

Explaining historical events

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This article is from a research project, Improving Language and Learning in Public-sector Schools, conducted in 2004 in Hong Kong by John Polias. One of the teachers involved was HUNG Sau Yu Dora, a History teacher at Tak Oi Secondary School, Hong Kong. All of the people participating in the project had English as a second language, the teachers and the students. As the consultant and leader of the project, John was involved in teaching the project participants about systemic functional grammar (using the precursor to How Language Works), helping to design the class work and advising in an ongoing way on that work.

One of the major aspects of a history curriculum is to explore the factors that contribute to historical events. Students are expected to identify the major issues in those events and then undertake an examination of the issues. These analyses contribute to the development of the student as an apprentice historian. To ensure that a student has understood the often complex, interrelated issues, the factors contributing to an historical event need to be presented in a clear and methodical way. This generic process, an activity that is common to all history classrooms, is referred to as the factorial explanation genre.

Objectives

Students can:

- understand history questions so that they know which genres the task is requiring
- identify the features and structure of the factorial explanation genre
- produce a text with the major features of factorial explanation: ie students can write a short introduction and explain the various factors accordingly
- pay attention to the language features required in a factorial explanation; for example, express cause and effect in a range of ways.

Class

Form 2 (13 years of age)

Teaching methodology

Topic: The causes of the American Revolution

Activities

Setting the Context

- What was done here to cover the American Revolution?

The class contextualised what they knew about the US; they identified powerful nations and change in

power structures, the reasons for the changes and linked that to independence and reasons for someone wanting independence. They then related that to the situation prior to the time of the Revolution and linked that to the reasons for the revolution and the grievances (eg enlightenment). They discussed, read their text books, role-played the British versus American sides and studied maps.

Modelling and Deconstruction

- To allow the class to focus on the features of a written factorial explanation rather than deal with new content, the field of the text needed to be familiar to them. For this reason, the field of the text to be modelled was something they had already completed previously: the reasons accounting for Italy being the birthplace of the Renaissance.
- Students read and analysed a factorial explanation provided by the teacher (Figure 1).

Why did the Renaissance first take place in Italy?

Renaissance means 'rebirth' and the period in Europe from about 1350 to 1600 is called the Renaissance. During this period, many great changes took place; for example, the revival of classical learning. The Renaissance first started in Florence, Italy and the main reasons for the Renaissance beginning in Italy were the possession of Roman remains, the presence of many rich merchants, the existence of many independent governments and the influx to Italy of Greek scholars together with the Greek civilization.

The first reason for the Renaissance originating in Italy was the possession of Roman remains. Compared with other parts of Europe, Italy had more remains of ancient Roman art and learning since Italy was the home of Roman Civilization. It thus allowed the Italians to have more opportunities to learn about the classical civilization. The ancient ruins also inspired the Italians to rediscover their past.

The presence of many rich merchants in Italy was another factor for the Renaissance to first start in Italy. In the late Middle Ages, the Christian Crusaders went to Jerusalem to fight against the Muslims. On their way to the Holy Land, the crusaders traded with Italian merchants such as the Medici family in Florence. The immense wealth from this trade was spent on pictures, books and fine goods. This was a rich time for the development of art.

The third factor explaining the rise of the Renaissance in Italy was the existence of many independent governments in Italy. As the Italians became more affluent, many of them bought independence from kings. As independent governments appeared, Italians found that they could think and talk about their ideas freely. The development of new ideas is a major feature of the Renaissance.

The last reason was the influx of Greek scholars and Greek Civilization to Italy in the fifteenth century. The spiritual capital of Greece, Constantinople, fell to the Turks. The severe Turkish rule caused unhappiness among the Greeks, and many escaped to Italy, taking with them important Greek writings. As a result, the Italians, unlike other Europeans, had access to the major writings of the two classical civilizations, Roman and Greek.

Figure 1: Sample factorial explanation

- Teacher and students worked together to explore the purpose, organisation and language features of the factorial explanation (Figures 2-9).

