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## Impact of source texts and prompts on students' genre uptake

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## ABSTRACT

Argumentative writing is a vital but challenging genre for university students, particularly second language writers. While much is known about different factors that make it challenging, in this paper, we focus on an underexplored factor: the intertextual relationship between source texts, prompts, and student writing. We analyze student writing in a first-year history class at a branch campus of an American university in the Middle East, and more specifically, how source texts and writing prompts condition whether students produce the expected argument genre. We draw from two perspectives on genre: Rhetorical Genre Studies, with its focus on the highly contextualized nature of writing, provides a useful lens through which to view intertextuality; Systemic Functional Linguistics, with its explicit focus on language, provides tools for studying writing development in school genres. Results suggest that source texts that do not contain an explicit argument and prompts that ask for students' opinion may facilitate students' uptake of argument. The study has pedagogical implications for improving alignment between an instructor's goals and expectations, assignment design, and the writing students produce.

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## 1. Introduction

Learning to write arguments is a crucial part of students' induction into university-level work (Wu & Allison, 2005) and writing argumentatively is "one of the greatest challenges many English language learners (ELLs) are likely to face" (Hirvela, 2013, p. 67). This is in part because L2 university writers may still be in the process of "learning the valued genres of academic communication" (Tardy, 2009, p. 4). Thus, even when these students are expected to produce arguments, they do not always meet this expectation. This gap between the instructor's expectation and the writing that students produce may stem from varied and overlapping factors, including lack of academic preparation (Allison, 2009; Harklau, 1994, 2001; Hirvela, 2013), organization of ideas (Coffin & Hewings, 2004), balancing authoritative voice with inclusion of multiple perspectives (Coffin & Hewings, 2004; Miller, Mitchell, & Pessoa, 2014), and justifying claims with appropriate evidence (Silva, 1993). In this paper, we focus on an underexplored factor: the intertextual relationship between source texts, prompts, and student writing. We analyze student writing in response to source texts and prompts in a first-year history class at a branch campus of an American university in the Middle East. Our analysis demonstrates how source texts and writing prompts condition whether students produce the expected argument genre.

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In higher education, students often write from source texts and in response to prompts (Hirvela & Du, 2013; Horowitz, 1989). The relationships among a source text, prompt, and student writing can be thought of as a type of intertextuality, or the relationship between two or more texts. Because university-level writing involves not only putting forth one's own ideas, but representing those ideas in relation to prior discourse in discipline-specific ways, intertextuality is an important aspect of academic writing (Tardy, 2009). Research on intertextuality between source texts and L2 writing has mostly focused on textual borrowing, plagiarism, and summary writing (e.g., Pecorari, 2003), with limited focus on how features of source texts influence student writing, particularly argumentative writing. Research on intertextuality between writing prompts and L2 writing has mostly focused on the context of standardized assessment (e.g., Horowitz, 1986, 1989), with limited focus on classroom contexts. Very little attention has been paid to the interplay between source texts, writing prompts, and student writing.

To study how source texts and prompts condition student writing, we draw from two perspectives on genre that have seldom been combined: Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS; Freedman & Medway, 1994) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL; Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). RGS, with its focus on the highly contextualized nature of writing, provides a useful lens through which to view intertextuality. Specifically, we use Freedman's (1994, 2002) notion of *uptake*—how one genre invokes another genre in response—to consider how source texts may influence the genre students produce (i.e., their uptake). We also draw on Bawarshi's (2003) application of uptake to the conditions that writing prompts create for student texts. We extend this work on uptake into an L2 setting, while also adding detailed linguistic analysis of the genres students produce.

For this analysis, we draw on SFL because of its explicit focus on language and the tools it provides for studying writing development in school genres. From an SFL perspective, genre is a “staged, goal-oriented, social process” (Martin, 1992, p. 505). We use Coffin's (2006) typology and linguistic descriptions of history genres to closely analyze student writing. Although SFL approaches to genre have been widely applied in the study of history writing, this has primarily been at the elementary and secondary school levels (e.g., Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Llinares & Pascual Peña, 2015; Martin, 1992; Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteiza, 2004), not in university settings.

In the next section, we discuss prior research on intertextuality between source texts and student writing, and between prompts and student writing. Then we describe in more detail how we draw on the RGS and SFL perspectives on genre. Finally, we introduce school history genres, with a focus on the Argument genre.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Intertextuality, source texts, and prompts

University students in many disciplines are frequently expected to write arguments from source texts (Davis, 2013; Hirvela & Du, 2013; Horowitz, 1989; Keck, 2006, 2014; Shaw & Pecorari, 2013). Writing from source texts can be challenging as it requires students to engage in “complex reading and writing activities and make contextualized decisions as they interact with the reading materials and the assigned writing tasks” (Hirvela & Du, 2013, p. 87). Much of the literature on intertextuality between source texts and student writing has focused on textual borrowing and plagiarism (see, e.g., Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006; Keck, 2010; Pecorari, 2003; Plakans & Gebriel, 2013; Shi, 2012; Weigle & Parker, 2012; Wette, 2010). However, fewer studies have looked at how specific aspects of the source text affect student writing. Keck (2014) showed that expository texts, more than narrative texts, tend to generate greater textual borrowing among both L1 and L2 students, resulting in more texts that mirror the sequence of ideas in the source text. Yu (2009) found that a number of aspects of source texts—including macro-organization, frequency of unfamiliar words, topic familiarity, and length of source texts—affected students' ability to summarize the source text.

Another form of intertextuality common in higher education is writing in response to prompts. Much of the research on prompts has considered their role in language tests (e.g., Hamp-Lyons & Mathias, 1994; Hinkel, 2002; Horowitz, 1986, 1989; Kobrin, Deng, & Shaw, 2011; Kroll & Reid, 1994), with less attention to the use of prompts in classroom writing assignments or how they affect student writing (Oliver, 1995; Reid & Kroll, 1995). Oliver (1995) found that the quality of student writing is affected by the types and amount of rhetorical specification of topic, purpose, and audience in the prompts. Studies focusing on task complexity have suggested that more complex prompts may encourage students to write more effectively by, for example, producing more accurate writing (e.g., Kobrin et al., 2011; Kuiken & Vedder, 2008; Ong & Zhang, 2010).

