

## **Intro slide Clockwork Orange**

### **SLIDE 1 St Andrews outline 'Phronesis in the classroom'**

You may think I'm here to talk about coherence or cohesion. I am, but I thought in a forum of much more experienced and well-read peers, what could I add that you wouldn't get from someone else, a bit more eloquently and much more deeply and rooted in 'the literature'.

I carried out some classroom based research in Spring 2016 and shared it via my department's blog, and my boss encouraged me to share it here. So I thought, what would you find useful that you couldn't simply read on the blog? And then it hit me! That you might find something interesting (or I certainly thought it worth sharing) in 2 things:

### **SLIDE 2 – What is phronesis? What is my point today? I aim to present to you**

1. my angle on the research process itself, and
2. The washback of research onto students directly during the research process.

I do plan to tell you something of my findings on teaching writing coherence to pre-sessional students but that's not my main focus.

### **SLIDE 3 – The teacher as a researcher**

**Firstly, let's talk a little about the research process and the teacher as researcher. That the teacher SHOULD be a researcher.**

### **SLIDE – BUT VIEWED FROM ANOTHER ANGLE, RESEARCH FAILURE! Trow 1971**

### **SLIDE 4 Concerns about research robustness/research quality**

So if we accept that we should be researching, then we are left with the worry about the QUALITY of that research,

What discipline is EAP anyway? Do we come from that background?

I hope that with this presentation I will encourage you to do more research, get past these qualms, and disseminate what you do. There are two prongs to my encouragement:

- A. by challenging our understanding of research in the first place, and
- B. by highlighting the direct benefits of any type of research for students.

A third benefit I'll mention now just briefly - research is disseminated not just so it can be evaluated by others but because it provides inspiration for others.

## **SLIDE 5 – OUTLINE**

So, in order to get across my aim of encouraging you to research in the classroom by challenging some views of research and by highlighting what the students get from it, I'll take you through the stages of my research on coherence.

## **SLIDE 6 - BACKGROUND**

### **Experiment on Coherence in student writing:**

This research was originally entitled 'how to think like an English person' because I have, for a number of years, found Chinese students puzzling over how to think logically or how to "think like an Englishman".

### **My experience over 6 years of EAP writing teaching consisted of**

Over-use of connectors

Difficulty following the main idea of a paragraph

Difficulty understanding the flow of ideas

## **SLIDE 7 – MY HYPOTHESIS**

### **My musings over time – what might be causing the poor coherence**

Unclear thinking/lack of understanding e.g. think of your own history of writing essays on topics you didn't fully understand

Poor strategies for writing e.g. if you write in a stream of consciousness way rather than performing pre-writing stages especially planning

Translation at a micro level not working or translating at a more macro level not working e.g. do Chinese essays have a different structure, style, and approach

Generally insufficient proficiency

These are just my ideas but they can be as varied as your imagination or childlike wonder of the world

Which of these do you think are serious?

colour of walls in the classrooms, temperature of room, quality of teacher intervention (e.g. poor quality, confusing explanations), time of day, age of students

## SLIDE 8 The aims

### **Primary research question:**

What seems to influence coherence in Chinese students' writing

### **Other questions:**

1. How best to explain to students what coherence actually means and why it's important?
2. How interesting for students are the activities that are supposed to improve coherence?

## SLIDE 9 The methods

*Show model of research: linked to my Masters' background on information systems; natural science method*

*Is it appropriate? If you think not, then hold your thought for when I come later to saying what my reflections were on the research.*

*Go made from method! Triangulation!?*

*If you're interested in against-method, you should read [Paul Feyerabend's work](#)*

## SLIDE 10

There isn't time to go into the details of the tasks but very broadly, I attempted to study the dependent variable, coherence, by making adjustments in tasks that simulated independent variables: these included

### **cognitive load**

**via language (for example, to reduce the load, get them to brainstorm and plan in L1 or even write in L1 first)**

**topic**

**and time pressure (writing at home v writing in class),**

**explicitly referring to coherence and cohesion in a task (e.g. let's focus on topic sentences v no instructions or even mention of coherence).**

So, you can read more about the experiments on the blog<sup>1</sup>.

confounding variables would be a major problem for carrying out this research in a one off group as a course progresses. I would have trouble doing tasks where everything is kept the same save for adjustments to independent variables.

