

The Relationship Between Types Of Paragraphs And Topic Progression Used In Paragraphs Written By Iranian EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Using Lautmatti's (1978) framework, this study examines the types of topic progression techniques used in 120 paragraphs written by 40 Iranian undergraduate students. Each student was asked to write three types of paragraphs; namely, those of comparison and contrast, cause-effect, and chronology. The present study investigates the relationship between the types of paragraphs and types of topic progression techniques used in them. As the results of the Chi-square test show, there is a relationship between types of paragraphs and types of topic progression techniques. In paragraphs of comparison and contrast, sequential progression (38.44%); in paragraphs of cause-effect, sequential progression (34.72%); and in paragraphs of chronology, extended parallel progression (35.52%) were the most frequently used types of topic progression.

Keywords: Lautmatti's (1978) Framework; Types of Topic Progression Techniques; Types of Paragraphs; Paragraphs of Comparison and Contrast; Cause-Effect; Chronology

INTRODUCTION

Teachers no longer view errors only as those which affect grammatical, lexical, or structural items, but also as errors that affect the discourse of a written text. In other words, teachers today are also concerned with a particular piece of writing communicating effectively and meaningfully by means of its coherence and its conforming to the expectations of its prospective readers. Most analytic scoring schemes for writing include descriptors concerning discourse-level features of writing, such as coherence. Some examples are: high-quality writing should be "well organized," exhibit "logical sequencing", and be "cohesive" (Jocabs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartifiel, & Haughey, 1981); it should have "a clear progression of ideas well-linked"; and it should provide "clear and consistent evidence of the ability to produce organized coherent and cohesive discourse" (Weir, 1990, p. 172). It also requires "logically consistent ideas in order for the writer to compose a coherent piece of discourse that is readable and understandable to whoever the intended audience may be or whatever the writer's purpose may be" (Almaden, 2006, p. 1). However, poor-quality writing may be "so fragmentary that comprehension of the intended communication is virtually impossible" (Todd, et al., 2004, p. 14).

This study focused on the coherence in EFL students' writings and its determination and assessment based on a framework proposed by Lautmatti (1978) - named Topical Structure Analysis (TSA) – that is concerned with the topics of sentences, their repetition, and their progression in a paragraph. His framework is useful to detect the digression, which is a common problem in students' writings and occurs when students use irrelevant examples or inappropriate supporting ideas and not only hinder the logical development of ideas, but also break the overall textual coherence. The knowledge of the types of progressions used in the TSA can help teachers determine whether students' compositions meet the standards of high quality paragraphs.

TSA is one strategy to make compositions easier to understand. so it is possible to scan through a composition and simply look for repetition of key words and phrases in order to determine whether it is a piece of coherent or incoherent writing. In addition, this would give teachers (of English ideas) on what teaching strategies would be appropriate to help students enhance their writing skills and address writing difficulties and problems at the discourse level. One can detect the type of topical progression most frequently used in different types of paragraphs. Then, he can have a generalization about the type of progression used in those paragraphs.

Research Questions

This study uses Latuamatti's (1978) framework to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any relationship between the type of paragraph and the frequency of the use of topic progression techniques used in them?
2. Is there any difference in the frequencies of types of topic progression techniques used in paragraphs of comparison and contrast written by undergraduate EFL students?
3. Is there any difference in the frequencies of types of topic progression techniques used in paragraphs of cause-effect written by undergraduate EFL students?
4. Is there any difference in the frequencies of types of topic progression technique used in paragraphs of chronology written by undergraduate EFL students?