Specifically addressing the use of prompts in history classes is the work of Coffin (2006) and Llinares and Pascual Peña (2015). According to Coffin (2006), “Unless a writing task/exam question is formulated in clear, unambiguous terms and/or supported with supplementary guidance and support, students may produce a genre that is not the ‘target’ genre expected by a teacher” (p. 169). Consequently, it is important that teachers deconstruct the goals of the task with the students, are consistent in the wording of the prompt, and make it explicit “that different genres are given greater weight and value in different contexts” (p. 169). Llinares and Pascual Peña (2015) investigated use of oral prompts in history classes and found that the types of questions teachers ask can affect the genres students produce in classroom discussions.

### 2.2. RGS and SFL approaches to genre

To study how source texts and writing prompts condition student writing, we draw from two perspectives on genre: RGS and SFL. The RGS approach views genre as social action (Miller, 1994) and focuses on socio-rhetorical aspects of genre such as

discourse community, audience expectation, rhetorical situation, and intertextuality. Within this approach, writing is viewed as highly complex and contextualized, with a wide range of factors that influence the final product, many of which are invisible to students and instructors alike. Among these are intertextual factors, or influences from other texts (Johns, 2011).

Following an RGS perspective, the intertextuality between source texts, prompts, and student writing could be considered using [Freadman's \(1994, 2002\)](#) concept of uptake, or the ways that genres elicit other genres in response. [Freadman \(2002\)](#) argues that genres create socio-rhetorical conditions for other genres to take up in response, such as a jury's finding creating the conditions that a judge's sentencing takes up. The relationships between genres are not always one-to-one, however, and there could be a range of possible uptakes in response to a text, which [Bawarshi \(2008, p. 81\)](#) describes as a text's "uptake profile." According to [Freadman \(2002\)](#), some texts are designed to elicit certain kinds of uptakes, and some uptakes may be more valued or expected than others. In university-level writing, source texts may create conditions for certain ranges of uptakes and different source texts may have wider or narrower uptake profiles. Part of the task for student writers, then, is to become aware of how to select an appropriate genre in response to another genre. However, the need for this awareness is often invisible to both students and instructors and may result in a lack of explicit instruction, leading to uptake profiles that are wider than instructors expect.

The concept of uptake has also been applied to the relationship between prompts and student writing. Building on [Freadman \(2002\)](#), [Bawarshi and Reiff \(2010\)](#) argue that "the assignment prompt creates the conditions for the student essay" (p. 86), inviting students to take up specific positions in their writing. Although prompts may provide room for alternative positions, student uptakes of prompts that differ from the desired uptake are often seen as failures ([Pelkowski, 1998](#), cited in [Bawarshi, 2003](#)).

While still emphasizing the social dimension of genre, SFL investigates how language is used to make meaning to achieve the goals of a genre. Although variation between contexts is acknowledged, the SFL perspective contends that "within that variation, [there are] relatively stable underlying patterns of 'shapes' that organize texts so that they are culturally and socially functional" ([Feez, 2002](#), p. 53), and thus genre instruction focuses on making language and language choices explicit and scaffolding students' production of increasingly complex genres ([Martin & Rose, 2008](#)). SFL's explicit focus on language provides tools for the detailed analysis of school genres. Researchers who use SFL have taken these tools into classrooms, enabling teachers to make the language of academic writing explicit for students, and resulting in writing improvement, particularly for L2 writers (e.g., [Brisk, 2014](#); [Dreyfus, Humphrey, Mahboob, & Martin, 2015](#)).

### 2.3. School history genres

Genres of school history writing have been studied extensively from an SFL perspective. These studies have identified a number of distinct history genres and their linguistic features. [Coffin \(2006\)](#) describes these genres along a sequence of development ([Table 1](#)). Students initially learn to write chronologically organized, story-like Recording genres, such as Autobiographical and Biographical Recounts (which retell a person's life), Historical Recounts (which retell events in chronological order), and Historical Accounts (which explain the reason for a specific chronology). Students then move toward Explaining genres, which are organized by cause-and-effect relationships. Later, students progress toward writing more abstract Arguing genres, which incorporate complex interrelationships among ideas, evaluations of information and perspectives, and attention to the possibility of multiple interpretations of a historical event.

The transition to writing Arguing genres is difficult for many students ([Martin, Maton, & Matruggio, 2010](#)). Students must select and evaluate facts, and interpret, generalize, and transform these facts to create meaning ([Eggins, Wignell, & Martin, 1993](#)). Although expert writers of historical arguments skillfully perform this knowledge transformation (i.e., "integrating content as interpreted evidence for an argument"), novice writers tend to engage more in knowledge telling (i.e., "listing... document content as discrete information bits") without abstraction and evaluation ([McCarthy Young & Leinhardt, 1998](#), p. 25). Given the difficulty of transitioning to Arguing genres for all students, but particularly L2 writers, studying the factors that may influence argumentative writing is important.

**Table 1**  
School history genres.

Genre family	Genres
Recording genres	1. Autobiographical Recount 2. Biographical Recount 3. Historical Recount 4. Historical Account
Explaining genres	5. Factorial Explanation 6. Consequential Explanation
Arguing genres	7. Exposition 8. Challenge 9. Discussion

Note: Based on [Coffin \(2006\)](#).

## 2.4. The present study

In our study, we draw on [Freadman's \(1994, 2002\)](#) and [Bawarshi's \(2003, 2008; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010\)](#) descriptions of uptake for understanding intertextual relationships of source texts and prompts with student writing. We combine this theoretical framework with the linguistic descriptions of history genres from the SFL perspective (e.g., [Coffin, 2006; Schleppegrell, 2004](#)). Although RGS and SFL are usually thought of as distinct and separate perspectives (however, see [Aull, 2015](#), for another example of combining RGS and a linguistic perspective on genre), combining these perspectives was useful in our study. The explicit attention to intertextuality in RGS offers important insights in the study of genre, while the explicit linguistic descriptions of history genres in SFL are especially useful for the study of L2 writing (and for L2 writers and writing teachers) and offer systematic tools for analysis and classification of genres.

Our study also extends the previous work on the use of source texts and prompts by investigating how source texts and prompts, both individually and in combination, influence students' genre uptake in a classroom setting. Our research questions were:

- 1) How does variation across source texts affect students' uptake of the intended Argument genre?
- 2) How does variation across prompt wordings affect students' uptake of the intended Argument genre?
- 3) How does the combination of source text and prompt affect students' uptake of the intended Argument genre?

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Data source and context

In the present study,<sup>1</sup> we draw on data from a required first-year undergraduate world history course at a branch campus of an English-medium university in the Middle East that largely follows the curriculum of the main campus in the United States. The course, titled Introduction to World History, was a one-semester overview of major historical milestones from ancient Babylon to modern-day globalization. The data were collected as part of a larger study of academic writing at the university.

