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Topical Progressions of EFL Students' Descriptive Essays

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Abstract: This study aims at assessing coherence as reflected in the topical progressions in the descriptive compositions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Year 6 students. It also aims at exploring the interaction between culture and rhetoric. The research locale is one of the private schools in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). Utilizing Lautamatti's framework for topical structure analysis, the topical progressions most commonly used by the EFL students in their compositions were determined. By means of frequency count, parallel progression appeared to be the most commonly used type of topical progression. The findings show that the thematic development was influenced by culture and first language (L1) rhetorical milieu surrounding the students, particularly the oralised culture of Arab speakers. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and observations prove that culture and language are inextricably linked and intertwined with language learning, particularly in written discourse. The results suggest that language proficiency in second language (L2) can be attained through learning the culture of the L2. It is recommended that using larger samples, future EFL studies on TSA as an assessment tool in assessing coherence and other high-level concerns in other types of academic genres be conducted.

Key Words: English as a Foreign Language; coherence; culture; topical structure analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

In written discourse, learners encounter the conventions required of the new language when comparing and contrasting with the conventions of his own language. According to Hwang, (1970, cited in Hourani, 2008), EFL learners have an existing knowledge of the language being learned and do not learn a new language at a zero knowledge level. Learners "interpret the new phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic patterns through those of their native language" (Hourani, 2000, p. 4). In addition to this, the learners have to consider higher level skills and lower level skills that primarily include content, structure, organization, grammatical structures, word choice and

mechanics which can affect their written output (Richards & Renandya, 2002, cited in Hourani, 2008). Although they may know the discourse topic, there is still the tendency to make errors in terms of the organization of the particular text type that is assigned to them to write. Lakhoua (2007) has observed that "there is a general belief that EFL students face problems when writing in the foreign language because they know "What" to write but do not know "How" to write (p. 225). This is affirmed by Al-Buainain (2007) saying that this problem is experienced by almost all EFL students in all educational levels – from the university level down to the primary level in different EFL contexts.

EFL learners in Middle Eastern countries experience much difficulty in their writing classes. An example of these

countries is the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country where majority of EFL learners speak diverse Arabic languages. These learners recognize English as indispensable tool for communication in international trade, commerce, science and technology, etc., but in schools, most Arabic learners seem taking the subject English like another content subject. Studies in contrastive rhetoric (CR) which center on cultural influences on academic writing revealed that Arabic learners have poor English writing skills though they demonstrate good performance in internationally recognized English proficiency examinations (Phuwichit, 2004). Furthermore, researchers found out that first language cultural elements influence how EFL learners think through what they read and hear and their ways of organizing their ideas in written discourse. According to Agnew (1994), a common weakness of their poor writing skills is lack of coherence. To address the lack of coherence in written texts, Hinds (1990, cited in Phuwichit, 2004) suggested that with help from their writing teachers the learners could reflect on and critique the organization and construction of their written texts to identify a cause or causes of lack of coherence. Topical structure analysis (TSA) has been recommended by many researchers from various cultural, educational, social settings as a framework for examining how ideas in written discourse such as essays are organized. TSA determines the topical progression employed by writers as a practical approach to assess their written academic genres. Specifically, it unfolds the development of a thesis statement via related topic sentences that are further supported by appropriate sentences. In other words, many scholars recommend topical structure analysis as a viable tool to examine coherence in written academic genres as it focuses on revealing “how sentences in a discourse are structured and how those sentences progress to form a discourse” (Phuwichit, 2004, p. 3). Among research gaps which this study aims to address is the fact about scarcity of studies done on the primary level that specifically

analyzed the topical structure of descriptive texts and influences of L1 culture as seen in learners’ compositions. In addition, this study aims to demonstrate how TSA can be used as an assessment tool to measure not only low-level concerns such as grammar, word choice and mechanic but also discourse level concerns such as clarity, development and logic (Salteh & Sadeghi, 2012).

With all these gaps in view, the study was conceptualized and the researchers specifically looked into an academic genre - descriptive essays of Arabic learners. This study seeks to examine the compositions of 30 EFL learners who are in Year 6 in one of the leading private schools in Dubai, UAE, following the Cambridge Primary Curriculum.

This study is deemed to benefit language learners in both EFL and ESL settings. Researchers in EFL writing believe that it is important that even at the primary level, learners’ writing concerns should be addressed in order to prepare them for the secondary level.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Different cultural settings have varied rhetorical patterns that are reflected by academic written discourse and spoken discourse and these patterns differ to a varied extent from culture to culture (Kaplan, 1966). Contrastive rhetoric differentiates and identifies the rhetorical thought patterns that exist among EFL learners. English rhetoric based on Kaplan’s (1966) model on contrastive rhetoric (see Figure 1) distinguishes writing in English as linear and direct. In contrast, Semitic writing which pertains to Jewish, Arabic, Armenian, employs parallel propositions, or incorporates stories in their writing. Recent research reaffirms that written conventions in English tends to be direct than that of other languages where the discourse topic may be explicit or implicit (Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Hinkel 1999).



