In order to test the effectiveness of these activities, a simple pretest and post-test was conducted. Thus, before the language activities were implemented, students were required to write an academic essay, which was compared with an essay written in response to the last activity. This essay was then analysed to see whether the student had organised and supported his/her argument as they were encouraged to do during the previous steps.

Furthermore, after the completion of each activity, students’ responses were analysed qualitatively in order to see whether a systematic development of skills was achieved. Thus, the emails were analysed in order to see whether students expressed personal opinions. The bullets were analysed to see whether students were able to relate certain literary devices to the topic of an essay question. And finally, the students’ essays were analysed according to the criteria for academic writing.

Clearly, however, this study is limited, since it lacks statistical support for the efficiency of these activities. Statistical analyses were avoided owing to an unsatisfactory sample size (fifteen students for poetry, ten for drama and only five for prose). Moreover, since tutorial lectures are not compulsory, few students completed all three activities. For this reason, the article is mainly explorative in nature, and aims to suggest areas for future research.

## **4. Activities**

### *4.1 Scaffolds*

This section discusses the pedagogic scaffolds which were used to support students while completing the language activities.

The term ‘scaffolding’ refers to pedagogic strategies which are used to systematically develop a student’s skills. Practically, the educator assists the development of new skills/competencies, by exposing the student to increasingly demanding tasks. Thus, one learning activity serves as a stepping stone to the next. More importantly, as the tasks become more demanding, the student’s autonomy increases until he/she has mastered the knowledge/skills, and can apply them without aid (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976 - cited in Love, 2002; cf. also McCrown, Driscoll

& Roop, 1996:45). This collaborative process is aimed at optimising the student's development in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987:86 - which refers to the difference between unaided learning, and support from a knowledgeable partner).

The intervention programme discussed in this article is based on five successive scaffolds. They are partly based on Bruton's 2005 observation: 'novice writers develop partly on the basis of models and plans, but also from individual initiative, experimentation and feedback').

Scaffold 1: the first scaffold may be referred to as an embedded support device or ESD (Lo & Shu, 2005:47). ESDs include 'glossaries, sample learner responses, questions, illustrations and information about test formats' (Brokensha, 2007:76). In this case, the most important ESD is a sample learner response – in the form of an academic essay on poetry.

Scaffold 2: students express opinions about a selected poem, without the constraints of formal writing.

Scaffold 3: students summarise an answer to an essay question in bullet-form.

This should allow students to organise the information more coherently when writing the formal essay. As such, this scaffold may be viewed as a form of mind-mapping. In addition, it aims to encourage students to relate clearly information cited in an essay to the essay's topic.

Scaffold 4: students are provided with a second sample answer (another ESD).

This sample only includes an introduction and one paragraph. It aims to provide students with a guideline for transferring the information summarised in 'bullet form' into a complete academic essay. As such, scaffolds 3 and 5 represent what Allen (1987:18-19) calls 'rhetorical transformation'.

Scaffold 5: students construct an academic essay in response to an essay-type question. This activity is completed individually, and aims to develop students' ability to write an essay independently.

These scaffolds were organised into three activities. Students were required to complete them over three weeks. Additional ESDs included: 1) 'providing learners with the assessment rubrics' (Brokensha, 2007:76), 2) using social interaction during class discussions, 3) providing feedback on each activity, 4) opportunities for self-assessment, and 5) the following websites, which contain tips on essay writing:

<http://www.jcu.edu.au/studying/services/studyskills/essay/>

<http://www.trinity.wa.edu.au/plduffyrc/library/study/study/htm>

Self-assessment was included because it may enhance students' sense of their academic progress and their responsibility for continued progress. Moreover, it also encourages critical self-reflection (Marnewick & Rouhani, 2000:284-285).