The 70 students enrolled in the course came from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, with the majority from the greater Middle East. The average TOEFL iBT score was 97 (equivalent to above C1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference; [Educational Testing Service, 2015](#)), indicating that students were generally proficient users of English.

Assignments in the course, all designed by the history professor,<sup>2</sup> included reading and discussing academic and historical texts, and writing six short (1–3 page) argumentative essays about the texts. Eleven readings were assigned, ranging from five to 25 pages in length, and students could choose any six to write about. In each essay, students selected a prompt, choosing from among three to five options, typically based on a single source text.

To supplement our analysis of student writing, we draw on assignment descriptions, grading rubrics, and ongoing conversations with the professor.<sup>3</sup> A substantial proportion (30%) of the grading rubric was dedicated to "Argument," specifying that essays should have a clear thesis statement supported by relevant evidence from the source text, and that there should be "clear relevance of the argument to the question asked." The rubric also emphasized that students should be sensitive to biases and limitations in the sources, suggesting that the professor valued interpretative work beyond reporting the content of the source text. Although he expected argumentative writing, argument was not taught as a genre in this course.

### 3.2. Text analysis

The motivation for this analysis emerged during a separate project (see [Miller et al., 2014](#)), in which we noticed that although the history professor expected students to produce arguments, many students did not. Because of this perceived gap between the professor's expectations and students' genre uptake, we conducted a systematic analysis of the genres that students produced, following [Coffin's \(2006\)](#) typology of history genres and the conditions created by two source texts and the corresponding prompts.

<sup>1</sup> All study procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board. All participants gave informed consent.

<sup>2</sup> Although two history professors teach at this campus, this course is consistently taught by the same professor, who is originally from the United States., has English as his first language, and received his Ph.D. in history in the United States. He has extensive undergraduate teaching experience and had taught at this university for five years.

<sup>3</sup> As a part of the larger study from which we draw these data, we interviewed the professor and 30 students multiple times. Due to space constraints, we do not report on specific interview findings, since our main focus is on the analysis of student writing. Nonetheless, our analysis is informed by our interview data.

**Table 2**  
Descriptions of genre categories found in the student writing.

Genre	Social purpose	Stages	Key language features
Historical Account	To account for why events happened in a particular sequence	1. Background 2. Account sequence 3. (Deduction)	Temporal organization; language of cause-and-effect; presents events as agentive in bringing about subsequent events
Explanation	To explain the reasons/factors that contribute to a particular outcome	1. Outcome/Input (multi-part macro-Theme) 2. Factors/Consequences 3. (Restatement of factors/consequences)	“Text time” rather than temporal organization; orders causes and consequences with numeratives and connectives; construes significance of events through evaluative lexis and clause structures; presents causes and consequences as facts via non-modalized verbs
	To explain the effects/consequences of a situation		
Descriptive Report	To organize and describe the attributes, properties, behaviors, etc. of a single class of object	1. Topic (multi-part macro-Theme) 2. Attributes, properties, behaviors, etc. 3. (Restatement of attributes, properties, behavior, etc.)	Taxonomical organization; presents descriptions and generalizations as facts via non-modalized verbs
Argument (Exposition)	To put forward a point of view or argument	1. (Background) 2. Thesis 3. Arguments 4. (Counter-arguments) 5. (Concession) 6. Reinforcement of thesis	Logical organization; evaluates and comments on historical information, supported by evidence; holds interpretations of history as tentative (not factual) that have to be argued for; aligns reader to the position advanced in the thesis via interpersonal resources

Note: Adapted from Coffin (2006), Schleppegrell (2004), and Veel (1997). Genre stages in parentheses are optional.

### 3.2.1. Coding for genre

The 83 essays analyzed include writing from 70 students (13 wrote about both source texts). All three authors independently coded the genre of each essay, and discussed differences until reaching agreement. Based on our data, we modified Coffin’s (2006) typology of history genres by incorporating the Report genre<sup>4</sup> (Veel, 1997). To code for genre, we focused on the essays’ global structure (genre stages), purpose, and key language features (Coffin, 2006; Schleppegrell, 2004). These features are described in Table 2.

Historical Accounts are essays that “explain why events occurred while maintaining the ‘what’ of history in the form of a timeline” (Coffin, 2006, p. 58). In our data, Accounts typically began by summarizing previous historical events (Background), and then presenting an account of events as they unfolded over time (Account sequence). Thus, their global organization was chronological, often manifested through time encoded in marked Themes (i.e., the beginning of a clause: Before the . . . , During the . . . , After the . . .).

Explanations use cause-and-effect relations, not time, as the organizing principle. Students’ Explanations were typically organized by a macro-Theme—the opening generalization in a text that serves to predict the text’s overall development (Martin, 1992)—that had multiple parts, such as, “Disease affected culture in India, China, and Egypt.” Students followed the macro-Theme with body paragraphs that elaborated multiple, simultaneous causes (in the case of Factorial Explanations) or effects (Consequential Explanations), each of which corresponded to a part of the macro-Theme. As Coffin explains, these causes and effects are “presented as categorical, objective ‘facts’ rather than a set of propositions that have to be argued for” (p. 71) (e.g., *one important effect is . . . vs. this effect is important because . . .*).

Following Veel (1997), Descriptive Reports were essays that were structured by a taxonomy reflecting the social purpose of “describ[ing] the attributes [or] properties. . . of a single class of object” (p. 172). These essays had paragraphs united under individual common sub-classes of the taxonomy that did not support an overarching argument in the macro-Theme. As with Explanations, the macro-Theme often had multiple parts, with body paragraphs corresponding to each part. For example, one Descriptive Report had a macro-Theme of “By looking at the Hammurabi Code we can conclude many important points and facts which tell us about Babylon’s political system, social structure, and economy,” followed by three body paragraphs describing each of these, without an over-arching argument that they supported.

<sup>4</sup> Coffin found the Report genre in student history writing but did not include it in her genre typology for school history writing because it was “not pivotal in fulfilling the aims of the secondary history curriculum” (Coffin, 2000, p. 86).

