

A Study of the Systemic Functional Revisions in EFL Academic Writing

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Abstract

This study approaches the dynamic systemic functional description of written academic texts through a rigorous endeavour into revisions produced by EFL poor and good student writers. To this end, relying on a questionnaire, this study makes use of students' own evaluation of their writing in order to understand how poor and good writers functionally revise the draft(s) of their essays. By understanding how these writers revise text in light of academic expectations, this study adds to the already existing descriptions of EFL writers' revision behaviour. The results of this study may help in designing activities following functional basis so as to help poor writers become better writers.

Keywords: *Revisions, systemic functional linguistics, English as a foreign language, thematic progression, writer.*

دراسة وظيفية توليدية للتنقيحات في الكتابة الأكاديمية بالإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم وصف ديناميكي للنص الأكاديمي المكتوب من خلال البحث الجاد في التنقيحات التي ينتجها الطلاب ذوي المستوى الضعيف والطلاب ذوي المستوى الحسن في كتابتهم باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. ولتحقيق هذه الغاية، تم الاعتماد على تقييم الطلاب لكتابتهم بالاعتماد على استبيان من أجل فهم كيف يقوم كلا الصنفين من الطلبة (الطلاب ذوي المستوى الضعيف والطلاب ذوي المستوى الحسن) بتنقيح مسودة مقالاتهم. ومن خلال ذلك ستضيف هذه الدراسة إلى المجموعة الحالية من الأوصاف المعرفية لسلوك كتاب النصوص الأكاديمية عند مراجعة مسوداتهم. ويمكن أن تكون نتائج هذه الدراسة مفيدة في تصميم الأنشطة على أساس وظيفي لمساعدة الطلاب ذوي المستوى الضعيف على تحسين مستواهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: لغويات وظيفية نظامية، إنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، عملية كتابة، تطور مضمون نص، كاتب.

Une étude systémique fonctionnelle des révisions dans l'écriture académique de l'Anglais langue étrangère

Résumé

Cette étude tente d'explicitement comment les révisions étaient effectuées dans la formulation du sens des textes produits par des étudiants-bons scripteurs et des étudiants-scripteurs en difficulté en classe d'Anglais langue étrangère. Elle se sert de l'analyse d'étudiants-scripteurs sur leurs propres comportements scripturaux afin de comprendre comment les bons- et les mauvais-scripteurs procèdent de manière fonctionnelle à la révision de leurs productions écrites. Les résultats de cette étude pourraient être utiles pour la mise en place d'une démarche méthodologique afin d'aider les scripteurs en difficulté à améliorer leurs productions écrites.

Mots-clés: *Révision, linguistique systémique fonctionnelle, Anglais langue étrangère, processus rédactionnel, développement du thème, scripteur.*

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Introduction:

The ultimate aim of the writing process is not the creation of text but is the creation of meaning⁽¹⁾. Yet, focussing in the previous decades on the cognitive processes involved in making meaning, research in both native and EFL contexts has tended to ignore the functionality of meaning inherent in revision activity and little work has been done, though, with promising results. Hence, the secondary position given to such revisions compared to cognitive processes involved in writing has urged researchers in native context, particularly in higher education, to explore this previously unrealised threat of research.

While research has shown that skilled and unskilled writers behave differently (Langer and⁽²⁾ and⁽³⁾ and that “we can specify a curriculum by studying what experts do and teaching our students to do likewise”⁽⁴⁾, nothing in the EFL context has been done with regard to functional revisions. Thus, the aim of the present study is to help poor writers become better writers through attending to what and how good writers functionally revise Theme-Rheme structure in their text at the level of the sentence and above it and to urge poor writers to do likewise.

1-Literature review:**1-1-Writing and functional revisions:**

Writing is a process of approximately transforming networks of non-linear, recursive thought patterns into linear, sequential arrangements in an organized text within which the reader is told where to look for such connections and related ideas⁽⁵⁾ and⁽⁶⁾. In writing, then, a collection of floating ideas (meaning) is recognized into an unfolding of words- a final product which is the result of a sequence of interactions between writers and their texts or as put : “the composed utterance has a history where a sequence of interactions and possibly a series of externalized inscriptions have been organized around the project of a final text/performance”⁽⁷⁾(p. 27).