As mentioned earlier, these activities concentrate on developing the ability to organise and support an argument. This focus is based on observations in the classroom, students' responses to tests and assignments, as well as the essay students were required to write before the implementation

of these activities. Sample 1, below, illustrates the observation that while students are able to cite evidence from the poem, they often fail to make it relevant to the essay question.

Sample 1 (essay response aimed at discussing the theme of William Blake's *London*; grammatical errors have been retained):

'In the last stanza we are introduce to a person who curse life. Not her life but the life she is cursing is her infant. The reason she is cursing her child must be because she is a prostitute. And for her to have a child will demand her time.'

While accurate in terms of content, this discussion does not link the reference to a prostitute to the theme of William Blake's poem.

#### 4.2 First sample answer

Providing students with a sample essay might enhance their writing skills by illustrating the practical application of academic criteria. As such, sample essays may provide a useful resource for students when they are required to construct an essay independently (cf. Brokensha, 2007; Sullivan, 2002). More specifically, the sample essay should be chosen for the clarity with which it reflects the use of certain discourse markers (such as linking adverbials) and other linguistic devices which are used to organise the information and argument of an essay.

During this intervention, students were provided with one essay and asked to read it at home. Later on, a second sample was provided as a guideline for the transformation of information from a summarised form to an essay form. Thus, it was hoped that reading the sample answers would activate the students' 'pre-knowledge' of academic essays (Kilfoil & Van der Walt, 1997:171).

#### 4.3 Email activity

Before requiring students to write critical responses to essay-type questions, students should be motivated to express their opinions about the literature under study. Communicative Task-based Instruction (CTBI) recommends that this be done by encouraging open-ended and creative expressions, in a manner that emulates natural/authentic communication (Bruton, 2005). This is also consistent with the assessment procedures of OBE (Jacobs, 2004). The following activity aims to allow for this kind of authentic expression by emulating a form of electronic communication that all the students are familiar with, and that they might be required to use in future occupations. With regard to the second point email was also chosen since, according to Conttia (2007:39), autonomous learning is enhanced when students believe that they are developing skills which may be used in future occupations.

Instructions: (individually) select one of the following poems: 'Neutral Tones', 'We Sat by the Window' or 'Drummer Hodge' by Thomas Hardy. Then complete the following activity:

Write/type an email to a friend who is working/living overseas and has never read poetry (no more than 1500 words). Imagine that you are trying to explain why you either like or dislike the poem you have chosen. Be very specific on all the points that you like or dislike. Explain carefully both the strengths and weaknesses of the poem. Remember that your friend has never read poetry and will require a little help to understand things such as 'literary devices', etc.

It is imperative for the educator to remind students that the main objective of this activity is to encourage the expression of authentic opinions – in a manner that is not constrained by formal writing. Students should, therefore, be motivated to express themselves in whatever way they

deem fit. In this vein, the use of vernacular should be tolerated, or even encouraged. This includes abbreviations such as ‘b4’ (before), ‘ur’ (your), or ‘lol’ (laugh out loud) and emoticons, such as ‘☺’.

In this study, students were only required to complete this activity after all three poems (*Neutral Tones, We Sat by the Window and Drummer Hodge*) had been discussed in formal and tutorial classes. Educators may provide students with as wide a selection as they deem appropriate. Whatever the case, it is essential that students have some degree of choice – especially since formal assessment also confronts them with similar choices.

No assessment rubrics are included for this activity. Instead, formal assessment of grammatical accuracy and content-knowledge is postponed to subsequent activities. The main objective is to encourage authentic expression – in a manner that might alert students to the functional difference between written discourse to a friend and written discourse in the context of an academic course.

#### 4.4 Bullets activity

Once students have completed ‘emails’ on the poem of their choice, they may proceed to the following activity. Note that unlike the previous activity, this one allows for formal assessment. Therefore, it is accompanied by suggested learning outcomes and assessment rubrics.

Learning outcomes: at the end of this activity, students should be able to summarise an answer to an essay question in bullet form.