Questions asked of the students and directions given:

- 1: What is the purpose of a factorial explanation in history? (The answer is to present a number of factors or reasons clearly for an historical event.)
- 2: Read the whole passage and try to find out the structure of a factorial explanation (Figure 2).

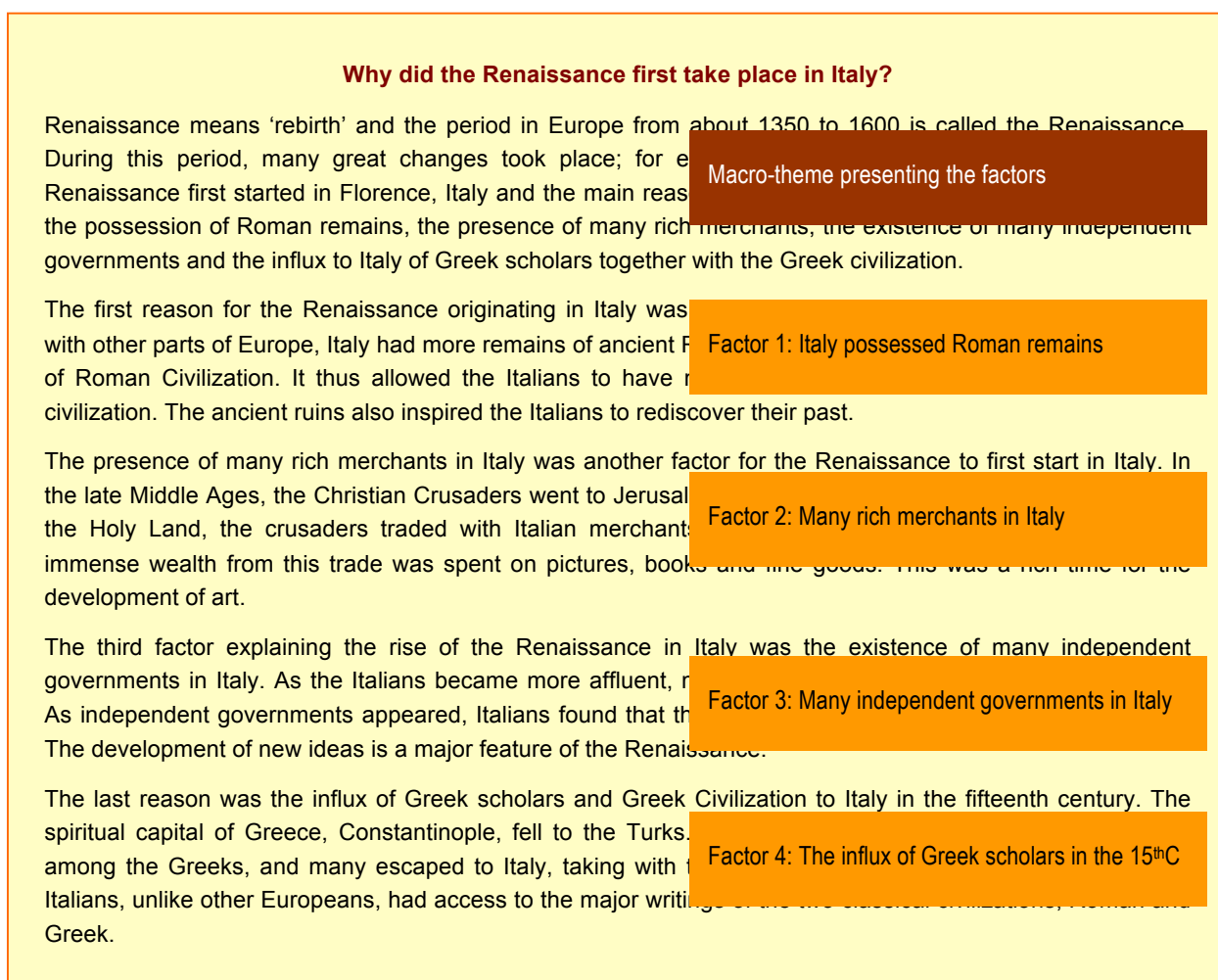


Figure 2: Schematic structure of a factorial explanation

- 3: The introduction, or macro-theme, predicts for the reader what the text is going to be about. The factors are to be presented in the macro-theme in as concise a form as possible.

