

The Writer-Reader Relationship in Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT

In the past, we were taught to think that writing and reading were two separate skills and the writer was more important than the reader because he or she was seen as an active composer of messages while the reader was seen only as a passive receiver of these messages. This has changed because in academic writing, the focus is on the active writer-reader relationship. Both the writer and reader will bring their world views to write and read the text respectively. The aim of this paper is to examine and understand how the writer (ESL student) and the reader (lecturer) relationship in academic writing can be improved if their shared knowledge of the assigned text increases. This concept is essential for good writing and ultimately this will help ESL students improve their grades in their writing assignments. This paper will also discuss how English instructors can play an important role in helping ESL students demonstrate, summarize and synthesize ideas in their written discourse.

INTRODUCTION

The writing of expository essays is an integral part of a student's life at the university and these students have to write these essays in the form of assignments which plays an important factor in their academic success. Monash University Malaysia like all the other universities in the region, is trying to remove certain weakness of these students who have a poor command of the English language. Hence, Monash University Malaysia has come up with a structured English plan for these weak students so that they can cope with assignments and ultimately, their exams.

The Subjects

This paper will focus on the writing styles of the very good and weak students in the Diagnostic English Test in Monash University Malaysia and how the weaker students fail to communicate their ideas to the reader, thus, hampering them to pass the writing component of the Diagnostic English Test. This test is administered to the first year students to gauge their level of proficiency in grammar, vocabulary and writing. The writing component carries 40 marks and if a student scored anything less than 25 marks, he or she is strongly advised to attend 15 hours of English lessons with the Language and Learning Support Unit of the university.

The following are some of the topics of the writing component in the Diagnostic English Test:

1. Business is about success or failure. Why are some business people more successful than others?
2. People nowadays, especially the younger ones, cannot leave their homes without their mobile phones. What are the reasons for this urgent necessity?
3. The advancement in science and medicine has made it possible for people to live longer and healthier life spans. A 100 –year life span can be achievable. Do you think it is important or necessary for everyone to live up to that ripe old age? Give reasons.

Explicit versus Implicit ideas

In academic writing, the writer must make it clear and exact his or her thought patterns to the reader, otherwise, the reader might lose interest in reading the work (Hodges & Whitten, 1986). The paragraphs in the expository essays must tell the reader why, how, when, what are the causes and effects of an issue or a problem. The first three sentences in a paragraph will inform the reader whether the ideas in initial thinking are clear and connected to the topic and if there is connection, the ideas in the text are explicit. Therefore, explicitness means the connection and clarity between the sentences and paragraphs and how it is related to the topic of the essay.

Implicitness, on the other hand, means that the writer is insensitive to the writer –reader relationship whereby the writer expects the reader to do all the work of breaking down the points or simply expecting the reader to do a lot of assuming of ideas about the piece of writing. However in other languages like Hindi, Chinese, Japanese, and Malay, the written discourse in these languages does not require explicitness in ideas because these languages have culture which encourages implicitness when presenting ideas (Clyne, 1994). Therefore ESL students, who speak these languages, feel that they are being rude if they gave straightforward and concise ideas. These ESL students are at a disadvantage if they subscribe to the writing styles of their first language in an English academic environment where the lectures expect their students to demonstrate their ideas in a clear and logical manner.

Examples of explicitness in writing of ideas in these two sample essays on topic 1 are as follows:

Subject 1

- a. With the fantastic spur both in economy and in industry in the world, business becomes a tool of communication. As we can see, some people are successful and others fail.
- b. First, to be a successful businessman, he should have responsible to do that. Secondly, they have some relationship with their business.

Subject 2

- a. The business world is a very challenging and stimulating one. It can either make you or break you. Competition refines a person in any field but it is how a person deals with it that matters A must have quality in every business person is good personal skills.
- B. This is crucial as companies are built by their workers and these workers want to be valued. Business people who are successful also know how to create the demand for their products.

Discussion

Subject 1 fails to show explicitness in his writing ,for example, he writes business becomes a tool in communication, what does he mean ? In paragraph 2, he writes that a successful businessman should have responsible to do that. Do what? Therefore in this

essay, the reader has to assume too many things and the writer –reader relationship is lost in this reasoning process. This is an implicit style of writing.

Subject 2, on the other hand, has established his ideas clearly to the reader and he manages to keep the reader interested in his writing. Therefore, Subject 2 is explicit and straightforward in his thought patterns; hence, this style of writing is necessary in academic writing.

Samples of essays on topic2 are as follows:

Subject 1

a. Mobile phone now is a high-tech produce in the world. The model and function was created more high-tech and functional.

b. Even charge is expensive but they still use the mobile phone to contact because it was faster and easy, they do not need go their house.

Subject 2

a. In Today’s society, mobile phones have become a very commonly used electronic item .It is almost impossible to meet a person who does not own one.

b. Mobil phones are a necessity as it provides us with many useful tools and functions that are very helpful to us in our daily activities.

Discussion

Based on the examples of these two sample essays, it is found that Subject 1 lacks explicitness in his writing and it is quite difficult to follow what he is trying to say. However, Subject 2 has a clearer style of presenting her ideas and thus helps the reader to understand the written discourse with ease.

Linear style of writing

The English culture bases a lot of emphasis on formality (Clyne, 1994) and this is reflected in the academic style of writing. In this style of writing, linearity of ideas is very important (Cox & Hill).This means that the essay has one central idea and every sentence and paragraph must express linear thought patterns be developed in a straight down direction without any digressions of ideas as found in other languages. However, the linear style is not seen as the superior pattern but it is just different from other style of writing (Kaplan, 1972).