Essay question: In a well-ordered response of no more than 1 500 words, carefully explain 1) the theme of the poem you have chosen, 2) as well as the role of diction, and 3) images in communicating that theme.

Instructions: DO NOT WRITE AN ESSAY. Summarise the main points of your answering essay in bullet form. There should be a bullet for every piece of evidence that you cite from the poem to support your argument. Then, in brackets next to each bullet, carefully explain your reasons for choosing this piece of information. You will be assessed on the basis of this motivation. For example:

If you have chosen ‘Neutral Tones’:

- The image of a winter day. (This image reinforces the theme by conveying a cold atmosphere.)

If you have chosen ‘We Sat by the Window’:

- The word ‘witless’. (This word reinforces the theme by conveying a sense of uselessness.)

If you have chosen ‘Drummer Hodge’:

- The word ‘throw’. (This word tells us that Drummer Hodge was simply dumped into his grave. This reinforces the theme of the futility of war.)

REMEMBER: you must have at least six bullets (at least three for diction and three for images), but you may have more.

Assessment rubric:

Dimension: poor	Scale	Dimension: excellent
Inclusion of all points: student did not include six bullets	1 2 3 4 5 6	Student included six bullets
Relevance: motivation for bullets is not relevant to the essay question	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Motivation for bullets is relevant to essay question
Levels of the question: the student's bullets do not address images and diction	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Student's bullets include information on both images and diction

The aim of this activity is to provide students with a framework which will serve to order their thoughts, in preparation for an academic essay. More importantly, students are alerted to the importance of citing evidence from the poem to support their arguments, and to explain the contribution of literary devices to the implicit messages/themes of poetry. Thus, students are allowed to simultaneously develop their mastery over theoretical knowledge, as well as the ability to report opinions/arguments according to the criteria of academic essays.

Once the students have received feedback on their bullets, they should be allowed to compare and discuss these in groups. If an educator feels that there is too little time to allow for these discussions, students should be encouraged to do this at home. However, as noted by Bruton (2005): 'novice writers develop partly on the basis of models and [...] feedback'. Feedback from and collaborative interaction with peers might, therefore, enhance critical essay writing.

In addition, this exercise provides a diagnostic opportunity. An analysis of the essays written before the implementation of these exercises suggests that while students are able to cite evidence from a poem to support their arguments, they fail to link these citations to the essay question. In this regard, an analysis of students' motivations for selecting a specific image, word or phrase, may provide the educator with an opportunity to focus their attention on this issue.

Finally, the educator must decide whether the first week should be dedicated to the 'emails' alone, or whether students should be required to finish both the 'emails' and 'bullets' in one week. In this study, an entire week was allocated to each activity. This was done in order to allow students enough time to express personal opinions. However, when questioned about this issue in class, the students indicated that the alternative should not detract from the authenticity of the 'email' activity.

#### 4.5 Second sample answer

While the researcher/educator prepared feedback on the 'bullets' activity, students were provided with the sample answer cited below. First they were required to discuss it in small groups –during the class in which the 'bullets' activity was submitted – with specific emphasis on the manner in which the argument is organised. These collaborative, small-group discussions were aimed at enhancing students' development by creating a situation that requires them to integrate different perspectives and opinions (Killen, 2000; cf. White & Lightbown, 1984; Smith, 2006; Hellerman, 2005). Thereafter, students were asked to peruse the sample at home, with specific emphasis on the manner in which it can inform the subsequent activity.

Essay question: Sylvia Plath's poem *Crossing the Water* has a very dark and ominous tone – to the extent that it may even refer to suicide. Discuss the way in which this tone is conveyed in the poem.

Sylvia Plath's poem *Crossing the Water* conveys a sense of foreboding and apprehension. This essay will discuss the way in which this tone is conveyed in the poem. The role of specific words will be discussed first, followed by the poem's images. And finally, the poem's structure will be inspected.