#### **SLIDE 11 - observations**

##### **A. The results i.e. what I observed**

**A summary of results related to coherence and cohesion**

#### **SLIDE 12 Other, perhaps more interesting observations**

#### **SLIDE 13 What about secondary research? What do others say?**

The framework I worked with is probably most closely associated with Halliday An introduction to functional grammar (Routledge)<sup>2</sup> and his 'theme and rheme'.

Grammatical resources or writers' confidence with them seems to be the gist of the message on what damages coherence; as English proficiency improves, so does coherence

There seem to be differing opinions on how cultural ways of thinking and or ways of constructing sentences negatively influences coherence in English e.g. how similar and how different are English and Chinese and does this play a part. For example, Nunan suggests Chinese is less direct and more circular in its rhetoric

other writers I looked at talked about more mechanical aspects of grammar

quite a few articles highlighting language tendencies when contrasting Chinese and English such as observations that East Asian writers produce writing lacking any theme – rheme connection between clauses or sentences though reasons are disputed.

Chinese speakers reputedly have a tendency to back end their units which may mean for us reading that the most important information comes later, whether in units at sentence level or even paragraph level.

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<sup>1</sup> EAS blog

<sup>2</sup> Halliday an introduction to functional grammar

In addition, there is some argument that Chinese favours short clauses rather than complex sentences so when attempting to write in complex style there is a disorientation.

More specifically directed at Chinese students, educational approaches focusing more on sentence level composition and a lack of attention on larger discourse units causes problems.

If you want to more about this, have a look at the references at the end.

**SLIDE 14 – Let’s now compare what I observed in the classroom and what I would have taken from the literature if I had started with the literature**

Took me down another route

**SLIDE 15 – TEXT BOOK EXAMPLE 1**

**SLIDE 16 – TEXT BOOK EXAMPLE 2**

One of the problems of theme/rheme analyses is that unlike grammatical terms like noun and verb, clause, or to some extent subject predicate, that particular framework hasn’t hit the mainstream - even though Halliday used the framework in the 1980s, it is largely invisible from course books – examples from text books and how they ‘describe’ these aspects of coherence.

I’d now like to move on from the topic of coherence itself. If that part is what interests you most, particularly as regards Chinese writers, then you should find a reasonable starting point with the selected references at the end.

Now I want to come back to the point I made about methodology and how much handwringing we should do: In fact, I’d like to encourage you to challenge the idea of methodology to some extent

**SLIDE 17 – Becher’s research of 126 Academics and their views of each other because we’ll start looking at how we can perceive the research process**

Becher<sup>3</sup> (1981) conducted the study by examining perceptions of academics about their own and others’ disciplines ,interviewing 126 academics across 6 disciplines (physics, biology, engineering, sociology, history, and law).

Aside from some amusing negative stereotypes they had about each other (lawyers are untrustworthy, immoral and arrogant, for example), there were interesting views that can help us think about what each of us perceives about eap and its research methodology.

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<sup>3</sup> Becher 1981

One thing he noted were certain quite major differences that we may have a tendency to assume are consistent in the academy:

- Hypothesis or no hypothesis – some want it, some don't care
- Anecdotal: is it a taboo? – not necessarily; some disciplines more comfortable with nuance, fluidity, uncertainty e.g. law is more comfortable with analysing what might be considered anecdotes as it's sometimes the stories that make it
- Changing discipline: you traitor – I sometimes wonder in this regard what eap is: who dominates? Linguists?
- Settings > lack of uniformity WITHIN discipline meaning that even within disciplines there are fields and contexts that require different approaches to research

Clark 1962 – we must let go of the idea of a unified culture in the academy.<sup>4</sup>

## SLIDE 18

### SLIDE 19 – How do we find our method? Does it depend on what we are looking for?

My default starting point for my classroom experiments was influenced, possibly subconsciously, by my own educational background of a masters in information science when I used experimental methods in some of my work including my dissertation and that was designed to assess QUALITY of a system.