Note that the order of the factors in the macro-theme is the same as the order that the factors are presented in the remainder of the text.

- 4: How should the various stages of the genre, that is, the factors of a text, be linked up?

The factors presented in the macro-theme are now presented in slightly more expanded form in each stage of the explanation stages of the genre: these are the hyper-themes (topic sentences) and then the remainder of the paragraphs are an elaboration of the factor.

Language features of factorial explanations

- The class discussed the resources used for expressing cause and effect explicitly. The students were asked to identify common words and phrases they would use when answering a 'why' question. They came up with answers such as 'reason', 'factor', 'as a result', 'therefore', 'so', 'because of ...'. These were written by the teacher in two columns: 'reason' and 'factor' in the first column and the rest in the second column. The students were then asked to consider the differences between the members of each column. They identified that the first column is for nouns, while the other column is for conjunctions. Since they could not think of any verbs used to express cause and effect, the teacher asked the students to reread the text, 'Why did Renaissance first take place in Italy', to see if there

were any causal verbs. Eventually they identified 'led to' and 'caused'. From the text, they were also able to find more nouns and conjunctions connectives used to express cause and effect (Figure 3).

Why did the Renaissance first take place in Italy?

Renaissance means 'rebirth' and the period in Europe from about 1350 to 1600 is called the Renaissance. During this period, many great changes took place; for example, the revival of classical learning. The Renaissance first started in Florence, Italy and the main **reasons** for the Renaissance beginning in Italy were the possession of Roman remains, the presence of many rich merchants, the existence of many independent governments and the influx to Italy of Greek scholars together with the Greek civilization.

The first **reason** for the Renaissance originating in Italy was the possession of Roman remains. Compared with other parts of Europe, Italy had more remains of ancient Roman art and learning since Italy was the home of Roman Civilization. It **thus** allowed the Italians to have more opportunities to learn about the classical civilization. The ancient ruins also inspired the Italians to rediscover their past.

The presence of many rich merchants in Italy was another **factor** for the Renaissance to first start in Italy. In the late Middle Ages, the Christian Crusaders went to Jerusalem to fight against the Muslims. On their way to the Holy Land, the crusaders traded with Italian merchants such as the Medici family in Florence. The immense wealth from this trade was spent on pictures, books and fine goods. This was a rich time for the development of art.

The third **factor** explaining the rise of the Renaissance in Italy was the existence of many independent governments in Italy. **As** the Italians became more affluent, many of them bought independence from kings. **As** independent governments appeared, Italians found that they could think and talk about their ideas freely. The development of new ideas is a major feature of the Renaissance.

The last **reason** was the influx of Greek scholars and Greek Civilization to Italy in the fifteenth century. The spiritual capital of Greece, Constantinople, fell to the Turks. The severe Turkish rule **caused** unhappiness among the Greeks, and many escaped to Italy, taking with them important Greek writings. **As a result**, the Italians, unlike other Europeans, had access to the major writings of the two classical civilizations, Roman and Greek.

Figure 3: Elements expressing cause explicitly through **nouns**, **verbs** or **conjunctions**

- The class discussed the language elements (Figure 4) that express the field.

Participants

These are the people, things, issues, concepts or phenomena involved in the processes. They are realised through nominal groups. Key question to identify the participants: Who or what (followed by the process)?

Processes

These are the 'goings on' in the world; that is, the actions, the sensings, the sayings, and the states of being and having. These are realised in the language through the verbal group. Key question to identify the processes: What is the central process going on here?

Circumstances

These function to provide the circumstantial information relevant to the process (e.g. the where, when, how and why of the process). They are typically realised through prepositional phrases and adverbial groups. Key question to identify the circumstances: Where, when, how, why, with whom, etc is the process taking place?