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no relationship between the type of paragraph and the frequency of the use of topic progression techniques used in them.
2. There is no difference in the frequencies of types of topic progression techniques used in paragraphs of comparison and contrast written by undergraduate EFL students.
3. There is no difference in the frequencies of types of topic progression techniques used in paragraphs of cause-effect written by undergraduate EFL students.
4. There is no difference in the frequencies of types of topic progression technique used in paragraphs of chronology written by undergraduate EFL students.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As mentioned by Danes (1964), Firbas (1974, 1966), Halliday (1985), the linear order of words plays an important role in written texts to compensate for the loss of explicit clues about information available through intonation in the spoken language. In spoken English, emphasis is achieved by manipulating intonation; that is, informationally important elements get nuclear stress in tone and the speaker's emphasis can be directly inferred by the help of tonic accent, stress and pitch. In written English, however, there is no tonic accent and those informationally important elements must be inferred from their graphic representations. While speakers can directly convey their emphasis through stress and pitch, writers must manage this carefully with graphic signals (Fries, 1994) and with judicious word order, punctuation and discourse implication (about what the writer considers given or new information for the audience), topic and comment relationship — to compensate for the loss of such explicit markers of emphasis in speech

Lautamatti (1978) analyzed the relationship of "topic" and "comment" in sentences. Topic is what the sentence is about - the main idea of the sentence - and comment is what is said about the topic. He proposed TSA as a device to achieve coherence in writing. In TSA, researchers look at sequences of sentences and examine how the sentence topics work through the text to progressively build meaning (Kim, 1996). Lautmatti (1978) introduced three types of progression - parallel, sequential, and extended parallel progression. In parallel progression, successive sentences have the same sentence topics; that is, the topics of the various sentences are referentially identical, using repeated lexical items, synonyms, near-synonyms or pronouns. Writers who use parallel progression are fully aware of the content of their writing and the manner by which they can further explore that subject (Carreon, 2006). In sequential progression, the sentence topics are always different and the comment part of the previous sentence often becomes the topic of the following sentence. Extended parallel progression is temporarily

interrupted by a sequential progression. As Cerniglia, Medsker, & Connor (1990, p. 238) indicated, extended parallel progression “often develops an idea well, but also brings the reader back to the main idea to achieve closure”. Extended parallel progression shows the ability of the students in their discussion to go back to the main theme (Carreon, 2006). Simpson (2000) revealed a fourth type of progression identified as extended sequential progression. It occurs when the rhyme element of a clause is taken up as the theme of a non-consecutive clause.

In their research study on TSA, Schneider and Connor (1991) concluded that the low-, medium- and high-rated essays differed significantly in the proportion of parallel and sequential progression. The medium- and low-rated essays contained a greater proportion of parallel topics than did the high-rated essays, which contained a greater proportion of sequential progression.

Almaden (2006) investigated the topical progression in paragraphs written by Filipino ESL students. He used Lautamatti’s framework of TSA to investigate the students’ paragraphs. He found that parallel progression was the most preferred progression in the paragraphs, extended parallel progression was second, sequential progression was third, and extended sequential progression was used least in the paragraphs.

Carreon’s (2006) study involves a TSA of 20 student journals. As the results show, the most frequently occurring progressions are those that contain sequential patterns, such as the simple sequential and the extended sequential progressions. So, in general, students develop their topics coherently due to the high use of sequential progressions in its varied forms.

In his study, Kim (1996) investigated the TSA of Korean and American university students’ writings. In his analysis, paragraphs written by American students used more parallel and extended parallel progressions than those written by Korean students. Therefore, the total number of topics per paragraph in American students’ writings is smaller than that of Korean students. On the other hand, the paragraphs written by Korean students used more sequential progressions and, generally, the sequences of topics were not closely related to the main discourse topic or that of the previous sentence.

Yue Shan Fan (2008), in his thesis, evaluated the feasibility of implementing TSA as a revision strategy for Taiwanese EFL graduate students and as an alternative approach for detecting their coherence problems. He also used questionnaires on TSA to elicit students’ attitudes toward learning this strategy. The findings showed that the instruction has a positive effect on the students’ revising process. By analyzing the students’ writing samples, including drafts and revisions, different patterns and improvement in information organization were identified. All types of progressions - parallel, sequential, and extended parallel - increased after having received TSA instruction. Sequential progression was most frequently found in the students’ writings.