Fig.1. Kaplan’s model (1966)



Writing, based on contrastive rhetoric (Connor, 1996, cited in Mohamed & Omer, 2000), is ensconced in one's culture. Mohamed and Omer (2000) identified that communication in Arab culture "tends to rely heavily on context, on the assumption that a great deal of background information is shared by the discourse participants (context-based)" (p. 67) because of its collectivist culture.

2.2 Topical Structure Analysis

Topical structure analysis (TSA) was conceived by Lautamatti (1987) for the purpose of examining coherence. TSA is a practical approach to assess written genres in the school level for it looks into the construction of the sentences and its progression to develop the discourse. Lautamatti (1987) identified three basic sentence elements that play a role in TSA. She identified the initial sentence element (ISE), which is what comes first in the sentence. This may be the subject of the sentence, an introductory phrase or clause, etc. The second element is the mood subject, or the grammatical subject of the sentence. The final element is the topical subject, which or which may not be the mood subject. After the three elements are identified in each sentence, the topical subject was plotted onto a graph, in order for the physical representation of the thematic development to be visualized.

Lautamatti (1987) suggested three types of thematic progression in her presentation of TSA: parallel progression (two consecutive clauses with the same topical subject); extended parallel progression (a topical subject that occurs in two clauses that are not consecutive); and sequential progression (the rheme element of a clause becoming the theme element of the consecutive clause).

2.3 Methodology

Seeking a formal permission from the school administration to conduct the

study in the school was the initial step taken. After the request was granted, a pilot study was undertaken. The piloting was applied to descriptive essays of a comparable sample of Year 5 students. By analyzing the essays of the pilot group, the researchers aimed at comparing Lautamatti's framework with Swales's framework relative to the research aims of the current study. In the pilot study, two inter-coders with appropriate educational and professional experience were employed to establish reliability. The pilot study helped to a great extent in polishing the procedure to follow in the actual study and in identifying Lautamatti's framework as the suitable one for the study. The compositions written in English of 30 Year 6 grade-school non-native speakers of English were analyzed in this study. Essays from five different nationalities were chosen at random. They were mostly from Arab countries and the rest were from India, Pakistan and other countries. The school population was dominated by Muslims. The participants, who were Pakistani, Emirati, Egyptian, Persian, and Jordanian students, represented the major nationalities of the population of Year 6. The participants' first languages were their native languages which include Arabic, Urdu, a language spoken in India and Pakistan, and Farsi. All the participants studied English in school.

To assess coherence, the essays were subjected to Lautamatti's topical structure analysis. The physical paragraphs were identified based on the spacing and indentation indicated by the writer. The independent clause in each paragraph was enclosed in brackets and numbered. After which, the topical subject in each clause was underlined then plotted onto a table. The clause number was shown on the leftmost part of the table. The topical subject for each clause was identified and the frequency of occurrence was indicated. Words and phrases that correspond to the same topical subject fall under one topical depth. Topical depth denotes the different topics that appear in every sentence. An acronym for each type of progression was used to designate the progression for each paragraph. The different types of progression are parallel progression (PP), sequential progression (SP), extended



parallel progression (EPP), and extended sequential progression (ESP).

The following thematic progressions, presented in tabular form, are from one of the five nationalities whose descriptive essays were analyzed in this study. Table 1 represents Emirati student's essay. It can be seen from Table 1 that all types of progression were evident among the six essays.

Table 1. Thematic progression of six Emirati students' essays

Student/ Theme progression	E m	E m	E m	E m	E m	E m	T
Total number of IC	12	18	10	13	10	26	89
New topics	0	1	1	0	0	5	7
PP	1	2	1	1	3	2	12
EPP	0	1	0	1	1	5	8
SP	0	1	1	0	1	5	8
ESP	0	1	0	0	0	3	4

Table 1 also shows the occurrence of thematic progressions in the six Emirati students' essays. It can be seen that the students employed all types of progression in the development of their essays but parallel progression was mostly preferred by students in developing the discourse topic. The repetition of key words and phrases in their clauses indicate that they were able to develop and focus on the discourse topic following the conventions of English rhetoric.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data reveal that the students use parallel progression in their descriptive texts followed by sequential progression and extended parallel progression. This shows

that students use the same topical subject in consecutive clauses and use the pronoun, *he*, as referent to the topical subject. With the characteristic feature of the descriptive genre to refer to the discourse topic, it is evident that students are able to write coherently in that they can lead the reader back to the discourse topic marked by the presence of extended parallel progression in their writing. According to Kiliç et al (2016), the issue on coherence, based on its text features, can be addressed from a topical perspective. A discourse topic is developed by sequence of sentences, or subtopics that build up the discourse topic. Thus, it is most probable that the subtopics are in progression that leads to the discourse topic.