Essays were coded as Arguments if they had a central thesis that made a claim in the macro-Theme and a majority of body paragraphs were consistent with and supported this claim. A key distinction between non-argumentative and argumentative history genres has to do with whether the writer acknowledges multiple perspectives on the topic through the use of interpersonal language. To analyze these linguistic resources, we used [Martin and White's \(2005\)](#) Appraisal framework, particularly the resources of ENGAGEMENT. In non-argumentative genres, the focus is on providing “relatively categorical explanations of historical phenomena” ([Coffin, 2006](#), p. 77) with linguistic resources that present information as factual. When writers present information as factual, relying on bare assertions or presuppositions, they are expressing no room for alternative points of view and projecting complete agreement onto the reader. These are termed *monoglossic* (single-voiced) propositions and are typically realized via non-modalized verbs (e.g., the simple present tense). In argumentative genres, on the other hand, writers “hold interpretations of history as tentative” ([Coffin, 2006](#), p. 76), using *heteroglossic* (multi-voiced) propositions to acknowledge multiple perspectives, evaluate information, and guide the reader toward accepting their perspective. They do so using resources such as modality, concede and countering moves, explicit reference to other voices, and moves that comment on discourse to help align the reader to the writer's perspective ([Martin & White, 2005](#); [Miller et al., 2014](#)).

### 3.2.2. Prompts

We analyzed the prompts' wording to determine the genre each seemed to create conditions for. We based our analysis on [Linares and Pascual Peña's \(2015\)](#) application of [Dalton-Puffer's \(2007\)](#) classification of academic questions to history classrooms. [Linares and Pascual Peña \(2015\)](#) analyzed the history genres (also using [Coffin, 2006](#)) that students produced in oral responses to teachers' questions for facts (objective happenings), explanation (how something happened or elaboration of facts), reasons (reasons or causes why something happened), and opinions (personal opinion about a fact). They found that questions for facts (e.g., *What happened...?*) and reasons (*Why...?*) were the most common to trigger Historical Accounts and Explanations, whereas questions for opinions (*Do you think...?*) were the most common to trigger Argument.

### 3.2.3. Source texts

We focused on student responses to two source texts. The first consisted of excerpts from Hammurabi's Code, laws devised by the Babylonian king [Hammurabi circa 1754 B.C.](#) Hammurabi's Code is a numbered list of laws and associated punishments for breaking the laws (e.g., “205. If the slave of a freed man strike the body of a freed man, his ear shall be cut off”; codes ranged in length from 10 to 90 words each). As such, there is no overarching claim that is made and supported throughout the text. Furthermore, there is no sequence of events; instead, each particular law presents isolated cause-and-effect relationships.

The second source text was a slightly abridged excerpt from the third chapter of historian [William H. McNeill's \(1976\)](#) book, *Plagues and Peoples*. The chapter is a macro genre<sup>5</sup> describing relationships between humankind and disease. McNeill argues for his interpretation of events by drawing on multiple primary and secondary sources and evaluating their validity. For example, in the following passage, McNeill justifies his interpretation that the existence of parasites prevented Chinese expansion:

All these assertions remain uncomfortably abstract and *a priori*. As in the case of the Middle East, there is little hope of discovering from ancient texts exactly what the humanly dangerous parasites may have been. Still, ancient writers often betray keen awareness of the disease risks in the South. Thus, Ssu-ma Ch'ien, the founder of Chinese historiography, who lived from about 145 to 87 B.C., tells us [...] This is authoritative testimony, for Ssu-ma Ch'ien made a personal tour. ... (1976, pp. 104–105)

Here McNeill evaluates historical sources, conceding that they are not completely indisputable (“All these assertions remain uncomfortably abstract and *a priori*”), but then countering with claims about their reliability (“Still, ancient writers often betray keen awareness of the disease risks in the South”). McNeill makes use of interpersonal resources to persuade the reader to adopt his historical assessment based on his explicit reasoning, including his evaluation of available information. Thus, this brief excerpt is indicative of the substantial differences between this text and Hammurabi's Code, which contained no such explicit argumentative features.

In our preliminary analysis, we noticed that the differences between these two texts may have affected students' uptake. In addition to these differences, the selection of Hammurabi's Code was useful as the first reading of the semester—providing insight into what students could produce with limited university instruction—in contrast to the McNeill text, the fourth reading in the semester.

## 4. Results

While the professor's expected uptake for each essay was Argument, we found that the prompts and source texts had wider uptake profiles, with students producing several non-Argument genres. We found that not all of the prompts created conditions to be taken up as Arguments, and that one of the source texts facilitated Argument uptake while the other did not.

<sup>5</sup> [Martin \(1992\)](#) distinguishes between *elemental* genres and *macro-genres*. Elemental genres are ones like those found in [Table 1](#), and macro-genres are typically longer texts comprising multiple elemental genres. Despite this complexity, macro-genres may be characterized by an overarching purpose.

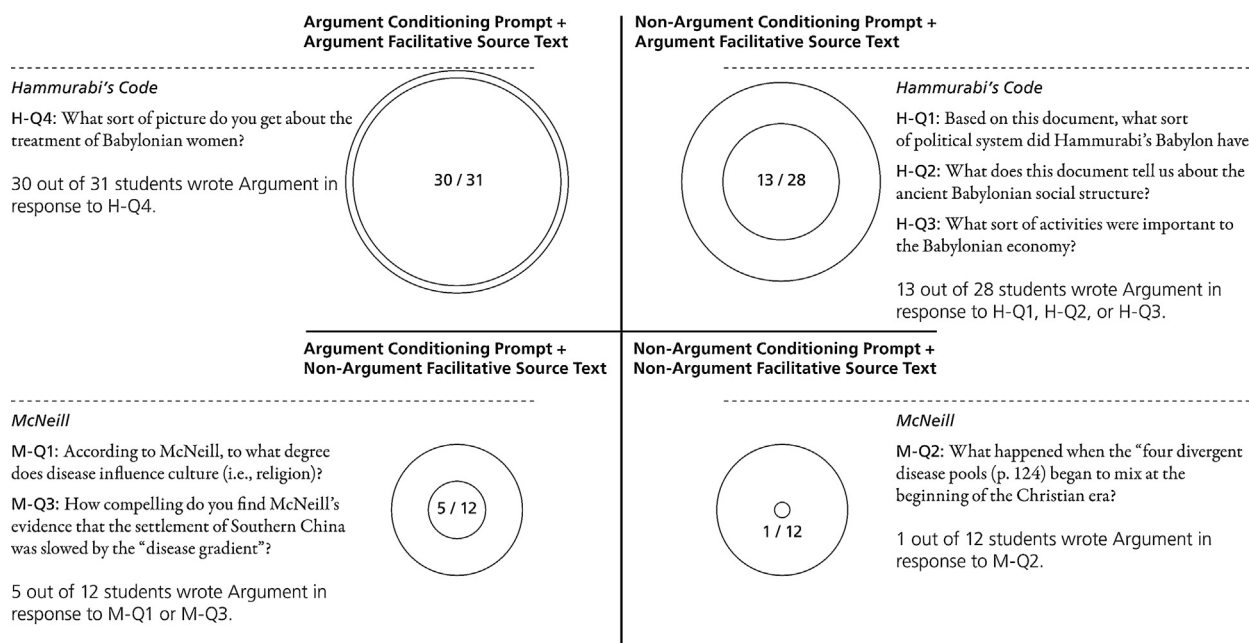


Fig. 1. Overview of findings.