Figure 4: Definitions of the language elements functioning to express the field, the 'content'

- The students analysed and discussed the following (Figures 5-9) for participants, processes and circumstances.

Renaissance means 'rebirth'.

The period in Europe from about 1350 to 1600 is called the Renaissance.

During this period, many great changes took place, for example the revival of classical learning.

The Renaissance started in Florence, Italy.

The main reasons for the Renaissance to first take place in Italy were the possession of the Roman remains, the presence of many rich merchants, the existence of many independent governments and the influx of Greek scholars together with the Greek civilization into Italy.

Figure 5: Analysis for processes, participants and circumstances of examples given to students

What kinds of processes are found in these examples?

Action processes: took place, started

Mental processes:

Saying processes

Relational processes: means, is called, were

Figure 6: Types of processes found in the analysed examples of Figure 5

What kinds of participants are found in these examples?

Human or non-human participants: non-human participants

Concrete or abstract participants: abstract participants

Specific or generalised participants: generalised participants

Figure 7: Types of participants in the analysed examples of Figure 5

What kinds of circumstances are found in these examples?

Circumstances of time: During this period

Circumstances of place: in Florence, Italy

Circumstances of manner:

Circumstances of cause:

Figure 8: Types of participants in the analysed examples of Figure 5

Summary of the language features in this factorial explanation

The participants are usually non-human, abstract and generalised
 The processes are usually action processes and relational processes
 Circumstances of time and place play a major role.

Figure 9: Summary of language features of the factorial explanation

Guided Construction

- In this stage of the unit of work, the teacher and students worked together to construct a factorial explanation titled: What are the causes of the American Revolution? (Figure 10). The teacher scaffolded the students through careful questioning, commenting on their responses and recasting their contributions.
- The class were reminded of the structural features of a factorial explanation, focusing on what the purpose of the macro-theme is and how that is linked to the remainder of the text.

What are the causes of the American Revolution?

- Stage 1: Introduction / Macro theme
- Stage 2: Factor 1—America’s political discontent
- Stage 3: Factor 2—America’s economic discontent
- Stage 4: Factor 3—Taxation problem
- Stage 5: Factor 4—The influence of the Enlightenment

Introduction / Macro-theme

- What do you expect in the introduction?
 - a brief description of the American Revolution (eg name / time)
 - a list of factors leading to the outbreak of the American Revolution
- Pay attention to the language features

The American Revolution is sometimes called the American War of Independence. This is because the 13 Colonies in North America fought against Britain for independence in this revolution. The main causes for the American Revolution were

.....

.....

.....

.....

Factor 1—America’s political discontent

- How should you start this paragraph?
- What is the major content you will talk about in this paragraph?

- Remember to link the content (ie the America’s political discontent) to the outbreak of the revolution at the end.*¹
- Pay attention to the language features

The first cause of the American Revolution was the American discontent with the British rule.

.....

.....

.....

Factor 1: America’s political discontent

- How did Britain rule America at the beginning?
- How did the colonists feel at first?
- How did Britain rule America later?
- How did America feel as a result?
- Link America’s feelings to the Revolution!*
- Pay attention to the language features

The first cause of the American Revolution was the American discontent with the British rule. In 1607, Britain built a colony in Virginia in North America. By the early 18th century, there were already 13 British colonies in American along the Atlantic coast. At first, the British government did not control the colonies strictly. The colonists enjoyed a great deal of freedom and quickly developed a sense of independence. However, Britain tightened its rule later. The 13 colonies did not like this. This became an underlying cause of the American Revolution.

Figure 10: Part of the process of questions and texts undertaken in the joint construction part of the teaching-learning cycle

Independent Construction

The students were required to write the next two factors in the text by themselves, using the previous examples as models.

¹ Consultant’s comment: the necessity of the last line in each stage should not *simply* be a restating of the hyper-theme the way the students have done—see the student texts that follow.