As writers, we may go about essay writing in fundamentally different ways, yet we end up with well-developed texts that express meaning. That is to say, how writers write (the writing process followed) does not necessarily equate with the quality of the finished product; rather, it is the functional revision process that writers embark on in the course of making meaning that enables them to encode meaning in a piece of writing (ibid). Therefore, to understand how meaning is made in text, it is necessary to look, not at the writing process itself, but into the functional revisions embedded in it. In this connection, research in the native context has shown that increasing revision in interpersonal and experiential meanings leads to an increase in meaning features in text⁽⁸⁾. In the EFL context, we assume that it is a parallel case to the native context.

1-2- Systemic functional linguistics:

Systemic functional linguistics is both a theory of language and a tool for analysis which has proved to be powerful in explaining how meaning is organised in texts. Various studies have approached Theme and Rheme empirically. In written texts, Theme- Rheme framework has been also a useful tool of analysis of good and poor writers’ products⁽⁹⁾. Given this framework capacity to capture the organization of a text, the aim of these analyses is to deepen our understanding of how texts are organized so that the realisation of ideational and interpersonal meanings is enabled. Also, given this framework capacity to capture the effective ordering of constituents and how cohesion and coherence can be achieved through getting Themes effectively organised in texts⁽¹⁰⁾ and⁽¹¹⁾, we aim at investigating how revisions to make meaning within and across sentence (s) level help student writers to develop meaning at sentence level through information flow saved. This aim is achieved through the characterisation of well written and poorly written productions of students with regard to thematic patterns. However, how the realisation of ideational and interpersonal meanings is enabled through the writing process students engage in, mainly at the drafting stage where they are assumed to make functional revisions so that meaning making is enabled, is not sufficiently explored in EFL research.

2- Research questions:

Taking into account systemic functional linguistics ability in explaining functional revision and its applicability in exploring this previously unrealized thread of research into written text as process, this paper subsumes a number of underlying motifs, which are reflected in three research questions:

- 1- What are the functional changes the good and the poor EFL writer-participants make in their drafts?
- 2- Do the changes the good EFL writers make converge with those made by poor EFL writers?
- 3- What are the aspects of making meaning, among the EFL participants, which illustrate evidence of good or poor writing development?

3- Methodology:

3-1- Methodological approach:

To provide answers to these questions, the study makes use of the students’ own evaluation of the functional revisions they make as they move from one draft to another

3-2- Participants:

38 students with different proficiency levels in writing are selected from third year LMD students taking a course in academic writing in the second semester at the University of Skikda, Algeria. On the basis of their academic records, 12 students are with low proficiency level while 28 are with good level.

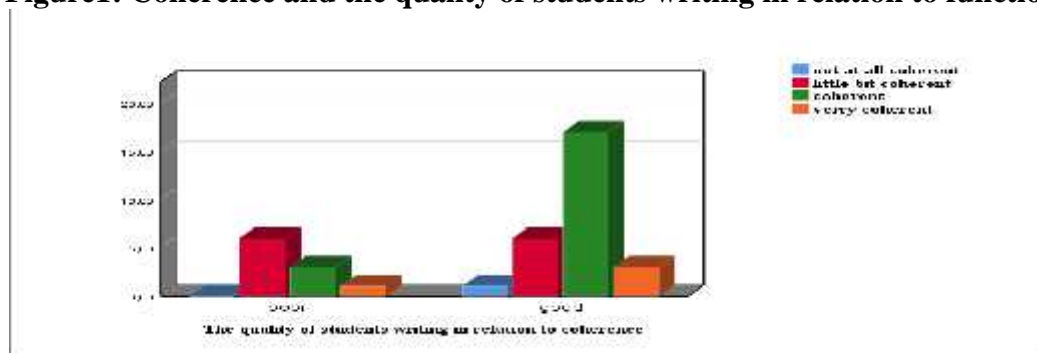
3-3- Procedure:

Our procedure in analysing the collected data is vested in the use of statistical and descriptive analysis of a questionnaire designed for the purpose of the study (see Appendix). Using SPSS version 25 (the latest), we first categorise the respondents into poor and good writers and then we subcategorise them into those who make drafts and those who do not. Then, we represent those who draft in tables and graphs that give room for comparison and contrast.