What field are we all operating in now? What is EAP? Is linguistics what brings us together? Or education? But if education, is that psychology? Are they social sciences? Humanities?

EAP is multi-disciplinary and considering the amount of ESAP around these days, I wonder if we should be borrowing ideas from other disciplines, or at least valuing perspectives that a variety of disciplines may bring, like most of you probably do unless all of you came through the linguistics root.

So what I've just said highlights the thorniness of research and research methodologies. What would encourage YOU to research?

What is your AIM? To disprove a hypothesis? Pursuit of knowledge for its own sake? For the sake of satisfying your own curiosity. Or do you want to be the latest to come up with another framework for understanding something?

There are approaches labelled action research, grounded theory, exploratory practice – these might provide some ideas but do we need to follow them religiously?

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<sup>4</sup> Clark 1962

the ground I'm trying to occupy – the professional science of teaching – researching what works with your students, taking any epistemology you bring from your own background to classroom analysis. This is not to say don't learn about research methods in education, but it is to say don't get overly bogged down in it. That's why I've come up with the title **Phronesis in the classroom – the Greek idea of simply deepening our understanding of something.**

## **SLIDE 20 – MOTIVATING STUDENTS**

The second point I want to make about research relates to the washback of research on students. Here, I'd like to set the idea more solidly by referring to the Hawthorne effect.

The Hawthorne effect is quite well known and appears in a lot of management texts. Very briefly, this was the 1920s and 1930s experiment conducted in a factory where the researchers made some changes, and then observed increases in productivity. The conclusion of the research, subsequently questioned, if not completely disproven, was that people reacted in a positive way to being experimented on – they are being singled out for special consideration.

Now whether or not productivity is affected by being experimented on, my hypothesis let's call it, arising from my coherence research, is that it appears from what I've read that observer effect is real, so in our current context of coherence research, that students are not acting completely naturally. But the key point, the most interesting aspect of my research, was the high satisfaction students showed in just about every 'experimental activity.

So now we return to Phronesis – prominent or implied in Humanistic research where the purpose is not to predict and change anything or prove cause and effect, but deepen our understanding of what it is to live a human life.

## **Slide 21 – links to motivating ourselves**

UNDERSTAND – SENSITISE – MAKE SENSE

**Table 1.** *Seven functions of theory*

Paradigm	
Positivist	
<i>Prediction</i>	to hypothesize in advance about the strength and direction of relationships among independent variables or about the results of experimental interventions
<i>Explanation</i>	to give or show the cause of a phenomenon
Humanistic	
<i>Making assumptions explicit</i>	to develop or formulate direct, publicly available statements about states of affairs previously taken for granted
<i>Understanding</i>	to grasp or uncover the meaning and significance of events
<i>Sense-making</i>	to put forward an interpretation of events to stimulate a discerning awareness and appreciation of their significance
<i>Sensitization</i>	to stimulate a more receptive, more responsive and more delicate awareness of the nuances of a given situation through thorough analytic descriptions
<i>Critique</i>	to evaluate and analyze the merits and demerits of extant and potential states of affairs

In respect of EAP, Allwright’s (2005) work on the notion of ‘exploratory practice’ which adopts an ethical, non-technicist approach is the closest in concept to what I’m talking about:

Contrasting with the academic researcher’s “I research your teaching,”

and with the Action Researcher’s “I research my teaching”.

Where it perhaps differs is that of the 6 criteria of EP, only those relating to understanding are paramount. The bottom line or the only criterion my suggestion requires is that you observe something you are interested in with the philosophical belief that ‘if you do something with a loving heart, you will always make something beautiful’

There were two particular benefits for me in jumping straight into experimenting

I wasn’t led by the research – the literature

By conducting the experiments I uncovered student students’ practices that may not otherwise have been uncovered e.g. use of google translate, the lack of understanding of classroom language of theme and rheme or coherence, and the different ways students approach tasks e.g. brainstorming and planning in L1.

**Slide 22 – summary: it’s virtuous to experiment on students if the aim is to deepen our understanding**

**Conclusion:**

Get in the classroom and say, this week, I'm experimenting on whether students are more motivated to pay attention when teacher instructions are given solely through the medium of mime and dance.