Student texts

The first student text has all the paragraphs, including those that were jointly constructed. The subsequent texts have only the two paragraphs written by the students independently. In the third paragraph, only the hyper-theme was jointly constructed.

The students' versions of the subsequent paragraphs rely to varying degrees on their textbooks: many have collected ideas from their textbooks and combined them in ways that are original and relevant to the task, while others have relied very heavily on their textbooks and have copied whole sentences.

Student 1

The American Revolution was sometimes called the American War of Independence. This is because the 13 colonies in North America fought against Britain for independence in this revolution. The main causes for the American Revolution were the American discontent with the British rule, the economic discontent, the taxation problem and the influence of the Enlightenment.

The first cause of the American Revolution was American discontent with the British rule. In 1607, Britain built a colony in Virginia in North America. By the early 18th century, there were already 13 British colonies in American along the Atlantic coast. At first, the British government did not control the colonies strictly. The colonists enjoyed a great deal of freedom and quickly developed a sense of independence. However, Britain tightened its rule later. The 13 colonies did not like this. This became an underlying cause of the American Revolution.

The economic discontent was another cause of American Revolution. Later in the 18th century, Britain began to treat her colonies as sources of raw materials for British industry and as markets for British goods. The British Parliament started to control trade in the American colonies. So, the American colonists were unhappy and conflicts between the British government and the colonists began. Consequently, the economic discontent helped to cause the American war of Independence.

The third cause of the American Revolution was the taxation problem. As a result of the Seven Years' War during the period 1756 and 1763, Britain took over a lot of land in North America from France. Thus, she had to keep an army in North America to protect the newly obtained land. All these needed money, so the British government decided to collect taxes from her colonies in America. The British Parliament passes a number of acts, they included the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765) and the Townshend Acts (1767). The colonists became very angry because they believed that there should be 'no taxation without representation.' Therefore, the British government and the colonists disliked each other more and more. This led to the American Revolution in the second half of the 18th century.

The last reason for the American War of Independence was the influence of the Enlightenment. By the mid-18th century, many colonists had read the works of the Enlightenment thinkers, especially those of John Locke and Rousseau. They knew they had the right to rebel against a government that suppressed its peoples' natural rights. Local thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin said that the British were wrong in the way they treated the American colonies. Therefore, the American colonies should question the British government and fight for their independence. That's why the American War of Independence happened.

Student 2

The third factor that explained the cause of the American Revolution was the taxation problem. After the Seven Years' War, Britain got some land in North America from France. So she had to keep an army in the new land to protect it. In order to pay for the new army, British government wanted to collect and impost taxes on the Americans. The parliament passed a lot of acts, like Sugar Act. However, the American colonists believed in 'no taxation without representation' and they thought that Britain had no right to tax them as they were not represented in parliament. As a result, the British government and her colonists hated each other more. Therefore, the taxation problem led to the outbreak of American Revolution.

The last factor of the American Revolution was the influence of the Enlightenment. Around the 18th century, the American colonists began to read the books written by Enlightenment thinkers, like John Locke, so they knew the ideas of the thinkers eg Social Contract and they understood their rights. Many local thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson were influenced by this. Thus, they questioned the bad British government especially the way they treated the Americans and they wanted to rebel against bad government and fight for independence. That's why the American War of Independence broke out.

Student 3

The American Revolution was also caused by the Taxation Problem. During 1756–1763, Britain fought with and defeated France in the Seven Years' War. In order to protect the newly obtained land, an army was set up. All these needed money, and so the British government decided to collect tax from the colonies in America. The British parliament passes a number of acts. The colonists became very angry. They believed that there should be 'no taxation without representation'. The British government and the colonists disliked each other more and more. This is the third reason leading to the American War of Independence.

By the mid-18th century, many colonists had read the works of the Enlightenment thinkers, such as John Locke and Rousseau. They knew they had the right to rebel against a government that suppressed its people's natural rights. Local thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin started openly that the British were wrong in the way they treated their American colonies. They thought the colonies should thus fight for their independence. That's why American Revolution broke out.