Following Dalton-Puffer (2007) and Llinares and Pascual Peña (2015), we analyzed the language of each of the prompts and found that three were questions for opinion, while four were questions for facts or explanations. Out of 43 essays written in response to questions for opinions, most (35, or 81.4%) were Arguments, so we termed these Argument Conditioning Prompts. Of the 40 essays written in response to questions for facts or explanations, only 14 (35.0%) were Arguments, so we termed these Non-Argument Conditioning Prompts.

We found that Hammurabi's Code resulted in a much higher proportion of Arguments (43 out of 59, or 72.9%) than the McNeill text (six out of 24, or 25%). Thus, we termed Hammurabi's Code an Argument Facilitative Source Text and McNeill a Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text.

Our analysis revealed four combinations of prompt and source text that conditioned students' uptakes (Fig. 1): (1) Argument Conditioning Prompt + Argument Facilitative Source Text; (2) Non-Argument Conditioning Prompt + Argument Facilitative Source Text; (3) Argument Conditioning Prompt + Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text; and (4) Non-Argument Conditioning Prompt + Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text. An Argument Conditioning Prompt combined with the Argument Facilitative Source Text resulted in 30 out of 31 essays (96.8%) being Arguments. The Non-Argument Conditioning Prompts, when combined with the Argument Facilitative Source Text, resulted in 13 out of 28 essays (46.4%) being Arguments. On the other hand, the Argument Conditioning Prompts, when combined with the Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text, resulted in five out of 12 essays (41.7%) being Arguments. The Non-Argument Conditioning Prompts, when combined with the Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text, resulted in only 1 out of 12 essays (8.3%) being an Argument.

In the following sections, we illustrate these findings with analysis of representative examples of student uptakes for each combination.

#### 4.1. Argument Conditioning Prompt + Argument Facilitative Source Text

H-Q4, because it directly addresses the student ("do you get"), is a question for opinion (Dalton-Puffer, 2007), the type Llinares and Pascual Peña (2015) found most likely to result in Argument. Similarly, in our study, 30 of the 31 students who responded to this prompt produced Arguments, and we categorized H-Q4 as an Argument Conditioning Prompt (Table 3).

This result suggests that the conditions created by this prompt and the Hammurabi source text were extremely favorable to Argument. Not only were the students responding to an Argument Conditioning Prompt, they were doing so in response to Hammurabi's Code, which is a list of laws. While the Code includes laws that outline provisions, expectations, and punishments that are particular to women, it never makes any overt evaluative statement about the treatment of women. Thus, to effectively answer the prompt, students needed to interpret the meaning of the laws and make claims about what they indicated about the status of women. The lack of an explicit argument in the source text appears to have facilitated interpretation and analysis, given that the majority of the students used the laws to support their own claims.

The 30 students who wrote Argument followed the stages of Argument, including a thesis in the macro-Theme position, support, and reiteration. The thesis was a central claim based on a subjective interpretation of Hammurabi's laws. Students

**Table 3**  
Genres Produced in response to Hammurabi's Code, Question 4 (H-Q4).

Prompt	Argument	Report	Total
H-Q4: What sort of picture do you get about the treatment of Babylonian women?	30	1	31

**Table 4**  
Genres produced in response to Hammurabi's Code, Questions 1–3 (H-Q1, H-Q2, H-Q3).

Prompt	Argument	Report	Total
H-Q1: Based on this document, what sort of political system did Hammurabi's Babylon have?	4	5	9
H-Q2: What does this document tell us about the ancient Babylonian social structure?	8	9	17
H-Q3: What sort of activities were important to the Babylonian economy?	1	1	2
Total	13	15	28

supported their claims with evidence of laws indicative of that interpretation, and they tied this evidence back to the overarching claim. Most essays supported a claim that Hammurabi's laws were "harsh," "rigid," or "unfair," while a few claimed that they were "fair" (or "rigid, but fair"). For example, one student argued that, "women were considered to be much less important than the men." In a paragraph focused on women receiving different punishment than men for the same crime, the student cited a relevant law as evidence, followed by the assertion that "this demonstrates that the laws were very biased against Babylonian women." Thus, this student made use of ENGAGEMENT (Martin & White, 2005) moves by bringing Hammurabi's voice into the text and guiding the reader toward accepting her perspective with the use of "this demonstrates."

Only one student took up H-Q4 with a Report, which had a multi-part macro-Theme but without an overarching claim. This essay was similar to Reports written in response to other prompts, which we discuss in detail below.

#### 4.2. Non-Argument Conditioning Prompt + Argument Facilitative Source Text

H-Q1, H-Q2, and H-Q3 can be categorized as questions for facts (Dalton-Puffer, 2007), a type Llinares and Pascual Peña (2015) found not well suited to Argument. While the phrasing of H-Q1 ("What sort of") is similar to H-Q4 (discussed above), H-Q1 does not solicit the students' opinion through direct address. In H-Q2, there seems to be a tension between asking for fact ("what does this document tell") and asking for opinion ("tell us"). Although the phrase "tell us" does make the prompt more personal, we find it does not really solicit students' opinions, especially when compared to more direct wordings, such as "What sort of picture do you get about the ancient Babylonian social structure?" Finally, H-Q3 appears to invite the students to produce a list of activities without arguing why they were important. Therefore, we categorized H-Q1, H-Q2, and H-Q3 as Non-Argument Conditioning Prompts (Table 4).

Although they are Non-Argument Conditioning Prompts, they generated a significant number of Argument uptakes. Again we suggest that the features of the source text had some bearing on these results. Hammurabi's Code never makes an explicit argument about the type of political system it represents (H-Q1), the social structure of ancient Babylon (H-Q2), or the activities that were important for the society (H-Q3). The Hammurabi text appears to have conditioned some students to make inferences based on their interpretation of the laws' content, in spite of the prompt, further indicating that Hammurabi's Code is an Argument Facilitative Source Text.