4- Findings:

4- 1- Functional revisions, coherence and good writing:

Figure1: Coherence and the quality of students writing in relation to functional revisions



Analysis of the good writers’ responses demonstrates that the highest percentages, as shown in figure 1, are in favour of texts being coherent: 44.4% of students said that their texts are coherent, a result that is magnificently significant compared to those whose writing is not at all coherent (1%) or little bit coherent (21.43%) on the one hand, and to what the analysis of the poor writers has revealed on the other (as shown in figure 1); most of poor writers’ texts (58.33%) are only little bit coherent.

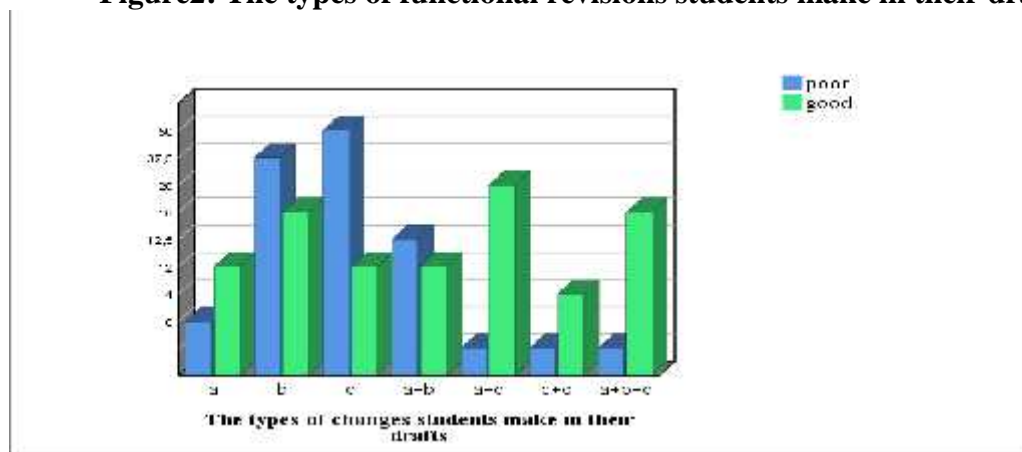
Table 1: Revision of structures and ideas before making changes from one draft to another.

Sr	Poor				Good			
	F	P	Pv	Pc	F	Pv	P	Pc
Fr								

no	3	25,0	27,3	27,3	1	3,6	4,0	4,0
yes	8	66,7	72,7	100,0	24	85,7	96,0	100,0
T	11	91,7	100,0		25	89,3	100,0	
M	1	8,3			3	10,7		
T	12	100,0			28	100,0		

Ideas and language are tightly related since a change in ideas leads to functional changes in language so as to make appropriate choice- to select structures that will express them⁽¹²⁾,⁽¹³⁾and⁽¹⁴⁾, and⁽¹⁵⁾. In the present study as displayed in table 1, 87. 3 % of the participants make revisions and then changes either in ideas or structures.

Figure2: The types of functional revisions students make in their drafts.



Based on the revision of a previous draft, the students make the changes represented in figure 2. Interestingly enough, separate changes have received rather similar percentages. These changes are classified as follows: 19.1% represent the changes in ideas (new structures are needed), followed by 17.6% in language (revision in the already written structures), and then by 16.2% for changes in text organisation (thematic progression). A simultaneous change however in ideas and text organisation represents a percentage similar to the changes in language (17. 6%). As we can see, the simultaneous changes good writers make are by far more important than the simultaneous changes poor writers do while it is the opposite with regard to separate changes.