Student 4

The taxation problem was the third factor causing the American Revolution. After the Seven Years' War, Britain had to keep an army in North America to protect the newly obtained land. Thus, Britain wanted to collect taxes from America in order to pay for the new army. However, the tax was too heavy and the Americans believed that there should be 'no taxation without representation'. They argued that the British government had no right to tax them because they were not represented in the parliament. The British government and the colonists disliked each other more and more. That's why the American Revolution broke out.

The last cause of the American Revolution was the influence of the Enlightenment. By the mid-18th century, many colonists had read the works of the Enlightenment thinkers, especially those of John Locke and Rousseau. They knew they had the right to rebel against a government that suppressed its people's natural rights. Local thinkers such a Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin stated openly that the British were wrong in the way they treated their American colonies, The colonists should thus fight for their independence. Thus, the influence of the Enlightenment was one of the causes of the American Revolution.

Student 5

The third factor explaining the outbreak of the American Revolution was the taxation problem. Because of the Seven Years' War, Britain had to keep an army in North America to protect the newly obtained land from France. In order to pay for the new army, Britain decided to collect taxes from her colonies in America. The British Parliament imposed too many taxes in America. The colonists became very angry with this. They thought the taxes were too heavy and unfair because they did not have representation in the British parliament. As a result, American Revolution started.

The last reason for the American Revolution to take place was the influence of the Enlightenment. By the mid-18th century, many colonists had read the works of the Enlightenment thinkers. They knew they had the right to rebel against a government that suppressed its people's natural rights. Local thinkers stated openly that the British were wrong in the way they treated their American colonies. They thought they should fight for their independence. That's why the American Revolution occurred.

Student 6

The taxation problem is the third factor of American Revolution. Britain got some American land from France because of the Seven Years' War. Britain needed to protect the newly obtained land from France, so Britain needed to have new army in America. Britain started to collect taxes from the colonies. The British parliament passes a number of acts, like Sugar Act and Stamp Act. The tax was too heavy for the colonists, they thought it was unfair to them because they did not have a representative in parliament. The colonists became very angry with that, the British government and the colonists disliked each other more and more. This encouraged the American Revolution.

The last reason for the American Revolution was the influence of the Enlightenment. The colonists read the books of Enlightenment thinkers, eg John Locke and Rousseau. After reading those books, the colonists knew that they had the basic natural right, they also had the right to overthrow the bad government and question the unreasonable parliament. The American Enlightenment thinkers, such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, encouraged the colonists to fight for their independence. As a result, the American War of Independence occurred.

Evaluation

Outcomes for the teacher

I learned more about how to teach my students, especially when English is a second language for them. In teaching, I need to help my students more with understanding the text and with their writing. I aimed at helping my students with their writing of factorial explanations because this is one of the genres that makes up the subject, History. Of course, I can only help my students if I have more knowledge of the characteristics of different genres.

In this project, I taught them the structure and language features of factorial explanations. Their writing of two paragraphs of a factorial explanation showed me that they have developed good writing skills in that genre.

ILLIPS raised my awareness as a subject teacher as well as a language teacher. Now, I pay more attention to the language ability of my students and it has helped me teach writing in the junior levels. This is important for learning history, especially when the new syllabus emphasizes writing. Using the specific example of a factorial explanation, I have been able to teach my students systematically. As a result, I present texts using PowerPoint while teaching my students, especially in Forms 2 and 3.

Still, the terminology used in this course is rather different from the traditional terms I and my students have been exposed to. Therefore, perhaps some modification and amendments are needed to facilitate a smooth implementation.

Outcomes for her students

The students' responses have been positive. They showed better understanding and, therefore, a greater confidence and willingness to learn.

The students' performances are also better when compared with their performances in September of this school year and when compared with other classes in Form 2, learning more and showing good skills in writing a factorial explanation. In previous years, the Form 2 students usually wrote one or two paragraphs, but now they can write a whole text with good structure.