METHOD

This study investigated the types of topic progression techniques used in 120 paragraphs (40 paragraphs of comparison & contrast, 40 paragraphs of cause-effect and 40 paragraphs of chronology) written by 40 Iranian intermediate students. The characteristics of participants, data collection procedure, methodological framework, data analysis procedure, and the design of the study are explained thoroughly.

Participants

Forty under-graduate students - 19 males and 21 females - from Sabzevar University for Teacher Education, participated in this study. All of the students majored in English and they were in the age range of 19-24. All of them had prior experience in writing academic English paragraphs. They had taken writing courses to enhance their English writing ability and they had formal training in English writing skills. The course of writing, which they had passed, oriented them to the use of writing conventions and standards, including the general skills of writing as well as basic structure (the thesis statement, specific support, organization, unity, coherence and cohesion).

In their final exam session of their course of writing, all of the participants were asked to write three types of paragraph on three given topics, so each student wrote one paragraph each of comparison & contrast, cause-effect, and chronology on the given topics.

Instruments

Before gathering students’ samples, a TOEFL test, which its reliability (.97) and validity (.94) are mentioned in Estiri’s Master thesis, was administered to 40 junior students to determine their level of proficiency and to investigate the homogeneity of them. The students are in intermediate level of proficiency. The mean, score range, and standard deviations of the test are reported in Table 2.

Data Analysis Procedure

Following Schneider and Connor (1991), the unit for conducting TSA is t-unit, rather than sentence. Because t-units distinguish between simple sentences and sentences, they provide a more valid basis of comparison. Schneider and Connor (1991) define t-units as any independent clause and all its required modifiers, or any non-independent clause punctuated as a sentence (as indicated by end punctuation), or any imperative.

In conducting TSA, the t-units in each paragraph were numbered and then the topic of each unit was underlined. The determination of topic was based on interpretation (Witte, 1983a; Schneider & Connor, 1991) and “As for” device (Hoenich, 2009). After finding the topical subjects, these elements were plotted onto a table, such as Table 1. The clause number was indicated on the leftmost part of the table. The topical subject in the corresponding clause was written across each clause number. All words that had equivalent meaning fell under one topical subject. All new topics were indented to the right. The types of progression identified by Lautamatti (1978) and Simpson (2000) - parallel progression, sequential progression, extended parallel progression and extended sequential progression- could be visualized. The following paragraph, taken from the sample, is provided as an example of how the procedure was done:

There are five major differences between Iran and Norway. Iran has a larger population than Norway. Statistics showed that Iran's population is more than 70,000,000, while Norway’s is 4,200,000. Iran includes an area of 1,600,000 km², while Norway’s is just 322,878 km². Contrary to Iran, which is Islamic Republic, Norway is constitutional monarchy. Iran's religion is Islam, while Norway’s is Christianity. The language of Iran is Persian and Norwa’y is Norwegianian.

- 1. differences between Iran and Norway
- 2. Iran
- 3. Iran’s population*
- 4. Norway’s population
- 5. Iran
- 6. Norway*
- 7. Norway
- 8. Iran’s religion*
- 9. the language of Iran*

Table1: Frequency of Types of Topic Progression Techniques in the Sample Paragraph

t-unit	Parallel Progression	Sequential Progression	Extended Parallel Progression	Extended Sequential Progression
9	1	2	1	4

Notes:

 represents sequential progression

* represents extended sequential progression

Design

The researcher had no control over the selection and manipulation of the independent variable, so the design of this research study is ex post facto. The researcher looks at the type or the degree of relationships between two variables rather than at the cause and effect relationship.