4-2-Revisions in Theme:

4-2-1-Within sentences:

Figure 3: The functional revisions students make within a single sentence

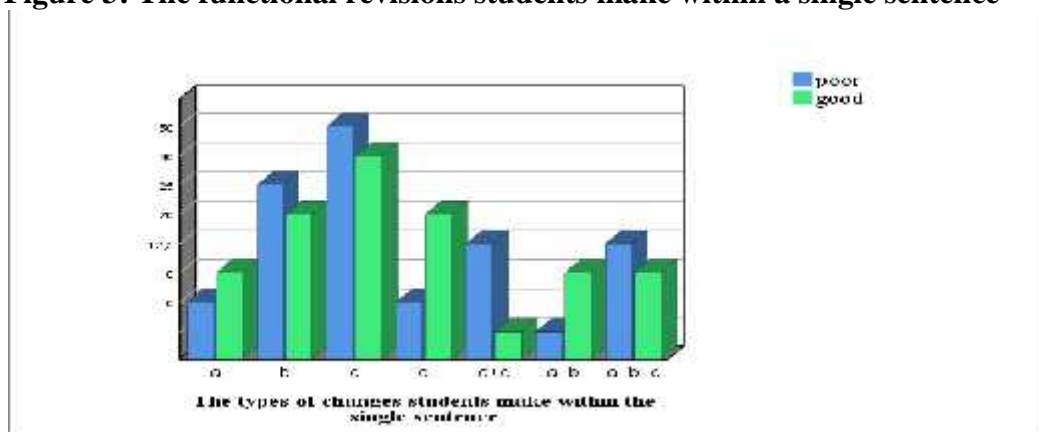
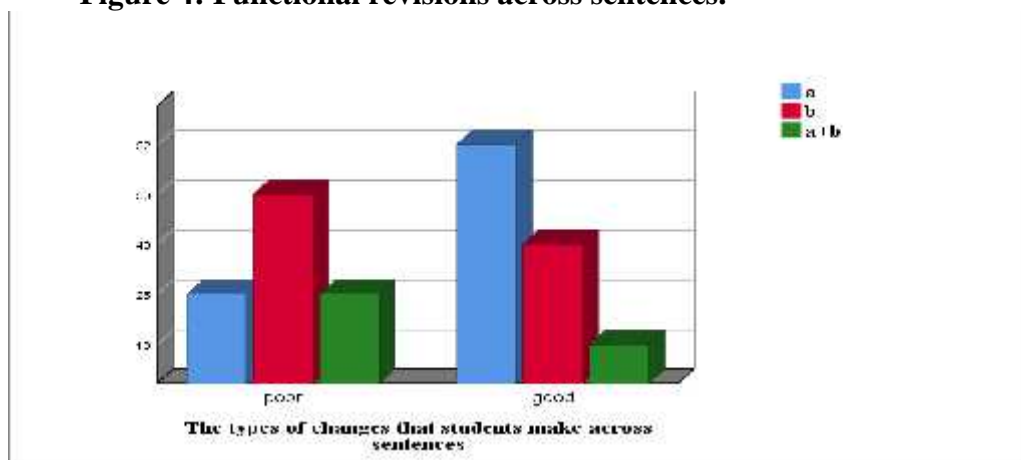


Figure 3 shows that the changes that good writers make are in parallel with the changes that poor writers make. Noticeably, compared to other changes, the important changes that poor and good writers make are adding either words or expressions that change meaning of the first part of the sentence (Theme). These additions must be either experiential or interpersonal themes or both.

4-2-2-Across sentences:

The functional revisions writers make within or across sentences in the Theme are fundamentally revisions in the experiential, interpersonal or textual meanings. Across sentences, turning simple sentences into complex ones, for example, calls for the use of conjunctions that link a process configuration to another process in the experiential meaning.

Figure 4: Functional revisions across sentences.



Significantly, more than half of the good writers (52%) turn simple sentences into complex, 40% try to make sentences cohesive and the rest do both changes. By contrast, half of the poor writers (50%) try to make sentences cohesive while only 25% turn simple sentences into complex.