The 13 students who wrote Arguments took up these prompts by making a claim in the macro-Theme and supporting their perspective with evidence from the text, following the stages of Argument. For example, in response to H-Q1, one student proposed that Hammurabi's Code "represented a mix of political systems." Each body paragraph focused on the student's interpretation of a single law as indicative of dictatorship, democracy, or theocracy. The student provided claims and supporting reasoning for his interpretation and concluded that this evidence demonstrated that the Code represented a mix of political systems.

On the other hand, the 15 students who wrote Reports took up these prompts by focusing on descriptions, but without an overarching claim. For example, one student responded with a multi-part macro-Theme suggesting that the political system "applied dictatorship, a rigid system, and communism on [its] people." In other words, the political system was described as having three sub-classes, and each body paragraph corresponded, in order, to one of these (e.g., "First of all, Hammurabi was a dictator. . ."; "Secondly, Hammurabi has a rigid punishment system. . ."; and "Finally, Hammurabi applied communism in his community. . ."), with no effort to tie the paragraphs together as support for an overall characterization of the system to create a unifying argument.

Although these students did not write Arguments, they nonetheless made interpretations and inferences in order to create the labels for the sub-classes (e.g., "a rigid system," "communism") because these labels did not exist in the source text. Furthermore, while the use of interpersonal resources was, on the whole, less frequent and less effective in the Reports,



**Table 5**  
Genres produced in response to McNeill, Questions 1 and 3 (M-Q1, M-Q3).

Prompt	Argument	Explanation	Historical Account	Total
M-Q1: According to McNeill, to what degree does disease influence culture (i.e., religion)?	4	3	0	7
M-Q3: How compelling do you find McNeill's evidence that the settlement of Southern China was slowed by the "disease gradient"?	1	4	0	5
Total	5	7	0	12

some students incorporated ENGAGEMENT moves to integrate and explicate evidence in support of claims about the individual sub-classes ("if we returned to code 23, we can see how he is practicing communism when he forced all the people in his community to pay back the stolen money"). Thus, even in the Reports that lacked the key stages of Argument, the Argument Facilitative Source Text appears to have conditioned uptakes that had some features of argumentative writing and analysis.

#### 4.3. Argument Conditioning Prompt + Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text

While nearly all of the students responded with Argument to the Argument Conditioning Prompt about Hammurabi's Code, the McNeill text resulted in proportionally fewer Argument uptakes when combined with Argument Conditioning Prompts, M-Q1 and M-Q3. Both prompts are framed in terms of degree, a framing Coffin (2006) suggests is favorable for triggering Argument, and M-Q3 has the additional element of direct address ("do you find"), which makes this prompt especially well suited to the uptake of Argument (Llinares & Pascual Peña, 2015). For M-Q1, four students wrote Arguments, and three wrote Consequential Explanations. For M-Q3, only one student wrote Argument, while the other five wrote Factorial Explanations (Table 5).

In the five Arguments in response to M-Q1 and M-Q3, students took up the prompt by making an overarching claim that fully answered the prompt and following the stages of Argument. For example, for M-Q1, students who responded with Argument made an overarching claim about the idea of degree (e.g., "...we can see that diseases have had *some* effect on influencing some regions"), and either forecasted or followed up evidence in body paragraphs with summarizing statements that tied back to the thesis (e.g., disease affected culture "somewhat" or "greatly"). However, three of the five Arguments were underdeveloped versions of this genre, lacking important features of fully developed Arguments. These essays made statements about degree either at the beginning or end of most paragraphs, but with other sentences in the paragraphs written as if they were telling facts or explaining causes and effects factually, and thus more closely resembled the language of an Explanation in significant portions of the essay.

For both prompts, students who wrote Explanations elided some of the prompt wording and turned the prompts into a question for explanation (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). In M-Q1, students who wrote Explanations apparently took up the prompt by answering the question, "how does disease influence culture?", ignoring the idea of degree. In M-Q3, students who wrote Explanations focused on a re-presentation of McNeill's discussion of the consequences of the disease gradient; they did not take up the invitation to evaluate his evidence, but rather wrote about it as if it were factual. Students did not organize Explanations around a central claim, but rather focused on explaining multiple causes and effects. They made little use of interpersonal resources to anticipate and navigate possible resistance from the reader.

For example, in response to M-Q1, one student wrote in her introduction: "The establishment of empires and close knit societies led to the spread of new diseases. ... This in turn led to the diseases' influence on culture such as the spread of Buddhism in India after 500 B.C., the transcendentalism in Indian religions, as well as belief in larger families in Chinese culture." Each body paragraph elaborated one of these effects of disease on culture, foregrounding causal relations, without an argument about degree. Similarly, for M-Q3, although several students included an evaluating claim in the introduction, such as "I feel McNeill is right," or "McNeill gives conclusive evidence," none supported this claim or even referred to it throughout the essay. In these cases, the response to the framing of degree was only nominal.

Thus, in contrast to the Hammurabi text, the McNeill text resulted in a wider uptake profile when combined with Argument Conditioning Prompts; it appears that the conditions created by the source text made it more challenging for students to write Arguments, even with these prompts. The McNeill text is a macro-genre that includes claims supported by evidence from multiple sources. In making his argument, McNeill describes events in chronological time, establishing his interpretation of events and evaluating them. Different from the Hammurabi text, which lacked an explicit argument, the features of the McNeill text facilitate the re-presentation of its content as if it were factual, sometimes in the same order as the source text.

#### 4.4. Non-Argument Conditioning Prompt + Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text

M-Q2 is a question for facts, a type Llinares and Pascual Peña (2015) found most commonly elicited Accounts and Explanations. Our analysis is consistent with these findings, as only one of 12 students wrote an Argument, while six wrote

**Table 6**  
Genres produced in response to McNeill, Question 2 (M-Q2).

Prompt	Argument	Explanation	Historical Account	Total
M-Q2: What happened when the “four divergent disease pools” (p. 124) began to mix at the beginning of the Christian era?	1	6	5	12

Consequential Explanations, and five wrote Historical Accounts. Thus, we categorized M-Q2 as a Non-Argument Conditioning Prompt (Table 6).

In the single Argument, the student went beyond what the prompt asked by evaluating the consequence of the mixing of disease pools in the Thesis stage: “McNeill argues that with areas or regions that have not previously experienced such diseases, the outcome was lethal.” This student made use of many interpersonal resources to position the reader as someone needing to be aligned to the thesis, rather than presenting it as factual information (e.g., “It is *extremely crucial for one to understand* that endemics have evolved. . .”; “*Acknowledging this difference is fundamental* to understanding the effects certain diseases had. . .”). Furthermore, she returned to her thesis as she presented evidence from the text (“McNeill refers to this process as ‘homogenization.’ This would definitely become more devastating”).