RESULTS

In order to investigate the homogeneity of participants, a version of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) was used. The students were supposed to answer the grammar, vocabulary and reading sections of the test. The scores were based on 100. Descriptive statistic results for the TOEFL are given in Table 2. It is important to mention that the results did not affect the process of subject selection. The test was used to determine the level of students’ proficiency. As it is evident, the level of proficiency of the students is intermediate.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for TOEFL Scores

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
VAR00001	40	50.00	34.00	84.00	59.6875	14.60009	213.163
Valid N (listwise)	40						

Descriptive Statistics for the Types of Topic Progression Technique Used in Paragraphs of Comparison and Contrast, Cause-effect and Chronology

The frequency of the use of each type of topic progression technique in three types of paragraphs is given in Table 3 and the bar graph presenting this data is shown in Figure 1.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for the Use of Topic Progression Techniques in Paragraphs of Comparison and Contrast, Cause-effect and Chronology

		Frequency			Percent			Valid Percent			Cumulative Percent		
		Comp. & con.	Cause-effect	Chro.	Comp. & con.	Cause-effect	Chro.	Comp. & con.	Cause-effect	Chro.	Comp. & con.	Cause-effect	Chro.
Valid	p.	72	73	113	11.6	23.5	25.6	11.6	23.5	25.6	11.6	23.5	25.6
	s.	238	108	108	38.4	34.7	24.4	38.4	34.7	24.4	50.1	58.2	50.0
	e.p.	113	58	157	18.3	18.6	35.5	18.3	18.6	35.5	68.3	76.8	85.5
	e.s.	196	72	64	31.7	23.2	14.5	31.7	23.2	14.5	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Total	619	311	442	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0			

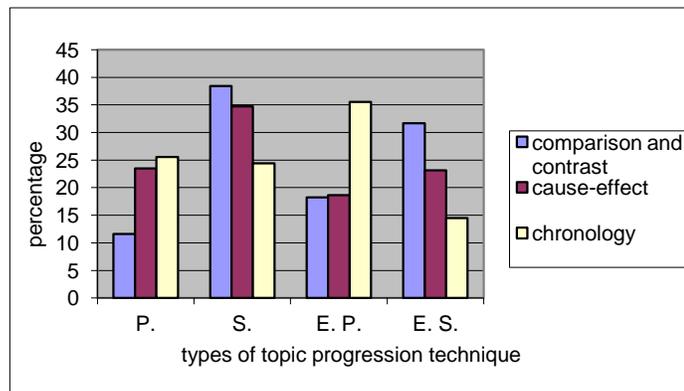


Figure 1: Bar Graph for the Percentage of the Use of Types of Topic Progression Techniques in Paragraphs of Comparison and Contrast, Cause-effect and Chronology

The Relation between the Types of Paragraph and the Frequencies of the Types of Topic Progression Technique Used in Them

To test if there is a relationship between the types of paragraphs and frequency of topic progression techniques used in them, the Chi-square test was used. Table 3 shows the observed frequencies of topical progression techniques in three different paragraphs. As it is evident in Table 4, the observed value of the Chi-square at the .05 level of significance and 6 degrees of freedom is greater than the critical value, so the null hypothesis is rejected. That is, there is a relationship between the types of paragraphs and the frequency of the types of topic progression techniques used in them.

Table 4: Chi-square Test

Observed value	Critical value	Sig.	d.f.
118.84	12.59	.05	6

In order to examine the difference between the frequency of types of topic progression techniques used in each type of paragraph, a Chi-square test was conducted separately, so the result of the Chi-square test for paragraphs of comparison and contrast, cause-effect, and chronology are provided in Tables 5, 6 and 7, respectively.

Table 5: Chi-square Test for Paragraphs of Comparison and Contrast

Observed value	Critical value	Sig.	d.f.
111.27	7.81	.05	3

Table 6: Chi-square Test for Paragraphs of Cause-effect

Observed value	Critical value	Sig.	d.f.
23.92	7.81	.05	3

Table 7: Chi-square Test for Paragraphs of Chronology

Observed value	Critical value	Sig.	d.f.
50.42	7.81	.05	3

As the observed value is greater than the critical value in each Chi-square test, the null hypothesis is rejected. That is, there are differences between the frequency of types of topic progression techniques used in paragraphs of comparison and contrast, cause-effect and chronology, and these differences are not due to chance. As it is presented in Table 3, sequential progression, with a percentage of 38.4, is the dominant type of progression used in paragraphs of comparison and contrast; sequential progression, with the percentage of 34.7, is the dominant type of progression used in paragraphs of cause-effect; and extended parallel progression, with the percentage of 35.5, is the dominant type of progression used in paragraphs of chronology.