4-2-3- Along the text (thematic progression):

Table 2: Functional revisions for each couple of two successive sentences along the text

	Poor				Good			
	F	P	P v	P c	F	Pv	P	P c
no	5	41, 7	55, 6	55, 6	8	28, 6	30, 8	30, 8
yes	4	33, 3	44, 4	100, 0	18	64, 3	69, 2	100, 0
T	9	75, 0	100, 0		26	92, 9	100, 0	
M	3	25, 0			2	7, 1		

T	12	100.0		28	100,0		
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Seemingly, the type of thematic progression the good writers follow differs from the one followed by most of the poor writers. 55.6% of the former make sentences coherent along the text, while 66.9% of the latter do not.

5-Discussion of the results:

To make meaning in academic texts, the good and the poor writers functionally revise their texts differently. For example, while the poor writers make many revisions in ideas and language separately, the good writers make many simultaneous revisions. These divergences in functional revision of the poor and the good students’ writing are apparent at the level of the text and above, ie, clause complex and text level.

Therefore, to make the meaning required, the poor writers must show different practices with regard to functional revisions in their revision activity at the drafting stage. Therefore, the need to acquire the range of practices characteristic to good writers is patent in this study.

5-1- Functional revisions and success in writing:

Unlike the poor writings, the good ones exhibit a well established coherence⁽¹⁶⁾. From a functional perspective, one way to establish coherence is through exploiting Theme system⁽¹⁷⁾. Hence, Theme may be a source of deterring the texts coherence in particular and its quality in general if not appropriately constructed and exploited. In the present study, while all the students functionally revise their texts, some of their productions are good while others are poor. Surprisingly, the good productions are the ones that are coherent and therefore, it can be claimed that the good writers succeed in functionally revising the Theme system while the poor writers do not.

5-2- The functional revisions the students make:

5-2-1-Theme in the sentence:

The Theme of the clause must be written carefully because it is very essential for the organisation of the message. Writers must make appropriate the choice concerning what to put as Theme. That is why they need to make many revisions to end up with the appropriate Theme. In the context of our study, most of the functional revisions poor and good writers have made are revisions in the experiential and interpersonal meaning. This partially explains the results reported in a study⁽¹⁸⁾ that shows that poor writers misplace experiential and ideational Theme. When poor writers revise their sentences, they do not select the element (actor, process, circumstances) appropriate to the type of writing they embark on. To identify what they should select we need to have empirical data of both poor and good writers compared.

5-2-2-Theme across sentences:

Lexical elements that basically function as textual theme like conjunctions are numerous in good writers’ papers⁽¹⁹⁾. The results obtained in the present study support this view; this huge number of lexical elements functioning as Theme is the result of changes that aim at fitting experiential meaning at the level of the complex clause, not the simple clause. On the contrary, in their revision(s), the poor writers pay more attention to lexical cohesion not to coherence and therefore, more attention is given to local meaning more than holistic meaning.

Therefore, this study is significant in two ways. First, it contributes to explaining functionally why poor writers are projective writers and good writers are retrospective writers. From a methodological point of view, the complex clause is deemed to be the unit of analysis in similar studies.

5-2-3-Theme at the level of the text (thematic progression):

Good writers use a variety of thematic progression types among which the zigzag is the most common, while poor writers tend to use only constant thematic progression⁽²⁰⁾. As figured out in this study, this is due to the functional revisions both categories of writers make at the level of the entire text. Additionally, while the good writers not only turn each two successive sentences into a complex one, but also vary the functional revisions they make to

create texture and hence they utilise different thematic progression types, the poor writers do not.

Conclusion:

This study is a descriptive- empirical attempt to figure out the functional revisions of both good and poor writers' revision activity attendant to making meaning in academic texts. This approach allowed us to confirm that the poor writers' revisions diverge from those of the good ones and proved the applicability of the results of Neil's study to the Algerian context⁽²¹⁾. His study claims that good writing is the outcome of the efficient functional revision accompanying the writing process, not the process itself and that an increase in revisions in the experiential meaning leads to an increase in the possibility of making meaning. Furthermore, this study has confirmed that there is a divergence between the functional revisions poor and good writers make at the level of the clause and above. Therefore, following scholars' belief of good writing skill use, teaching poor writers to revise their drafts the way good writers do will help them improve their writing..