Individual words play an important role in communicating the dark, melancholic tone of the poem. This paragraph will discuss the use of words in the poem. In the first line, the word 'black' is repeated three times. This repetition highlights the sombre emotions of the speaker. The last line of the first stanza also contains the word 'shadows'. Here the speaker describes the shadows of trees, large enough to cover Canada. This reinforces the morose atmosphere of the poem, by suggesting that the speaker has been living in shadows. In the second stanza, the phrase 'dark advice' continues to reinforce the tone established in the



first stanza. In fact, ‘dark advice’ might refer to the idea of committing suicide. It seems possible that the water flowers are inviting the speaker to join them in the water. Therefore, it seems that they are suggesting that she drown herself. In the third stanza, this sombre tone is conveyed by the words ‘Cold’, ‘blackness’ and ‘valedictory’. The last of these, refers to a formal farewell. The speaker is, therefore, suggesting that she is about to leave. It seems possible that she is contemplating suicide, and intends to leave life behind.

#### 4.6 Introduction and complete essay activities

Once the above-mentioned scaffolds have been completed, students may be asked to complete an essay-type response to the essay question used in the ‘bullets’ activity. If deemed necessary, the educator may ask students to complete the introduction to their essays in groups. This allows for a final diagnostic activity, which might enable the educator to determine whether or not students are sufficiently prepared for the final activity.

Learning outcomes: at the end of this activity, students should be able to write an academic essay.

Essay question: In a well-ordered response of no more than 1 500 words, carefully explain 1) the theme of the poem you have chosen, 2) as well as the role of diction, and 3) images in communicating that theme.

Assessment rubric:

Dimension [Poor]	Scale	Dimension [Excellent]
Coherence: Incoherent, disconnected, fragmentary	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 [student’s actual mark has been excluded]	Coherent, integrated, holistic response
Cohesion: Sentential and paragraph inconsistency	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Sentential and paragraph consistency and balance
Aspects of assignment dealt with superficially	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Aspects of assignment dealt with in detail
Inaccuracies of grammar mar communication	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Accuracy and style superb
Mindless application of theoretical knowledge	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Creative and technically appealing application

Once this activity has been completed, the educator can provide students with individual performance-enhancing feedback. In addition, specific strengths and weaknesses can be identified. Based on these findings, the educator may return to the ‘bullets’ exercise, or similar strategies for summarising/organising student responses.

Finally, as mentioned in section 4.1, students should also have the opportunity to assess their own work, in order to encourage critical thinking and reflection. Toward this end, a self-evaluation test such as the following may be used (based on Marneweck & Rouhani, 2000:285):

**Self-assessment:**

Introduction:

- My introduction contains background information on the essay question: /10
- My introduction clearly states what my essay is about: /10
- My introduction clearly describes the way I will approach the topic: /10

**Paragraphs:**

- My paragraphs all start with topic-sentences that clearly state what the paragraph is about? /10
- Each paragraph’s argument is described coherently (is it logical)? /10

Together, the paragraphs form a logical whole (they form part of a logical argument)	/10
I have cited evidence from the poem/play/novel to support my argument(s)?	/10
<b>Conclusion:</b>	
My conclusion summarises the main argument of the essay.	/10
<b>Total:</b>	/80
I gave myself this mark because:	
When I analyse my essay, I like:	
When I look at my work, I am proud of:	
I think I can improve my essay by:	

In the intervention, students were presented with this assessment form during the class in which the final essay was submitted.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Email activity

As indicated in the sample cited below, students were willing to express personal opinions about the poem they have selected. Most of these comments were focused on thematic issues. Although literary devices were rarely mentioned in detail, the amount of personal information included in these emails indicates the degree to which students interacted with the material. In some cases, however, students combined personal information with interpretations of poetic devices such as images.