The students who wrote Consequential Explanations took up the prompt as an invitation to explain consequences of the mixing of disease pools. One student started off with a seemingly viable claim in the introduction: “He argues that in the beginning of the Christian era the four civilized diseases occur or come into existence and these diseases affect people and cultures and had an influence on certain aspects.” However, the rest of the essay foregrounded causal relations, emphasizing one major consequence and using facts from the source text without much use of interpersonal resources (e.g., “These diseases become ‘epidemic disasters’ because the population number or density become less and less so, there is a rapid decay in the population density”), and with no reaffirmation of the thesis or recurring reminders to the reader about the point of evidence presented.

The students who wrote Historical Accounts took up the prompt as an invitation to tell a story. These essays were organized by a focus on time, which was revealed in the marked Themes of many clauses (e.g., “Before the Christian era”; “Not long before the Christian era”; “At the beginning of the Christian era”; “During the first millennium”). In the elaboration of what happened during these time periods, the students used language that explained causal relationships, with the causes realized within clauses (e.g., “trade *created* new chains of infection”; “infections could easily *affect*”; “this helped *open up* development”).

Thus, it appears that the conditions created by the Non-Argument Conditioning Prompt in combination with the Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text made it challenging for students to write Arguments. In contrast with a source text like Hammurabi’s Code (which does not describe events happening over time), students who wrote Explanations and Accounts based on the McNeill text were able to find McNeill’s discussion of the mixing of the disease pools and re-present it in their essays as if it were fact.

## 5. Discussion

Drawing on the concept of uptake (Freadman, 1994, 2002) and previous linguistic descriptions of history genres (e.g., Coffin, 2006), this study examined the intertextual relationship of prompts and source texts with student writing. In writing their history essays, students responded to what we found to be Argument Conditioning Prompts and Non-Argument Conditioning Prompts, in combination with what we found to be an Argument Facilitative Source Text and a Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text. Although the professor expected students to write Arguments in response to all prompts and source texts, many students instead wrote less-valued genres—Accounts, Reports, or Explanations—engaging in “knowledge telling” rather than “knowledge transformation” (McCarthy Young & Leinhardt, 1998). Our analysis indicates that this variation in uptake was conditioned by features of the prompt and source text, independently and in combination, which were invisible to the professor.

Although the professor wanted students to write arguments based on all the prompts, we found that some prompts were not well suited for argument. These prompts had wider uptake profiles (Bawarshi, 2008) than only Argument, resulting in several non-argument uptakes. For example, the Non-Argument Conditioning Prompt “What happened when the four disease pools. . .?” (M-Q2), is a question for facts (Dalton-Puffer, 2007) that, for the most part, was not taken up with Argument. The use of prompts that are not well aligned with the intended uptake is not unique to the classroom in our study, as Llinares and Pascual Peña (2015) found an over-reliance on factual questions in their study of history oral discussions when the instructor’s overall goal was for students to produce Arguments. Similarly, Horowitz (1986) found that even when instructors aim to have students write argumentative essays, many prompts ask students to describe, explain, or discuss.

To write an Argument from a Non-Argument Conditioning Prompt, students had to go beyond what was being asked in the prompt. For example, M-Q2 (“What happened when the ‘four divergent disease pools’ . . . began to mix. . .”), resulted mostly in Accounts (telling what happened chronologically), or Explanations (explaining multiple consequences of the mixing). The student who wrote Argument went beyond what the prompt was asking by evaluating the mixing as being “lethal” and supporting this evaluation with evidence. Although there were Non-Argument Conditioning Prompts for both

texts, nearly half of students responding to those about Hammurabi produced Arguments, while only one responding to McNeill produced an Argument. These differences in uptakes point to the importance of the intertextual relationships between source texts and student writing.

We suggest that the Hammurabi text is an Argument Facilitative Source Text because, as a list of laws without an overarching claim or explicit argument, the students were unable to simply re-tell the source text author's point of view. There is no place in the source text where the author makes an explicit assertion about, for example, Babylon's social structure, so even students who wrote Reports had to make inferences and draw logical connections between the content of a law and the corresponding interpretation of the society. In effect, this absence of argument in the source text seemed to push students toward the kind of interpretation and analysis that is necessary for writing Arguments. Another noteworthy aspect of the uptake of this source text was the complete lack of Historical Accounts, which could be attributed to the fact that Hammurabi's Code does not describe historical events in chronological time. Overall, the features of this source text created conditions that were well aligned with the instructor's goal of the students' uptake of Argument.

Among the prompts about the Hammurabi text, the prompt that was most successful in eliciting Argument (and selected by the most students) was H-Q4. Part of this prompt's success may have been its inclusion of a direct address ("What sort of picture do you get?"), making it a question for opinion, the type of question that [Llinares and Pascual Peña \(2015\)](#) found most successful in eliciting Argument. In addition, the topic of the prompt—asking students to praise or blame what the laws reveal about the treatment of women—may have been more accessible than having to characterize abstract entities like a political system or social structure. Accessibility and familiarity with the topic may shape how effectively students write from source texts ([Yu, 2009](#)) and may also be a reason for the high percentage of students who elected to respond to this prompt.

In contrast, we suggest that the McNeill text is a Non-Argument Facilitative Source Text. It included claims supported by evidence and described events in chronological time, so students could re-present its content as if it were factual, in the form of Accounts and Explanations, sometimes in the same order as the source text. This is consistent with [Keck's \(2014\)](#) conclusion that expository texts result more often than narrative texts in students mirroring "the sequence of source text paragraphs" (p. 17). We also note that the McNeill text was longer and more complex than the Hammurabi text. While [Li and Casanave \(2012\)](#) argue that difficult source texts may lead to inappropriate textual borrowing, we did not find inappropriate borrowing in our data. Rather, our finding may be evidence of [Tardy's \(2009\)](#) claim about intertextuality in which she points out that genres "are born out of prior texts and retain traces of those texts" (p. 14): the factual re-presentation of information from the McNeill text may be explained as the traces of the source text that remained in students' uptakes.