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Appendix: Students' Questionnaire

Dear student,

This questionnaire is part of a research work carried out on students' academic writing. Your answers will be used to explore students' drafting process to meet the criteria of good writing in the final production. Your answers will be treated anonymously.

Please put a tick () in front of the option of your choice and write down your comments when required. You can choose more than one option when necessary. Also, before you complete the questionnaire, please read the notes at the bottom of the last page.

Thank you in advance for your collaboration

Section 1: Students' writing background

1- Do you write various types of sentences in your writing?

a- Yes b- No

2- If yes, which type of sentences do you write more?

a- Simple b- compound c- complex d- compound complex

3- How would you describe your writing based on your teacher remark?

a- Not at all coherent b- little bit coherent

c- Coherent d- highly coherent

4- How would you generally evaluate your writing?

a- Very poor b- poor c- average

d- Good e- very good f- excellent

Section 2: Changes in the Theme and thematic progression.

5- Do you draft when you write your assignments in written expression classes?

a- Yes b- No

6- If yes, do you revise structures and ideas and then make changes from one draft to another.

a- Yes b- No

7- If yes, what kind of changes do you make?

a- Changes in ideas

b- Changes in language

c- Changes in text organization

d- Other, specify please

8- If No, please say why.

a- Your ideas are the ones you wanted to express

b- Your language is appropriate to the type of writing

c- Your text is coherent and cohesive

d- More, specify please

9- Do you make changes within the single sentence when you make your drafts?

a- Yes b- No

10- If yes, what type of changes do you make within the sentence when you move from one draft to another?

a- You reword the beginning of the sentence

b- You add words to the noun group of the sentence

c- You add parts that add to the meaning of the first part of the sentence

d- Others specify please

How many drafts do you make when you write?

a- 1 b- 2 c- 3 d- 4 e- more (number)

11- Whatever the changes you choose in question 12, in which draft do you make them?

a- 2nd draft

b- 3rd draft

c- More drafts, specify please.....

12- Do you make changes across sentences?

a- Yes b- No

13- If yes, what changes do you make?

a- You turn two simple sentences or more into complex ones

b- You try to make sentences cohesive.

14- More, specify please

a- How do you make two successive sentences cohesive?

b- You reword the first sentence .

c- You reword the second sentence .

d- You repeat or reword part of the first sentence in the second

e- You focus on information structure

f- More, specify please

Whatever your answer to question number 17, do you apply it/ them for each couple of two successive sentences along the text when necessary?

a- Yes b- No

15- If yes, when do you apply it?

a- When you move to the 2nd draft

b- When you move to the 3rd draft

c- More drafts, specify please

d- Why do you make the changes you mentioned above (question 17)?

16- Why in the draft you mentioned in question 19?

a- It is the only draft you make

b- In other drafts you make other changes

c- Other, specify please

Section 3: Changes in information structure

17- Do you revise the information you put in your sentences?

a- Yes b- No

18- If yes, what do you change in your drafts?

a- The order old/ new information

b- The information you have put itself

c- Information flow

19- What is the purpose behind the changes you make?

a- To make the text more coherent

b- To enable the reader to interpret the meaning

c- Other, specify please

20- In which draft do you make changes in information structure?

a- 2nd draft

b- 3rd draft

c- More, specify please

21- Why do you make changes in the draft you mentioned in particular?

22- Do you make changes in and across sentences (mentioned in section 2) and information structure in the same draft?

a- Yes b- No

23- If no, which one do you make first?

a- Changes in and across sentences

b- Changes in information structure

24- Whatever your answer to question 28, is it:

a- To make the other changes easy

b- To re-change in the next draft

c- Others, specify please.

25- What is the most challenging task that leads you to draft?

- a- Keeping information flow
- b- Managing sentence structure
- c- Making sentence fit within the text
- d- Using varieties of structures in your writing
- e- Enabling the reader to interpret the meaning
- f- other, specify please

Section 4: Suggestions and recommendations

What can you suggest in terms of changes in and across sentence structure and information structure at the drafting stages to improve your writing?

Please note:

Old information: information or idea you have already mentioned in the text or in previous sentence.

New information: information you want to say more (you focus on).

Information structure: how to put old information and new one in a sentence.