Table 2 is the summary of thematic progressions in the essays of the five groups of nationalities and their frequency of occurrence.

Table 2. Thematic progression in the essays of the different groups of Year 6 students

Nationality/ Theme progression	Pa	Em	Eg	Pe	Jo	To tal
PP	19	12	16	5	11	63
EPP	16	8	12	6	7	49
SP	22	8	12	9	9	60
ESP	0	4	0	0	0	4

It can also be inferred from the findings that the use of cohesive devices by the students is for parallel progression. Based on the text analysis, the pronoun, *he*, is the cohesive device prevalent in their essays. Since the writing prompt is central to the main character in the novel, it is but appropriate to use, *he*, as the pronoun for the male character antecedent. The finding of the prevalent cohesive device in the texts can be explained by the cultural influence of Arabic in English written text. The use of a singular cohesive device is largely dependent on Arabic's imitation and memorization technique in learning.

In addition, based on the contrastive cultural dimensions designed by Jandt (1995, cited in Mohamed and Omer,



2000), Arab speakers have an oralised, collectivist, high-contact, high-context, reader-responsible culture. According to Mohamed & Omer (2000), the Arabic oralised culture produces essays that are repetition-oriented, context-based, and additive. In the current study, the oralised culture of Arab is evident in the use of repetition-oriented cohesion in the essays of the students. The repetition of anaphoric pronouns and nouns in subsequent sentences indicates the kind of repetition referred to by Gutwinski (1976, cited in Mohamed & Omer, 2000) as enation. He defined enation as having two sentences that have identical structures, or elements, belonging to the same class. The thematic progression employed by the students shows consecutive sentence topics that are semantically identical.

The influence of oral tradition is a result of the Islamic clergy's objective to preserve Qur'anic poetry, and classical oratory that it has impacted on the teaching of writing which is anchored on constant repetition and memorization. Alhosani (2008) views that writing in English among Arabic learners is caused by the traditional approach in writing where "the purpose of writing heavily depends on practicing words, phrases, and sentence structures, therefore writing is perceived as correctness of the product" (p. 14). Another important feature in an oralised culture is the significance of context in understanding and interpreting the relationship in the topics. In Arabic culture, pronouns are used to refer to more than one antecedent that it requires the reader to use context in order to understand and interpret correctly the meaning of the text (Mohamed & Omer, 2000). However, in the current study, the students used reference to refer to only one antecedent and the repeated use of nouns indicates the students' "awareness of controlling the flow of the topic for clearer understanding of the paragraphs and for sustenance of the attention of the intended audience" (Almaden, 2006, p. 148).

This is in contrast to the Arabic cohesion which was identified to be context-

based, instead, it reveals a text-based cohesion which is characteristic of English writers. Generally, English writers use pronoun as an antecedent to one referent to avoid ambiguity. Though context-based cohesion is commonly used in Arabic texts, it does not absolutely mean that Arabic writers do not use text-based cohesion (Mohamed & Omer, 2000). Similar to other non-native speakers of English, Arabic writers are capable of using other forms of cohesive devices and avoiding semantically identical elements in their sentences. The organization of the text reflects the student's understanding of the English rhetoric required for the written discourse. However, unlike the high-contact and reader-responsible characteristic of Arab speakers writing in English, the students in the current study exhibited the low-contact, low context, and writer-responsible dimensions.

Indeed, the diversity in the cultural and linguistic backgrounds affects the participants in their attempts at producing error-free compositions in English. They are inclined to rely on their prior knowledge and first languages to give meaning to their experiences and to make meaning of the world. These findings clearly confirm the effects of a first language on writing in English (Mohan & Lo, 1985; Edelsky, 1982; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Qaddumi, 1995).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The dominant topical progression employed by the students was parallel progression. It was followed by sequential progression and third was extended parallel progression. Reference and repetition were prevalent in the students' essays to show unity and clarity of ideas. The results indicate that culture has influenced the written discourse, particularly the oralised culture in Arab culture and the different structures of L2 have also impacted on the students' writing difficulties.

In the educational milieu where the students of this study have been learning English, it can be concluded that it was initially normal for them to have tended to adhere to the framework and structure of their first language and to think in their L1 so that they could retrieve from their memory relevant information about the topic of their compositions while attempting at



producing written texts in English. Language learning is a complex process and thus it takes a long period of time for EFL learners like the Arabs to gain mastery of Standard English writing conventions. Aside from attaining an effective use of form and sociolinguistic conventions of English, EFL students contend with the fact that they also implicitly acquire the “culture” of the target language as they learn various ways of interacting, assessing and using the target language in their social and academic interactions. Through the use of language, the students interact and are able to understand the diverse cultures around them, recognizing and appreciating the special differences in their social and cultural experiences, and the differences in their languages.

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