The unfavorable conditions that the McNeill text created are particularly evident in the uptakes to Argument Conditioning Prompts (M-Q1 and M-Q3), in which some students elided key aspects of the prompt and produced non-argumentative genres. For example, M-Q1 asked, "According to McNeill, to what degree does disease influence culture (i.e., religion)?"; this exact phrase—to what degree—is one that [Coffin \(2006\)](#) suggests can be used to elicit Argument. However, almost half of the students seemed to elide this portion of the prompt, taking up a prompt asking *How does disease influence culture (i.e., religion)?*, and producing Consequential Explanations. [Ackerman \(1990, quoted in Kroll & Reid, 1994\)](#) notes that "in many cases the assignment [or topic] given by an instructor and the assignment [or topic] taken by a student are not a reciprocal fit" (p. 236), creating unexpected intertextual relationships between prompt and student uptake. The wording in the history professor's prompts that was meant to cue Argument as the appropriate uptake seems not to have been reciprocal with what some students took up. This resonates with [Reid and Kroll's \(1995\)](#) suggestion that prompts be designed to explicitly indicate the genre expected in students' responses.

Even the few students who attempted to write Arguments in response to McNeill did so with mixed results. Three of the six Arguments were underdeveloped versions of this genre. While they had the stages of Argument and some features of this genre, they also exhibited features that looked more like Explanations. Whereas some of the Reports in response to Hammurabi's Code exhibited features of Argument, students responding to McNeill seemed to be pushed in the opposite direction.

Clearly, the Hammurabi and the McNeill texts created different conditions for Argument uptake. Out of 59 essays in response to Hammurabi, 43 (72.9%) were Arguments; of 24 in response to McNeill, only six (25.0%) were Arguments. Of the 13 students who responded to both texts, six wrote an Argument for Hammurabi but not McNeill, and only one wrote an Argument for McNeill but not Hammurabi. These results are especially notable because the Hammurabi text was the first reading of the course, when students had less experience with university-level academic writing, whereas the McNeill reading was the fourth of the semester, when one might expect students to have a better understanding of assignment expectations and argumentation.

## 6. Implications

Our study contributes to the growing interest in intertextuality, with a focus on understudied aspects of the relationships between course materials and student writing. By applying [Freadman's \(1994, 2002\)](#) and [Bawarshi's \(2003, 2008\)](#) work on uptake to a history course in an English-medium university in the Middle East, we have shown the usefulness of this concept in an L2 setting. Furthermore, by combining Freadman's and Bawarshi's theoretical orientation toward intertextuality and genre with an SFL-based framework for detailed linguistic analysis of genre, we have shown how these two schools of thought may be profitably integrated. Finally, our focus on undergraduate L2 writers is particularly important given their

challenges when producing argument, as discussed in the literature (e.g., Hirvela, 2013). The conditions created by writing prompts and source texts can contribute to the challenges students encounter when writing arguments, which merits further study.

The intertextual relationships among source text, prompt, and student writing should be taken into account to improve alignment between an instructor's goals and expectations, assignment design, and the writing students produce. Three important pedagogical implications for L2 writing instruction emerge from this study. First, faculty should carefully select source texts that create conditions favorable for the expected uptake. In this study, we found a source text that lacks an explicit overarching claim allowed many students to do the knowledge transformation that is necessary for argumentative writing. In contrast, a source text that includes its own claims and support may be more challenging for L2 writers, both in terms of reading comprehension and facility with producing an Argument.

Second, faculty must carefully construct prompts that make the expected genre clear to students (see also Reid & Kroll, 1995). This may be particularly important for L2 writers, for whom genre expectations may be less clear. We found some prompts were not well aligned with the professor's desired uptake of Argument. For example, if Argument is expected, the instructor may ask, *How compelling do you find McNeill's evidence...? Evaluate McNeill's evidence and provide support for your argument.* Or, if Factorial Explanation is expected, the instructor may choose a frame such as: *Explain the causes of...* Prompts should then be unpacked with students during class, explicitly teaching students how prompts are meant to cue specific genres. For instance, teachers should be explicit about how a frame like *How compelling...* is inviting students to make an evaluation and consistently support that evaluation. In our study, we found that students produced non-Argument genres when they ignored key parts of the Argument Conditioning Prompts. When genre expectations are not made explicit, students must "draw upon the same... knowledge of genre that the test constructor did" in order to successfully "decode" prompts (Horowitz, 1989, p. 23), and L2 writers in particular may not have such knowledge. For example, L2 writers might be more likely to read prompts more literally than L1 writers, failing to see prompts such as *explain* or *discuss* as an invitation to argue (Kroll & Reid, 1994). Similarly, cultural differences may cause some L2 writers to feel that they do not have authority to write critically of others (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999) as would be required to critique the claims or evidence in a source text. L2 writers responding to prompts such as *How compelling do you find McNeill's evidence...?* may need explicit instruction and encouragement to understand that this is an invitation to challenge authorial authority. Thus, strong prompt design requires faculty to be keenly aware of how prompt wording may condition student uptake.

A third implication of this study is that faculty can guide students toward producing Arguments through a carefully planned sequence. For example, an instructor might begin the semester by assigning a reading like the McNeill text and using prompts that are intended to produce Explanations or Reports to check students' reading comprehension. Then, the instructor could progress to asking for Arguments by providing only suitable prompts, aided by an Argument Facilitative Source Text, and supplemented with explicit instruction about how the targeted genres differ. Finally, the instructor could target Arguments in response to more complex source texts (using only prompts designed to elicit Argument), with explicit discussion of how such source texts can be challenging for students and how to avoid producing Explanations and Reports. At each stage of this sequence, the instructor should deconstruct sample essays that did and did not respond with the desired uptake.

To implement these suggestions, faculty need to be aware of the genres in their field, the stages of these genres, and their linguistic features. An instructor who is aware of genre features is better equipped to provide students with additional linguistic resources for meeting the goals of the expected genre(s), and this is particularly important for L2 writers (Johns, 1997). With such awareness, faculty can also better recognize the genres that students produce and how these do and do not fit the expected genre(s). Because not all faculty across the curriculum are well equipped to teach writing with a focus on genre features, we recommend collaboration between faculty in the disciplines and faculty with more language expertise. While the specific suggestions outlined above may be particular to history, we are working with faculty in other disciplines using a similar approach, focusing on analyzing, categorizing, and deconstructing key features of the genres students are expected to produce.

The findings presented here are revealing about the intertextual relationship between prompts, source texts, and L2 student writing, yet further research is needed, both within history and in other disciplines. For example, we need more knowledge about how other features of source texts condition students' uptakes. We also need to know more about how differences among students, such as prior genre experience and language background, may affect how students interact with source texts and prompts. The application of introspective methods such as think-aloud protocols could provide insight into how students interpret a prompt and what steps they take to respond. Such research would provide further knowledge about how writing prompts and source texts influence student writing.

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