In the linear style of writing, every sentence should be linked to the next and ultimately all the paragraphs must be linked to one another. There must be coherence where one sentence must link to the next so that the reader does not see gaps when reading. Therefore, there is no room for digression of ideas as found in other languages like Spanish, Japanese, Chinese or Hindi (Clyne, 1994).

In academic writing, every paragraph is a mini essay (Cox & Hill, 2004). where it has the introduction or theme of the topic, followed by concrete supporting details and concluded

with the rheme. The rheme is the concluding sentence where new ideas or information should move on to the next paragraph. So, this new concluding idea or rheme in the previous paragraph becomes the theme in the next paragraph. This type of linear thought pattern becomes reader- friendly for the reader. Also, discourse markers signaling time and sequence are also used to add a certain flow to the written discourse so that the writer can communicate effectively to the reader (Kane, 2003). Therefore, a linear link must be established between the sentences and paragraphs in an academic writing style.

Non-link and Weak link (Non-Linearity)

Non-link is when there is absolutely no link between the sentences and paragraphs and the structure of the written discourse is incoherent in nature. Weak link, on the other hand, tends to have minimal link between the sentences and paragraphs of the text and the writer often moves around the topic without making a clear stand towards the topic and this kind of weak link is called circumventing (Wong, 2005).

Examples of linearity and non-linearity structures found in these two sample essays on topic 3 are as follows:

Subject 1

I think it is important and necessary for everyone to live up to that ripe old age. Because there should be one thing called love in this world. It is so heartbroken to lose loved ones such as grandparents. So we need to find advanced technology and medical ways to deal with diseases.

First, an old man spends less money than kids. It is good for a society even they can do less thing than a normal people but they still have a clever brain .It is a goal of science area that everyone can live longer and far away from sick. So make human life longer and cheer the scientists to improve the technology.

Last but not least, we hope we have a happy and big family include grand parents and all our relatives. Everyone has a healthy body .So we can accept the natural dead of old man because when the one dead, they should be smile because he or she has a happy family. If the family happy every thing goes well.

Subject 2

An individual's quality of life does not depend on his life span. In life, happiness and emotional satisfaction are essential elements. Therefore, a long but lonely life without family and friends would undoubtedly be miserable.

Also regardless of our life span, we should contribute to society and not be selfish; otherwise, our time on earth will be meaningless. In addition if every one lives to a hundred years, there would be a population boom. With the overall life span increasing, there will not be enough living space and resources for everyone. Furthermore, the increase in senior citizens will cause a financial strain to most government.

If everyone were to live longer, there would also be less job opportunities for the younger generation. This is because the old generation will hold on to their jobs much longer if they lived a longer life span. All in all, enabling everyone to live up to a hundred years is unnecessary.

Discussion

Subject 1

Non-linearity is found in the writing style of subject 1 where the writer establishes no link between the sentences and if there is a link, it is definitely a weak one where the writer circumvents her ideas around the topic without making her stand clear towards the topic. This style of writing is digressive in nature and is found in some other languages (Clyne, 1994). The writer of this essay could be thinking in her first language and writing in the second language and as a result, there is no unity in what she thinks and writes. The essay lacks unity and coherence and there is no linearity of thought patterns.

Subject 2

The writing style of Subject two is linear with every sentence and paragraph linked coherently with discourse markers signaling change or similar ideas. The ideas are explained explicitly and logically between the various sentences and paragraphs towards the argument of the topic.

Action Research

Every semester Monash University Malaysia has about 20% of its ESL students, mainly from China and Indonesia and Malaysia, performing poorly in the Diagnostic English Test. These students need a structured language lesson plan in order for them to cope adequately with assignments and exam which is part and parcel of university life. This research paper is designed to come up with an action plan to removes some of these problems that ESL students face when confronted with academic writing style which strongly stresses on the explicitness and linearity of the text.

“Action research is the systematic inquiry which reflexes and focuses on the practical. It seeks to answer questions and solve problems that arise from the daily life of a classroom and to put findings into practice”

(Abdul Haqq, 1995: <http://www.eric.digest.org/1996-1/teacher.htm>)

METHODOLOGY

The Language and Learning Support unit has designed a lesson plan for these weak ESL students. The course structure is designed in the following manner:

- Provide students with examples of essays with linear style of writing from newspapers, textbooks and magazines
- Help students identify the thesis statement, topic sentences and supporting details of these sample texts from the reading materials mentioned above.

- Make students outline or come up with a mind-map of their essay or assignments.
- Review together with the students their paper and make the students analyze on their own if arguments presented in the paper are valid and pertinent to the topic. In this way, the students will have a feel of what is meant by explicitness and linearity of an academic writing style.
- Peer review of writing should also be encouraged so that the students can give each other positive or negative feedback on their paper and this can create an insightful learning experience for both the students and instructor.

CONCLUSION

Teaching writing goes beyond the teaching of grammatical aspect of English. We, the ESL instructors should focus on the macro level of teaching writing where thought patterns together with sentence and paragraph development must be taken into account in order for the writer – reader relationship to be established.

The ESL teacher must help students focus these salient characteristics of linear structure in academic writing which is coherence and explicitness of thought patterns. This explicitness and coherence of thought patterns is important in academic writing because the reader (instructor) will then be able to understand the text written by the writer (student) and this will eventually help the student get better grades in assignments and exams.

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