CONCLUSION

The frequencies of the types of topic progression techniques used in three different paragraphs - chronology, comparison and contrast, and cause-effect - were determined. The Chi-square test was used to investigate if there is a relationship between types of paragraphs and types of topic progression techniques used in them. Statistical analyses, with an alpha level set at .05, confirm that such a relationship exists and that it is significant. The results of the chi-square test for each type of paragraph were separately used to answer the second, third and fourth questions. As the analyses show, the differences in the frequency of topic progression techniques in each paragraph were not due to chance. In paragraphs of comparison and contrast, sequential progression (38.44%); in paragraphs of cause-effect, sequential progression (34.72%); and in paragraphs of chronology, extended parallel progression (35.52%) were the most frequently used types of topic progression.

In paragraphs of comparison and contrast and in paragraphs of cause-effect, sequential progression is the dominant type of progression. According to Carreon (2006), an idea is developed by the use of extended sequential progression. This type of progression adds detail to a topic mentioned earlier in a rheme of a clause. It increases the number of different topics and connects the ideas across the paragraphs. In paragraphs of chronology, extended parallel progression is the dominant type of topic progression. According to Schneider & Connor (1991), parallel progression (the repetition of key words or phrases in consecutive clause) and extended parallel progression (the repetition of key words or phrases in nonconsecutive clauses) are used to reinforce an idea in the reader's mind and remind the readers of the important topics. In these types of progressions, writers choose to string ideas close together rather than link them across paragraphs (Almaden, 2006).

As it is seen, nearly similar types of topic progression techniques are used in paragraphs of comparison and contrast and paragraphs of cause-effect. This might be because both types of paragraphs have the same paragraph organization - listing. According to Alavi (2010), there is a relationship between paragraph organization and the types of topic progression technique used in paragraphs; and as it is evident in this study, these paragraphs have topic progression techniques different from those used in paragraphs of chronology. Again, this can be related to their paragraph organizations. Since paragraphs of comparison and contrast and paragraphs of cause-effect on the one hand, and paragraphs of chronology, on the other hand, have different paragraph organizations, the types of topic progression used in each group might differ from the other.

Implications and Application

Based on the findings and conclusions, this study offers some implications for EFL learners, teachers, and material developers.

Implications for EFL Learners

Most of the time, EFL learners have problems in writing a coherent paragraph. They should consider the elements, such as cohesion and coherence, and the way these elements can affect their writings. Being aware of topic progression techniques is useful in constructing a passage coherently, so they should be familiar with these techniques and consider them when writing a paragraph.

Implications for the EFL Teachers

Writing teachers should provide students with explicit instructions on TSA and types of topic progression techniques, using ample examples and elaborations. Teachers should emphasize the importance of such information and its effect on writing effective paragraphs by students.

After providing the students with the general information about four types of topic progression techniques, the teachers can teach the types of topic progression used most frequently in paragraphs with a specific organization. They should emphasize that in paragraphs with different organizations, different types of topic progression techniques are likely to be used.

Implications for Syllabus Designers

Since it is the sentence rather than the text as a whole that has received the primary focus (Johns, 1980), the syllabus designers had better make some changes in the contents and emphasize on discourse level rather than sentence level. In explaining coherence, most of the books provide students with subjective explanations. It is a good idea that syllabus designers present TSA and topic progression techniques as explanations to the way coherence is created in paragraphs. Moreover, they had better devote some parts of the writing textbooks to introduce different types of topic progression used in paragraphs with different types of organization.

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