

Gibbons Activity Cycle*

Pauline Gibbons (2002), a researcher and teacher educator in Australia, describes the following activity cycle, where students move from oral to written modes that have varying contextual features (e.g., oral vs. written, and informal, face-to-face, to more formal). Students are engaged in a science experiment whereby they have a number of items and need to determine which are attracted by a magnet.

Text 1: (spoken by three 10-year-old students, with accompanying action)

this...no, it doesn't go... it doesn't move... try that... yes, it does... a bit... that won't...won't work, it's not metal... these are the best... going really fast.

In text 1, students share the interactional space and the context of the activity, so they are able to use language that lacks specificity and assumes a shared understanding of what's being talked about. Note the lack of complete sentences and the phrasal, "choppy" nature of the language. Present tense is used exclusively because of the present action in which the children are engaged.

Text 2: (spoken by one student about the action, after the event)

We tried a pin... a pencil sharpener... some iron filings and a piece of plastic... the magnet didn't attract the pin.

In text 2, one student shares her group's findings from the experiment with the rest of the class. Again, there is a shared context, but in this case there's more specificity with language. Instead of using demonstrative pronouns (this, that), she uses more specific vocabulary related to the activity. The situational context is a bit more formal and her language takes on somewhat more formal characteristics, like complete sentences and lexical specificity. Verb tenses shift to the past tense since student is reporting on an event that has passed.

Text 3: (written by the same student)

Our experiment was to find out what a magnet attracted. We discovered that a magnet attracts some kinds of metal. It attracted the iron filings, but not the pin.

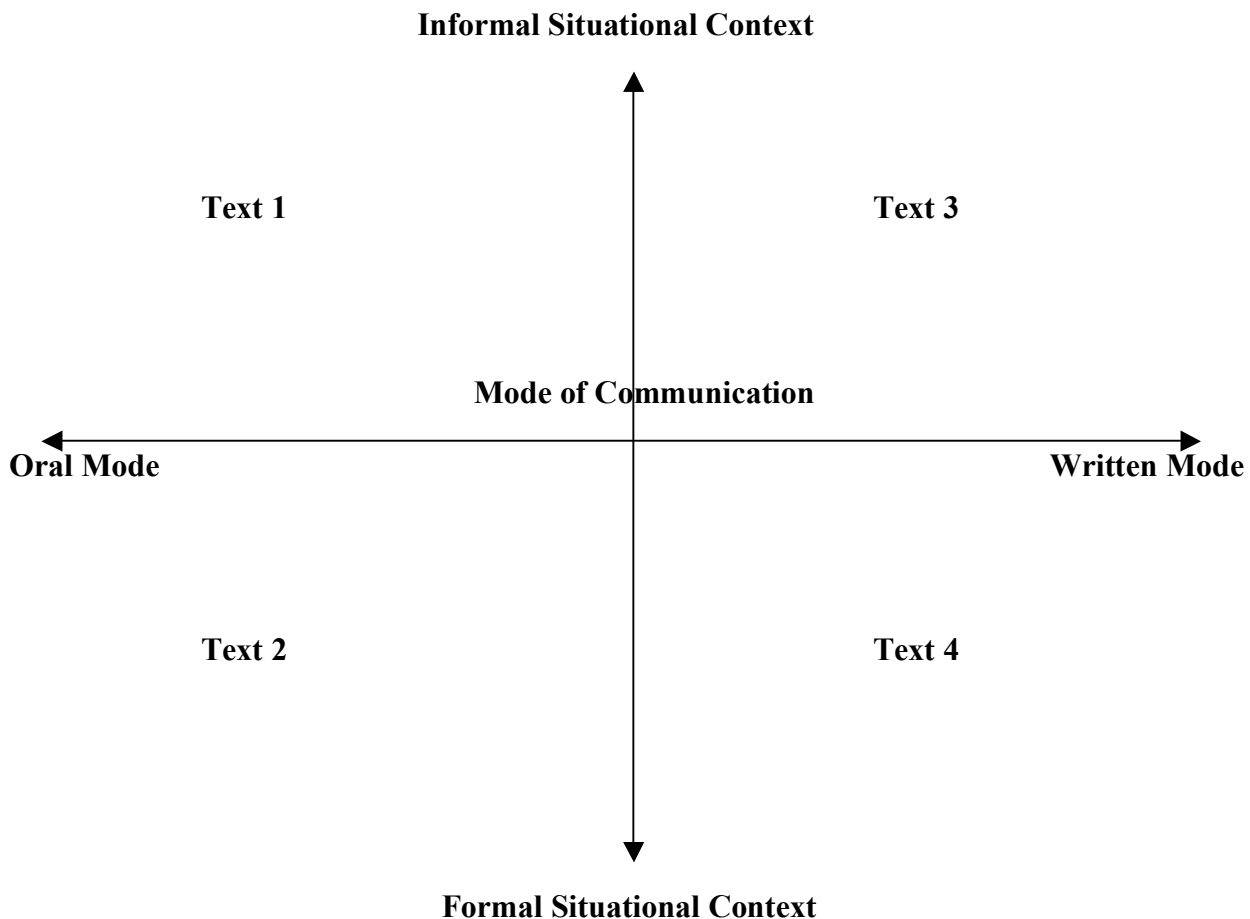
In text 3, the same student shares her group's findings from the experiment in writing, now shifting the linguistic mode. The shift in mode requires that she establish the context with the first sentence (no longer being able to assume the shared context on the part of the audience). The complete sentences become more complex and lexical specificity is a must. The verb tenses again, remain in the past as the written language is used to report a past action.

Text 4: (taken from a child's encyclopedia)

A magnet... is able to pick up, or attract, a piece of steel or iron because its magnetic field flows into the magnet, turning it into a temporary magnet. Magnetic attraction occurs only between ferrous materials.

In text 4, there is no longer reference to a specific experiment, so the language here is much more generic, referring to ALL magnets. Vocabulary is much more technical and sophisticated in nature, and sentences are increasingly complex, illustrating features of more formal written language. The verb tenses shift to the present tense because of the generic and more abstract description of the properties of ALL magnets.

Imagine taking students through such an activity cycle to scaffold their understanding of more complex academic text and to maximize the output they produce. The activity cycle might be illustrated as follows:



*Adapted by T. Fortune and D. Tedick from: Gibbons, P. (2002). *Scaffolding language scaffolding learning: Teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.