#### Sample 2:

'People have a way of putting two things together in their heads even if only one is mentioned, for instance when I say 'rain' you might think 'pancakes' (like most men would! lol!) or you might think of sadness or something else. [...] In *Neutral Tones*, the setting he describes was exactly the way I felt in my heart. [...] This poem tells about a conversation between presumably a man and a woman who broke up. Enter: my personal story!'

### 5.2 Bullets activity

An analysis of students' responses to the 'bullets' activity indicated that their ability to 1) identify examples of certain poetic devices, and 2) to connect these examples with the topic of the essay question, was systematically improved.

#### Sample 3:

'Image of eyes that rove (Reinforces the feeling of shame due to the pain, wants to forget what happened but can't.) [...]  
Image of God-curst sun (Reinforces the feeling of loss, being alone and deceived by those we trust.) [...]  
The words 'that winter day' (a specific day he can never forget, reinforces the pain they experienced and can now never forget.)'

In addition, this activity fulfilled a diagnostic role, since students could be alerted to specific areas which required attention. For example, when the motivations provided next to the bullet failed to express the students' thoughts with sufficient clarity, this fact was noted in the form of performance-enhancing feedback.

### 5.3 Complete essay

With regard to the last activity, the findings are ambiguous. While some students demonstrated

the ability to integrate discourse markers and citations from the poem – in order to organise their arguments – others repeated the same mistakes.

Sample 4 demonstrates the progress some students were able to make.

Sample 4 (essay response to *Neutral Tones* – grammatical errors have been retained):

'[Introduction] In this essay I will attempt to discuss the theme of the poem, 'Neutral Tones', by firstly referring to the influence of diction, which will then be followed by the images portrayed in the poem.' [...]

'[Third paragraph] The use of specific words are very important in portraying the dismal and indifferent tone of this poem [...] 'Firstly, the title: 'Neutral Tones'. The word 'neutral' immediately gives us an idea of the poets' indifference to this relationship and his former partner. 'Chidden' and 'starving sod' make the reader realise that the poet feels as though he has been personally punished and feels dead inside, because of the failed relationship.'

Despite stylistic inappropriateness, this student has demonstrated the ability to organise the main argument of a paragraph, and to link it with the essay question, as discussed in the introduction. Citations from the poem are also employed as evidence for the argument, by discussing the contribution of literary devices to the theme. These achievements are particularly important in the case of this student, as he was repeating the course.

As stated earlier, however, other students repeated the errors made during the first essay. Furthermore, this analysis was also hampered by the fact that some students failed to complete all three activities. For this reason statistical analyses were not conducted. Owing to the tentative and mainly explorative nature of the research, future studies may include a larger sample, as well as statistical analyses, in order to quantify students' improvement between the pre- and post-test.

## 6. Conclusion

This article aimed to suggest a series of language activities which 1) integrate the assessment principles of OBE with constructivist scaffolding, 2) in an attempt to improve students' ability to organise and support an argument in literary essays. Toward this end, an authentic communicative context was designed, in order to motivate and stimulate students' critical thinking. Thereafter, the process of essay writing was scaffolded by encouraging students to answer an essay question in a summarised format (aimed specifically at organising content-knowledge), before attempting to construct a complete academic essay.

While some students made significant progress, others repeated the errors which marred their first responses. This ambiguity may, however, be explained by the sample size, as well as the fact that some students did not complete all three activities (attendance is not compulsory for tutorial lectures). Nevertheless, the language activities discussed in this article may provide guidelines for the design of future intervention programmes in the context of tutorial lectures. The results also suggest that they may be used for diagnostic purposes and performance-enhancing feedback.

In brief, OBE requires educators to be sensitive to students' needs, and to respond effectively and creatively (Allen, 1987; Jacobs, 2004; Geyser, 2000; Killen, 2000; McCrown, Driscoll, & Roop, 1996). Although tentative and in need of quantification, the findings of this article suggest that constructivist scaffolding may provide educators with practical guidelines for creative and flexible interventions, as well as a means of providing students with performance-enhancing feedback that can alert them to specific errors.

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