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Using Systemic Functional Linguistics as a Tool of Assessing Students' Academic Writing-

The Case of 2ⁿᵈ Year LMD Students University Batna 2

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ملخص

في الوقت الحاضر يواجه الطلاب صعوبات متعددة في عملية التعلم بشكل عام وخاصة الكتابة. وقد لاحظ المعلمون أن التكنولوجيا أثرت سلبا على الكتابة الأكاديمية للطلاب بسبب الاستخدام المستمر للغة الإنترنت. في هذه الدراسة البحثية، تم إجراء تحقيق في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية لكسب الحقائق وتحليلها. أجري البحث باستخدام علم اللسان الوظيفي النظامي (سفل) لتحليل عينات الطلاب المكتوبة. وأظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب الذين اعتبروا غير كفؤين لم يتمكنوا من فهم الموضوع، وكتابة متماسكة وبناء نص منظم للمنظمة.هذا البحث هو دعوة لمزيد من البحث حول ما يؤثر على الكتابة الأكاديمية للطلاب، وخاصة في الرقمية وما يمكن القيام به من قبل المعلمين لتعزيز وتطوير قدراتهم على الكتابة. لهذا الغرض، تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى أن تكون نقطة انطلاق للإجراءات التخفيفية التي ينبغي أن تتخذ من قبل المدربين على مستوى الجامعة.

الكلمات الدالة: الكتابة الأكاديمية، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة إفل، علم اللسانيات النظامية.

Abstract

Nowadays students are facing multiple difficulties in the process of learning in general especially that of writing. Teachers have noticed that technology has negatively affected students' academic writing due to the constant use of internet language. In this research study, an investigation has been made at the department of English language to gain facts and analyze them. A research was conducted using systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to analyze students' written samples. The results showed that students who were considered as incompetent were not able to understand the topic, to write coherently and to build an organized body text.This research paper is a call for further research on what affects students' academic writing, especially in the digital era, and what can be done by teachers to enhance and develop their students' writing abilities. For this purport, this research paper is geared to be

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a starting point to alleviative actions that should be taken by instructors at university level.

Key words: Academic writing, EFL learners, Systemic functional linguistics.

Introduction

Academic writing is one of the fundamental tasks required in higher education. Nowadays teachers and educators from all over the globe are concerned about the decline in the quality of students' academic writing in the era of technology dominance and internet effects. The attempt here is to find out students' weaknesses in the process of academic writing and to analyze the samples using SFL as an analytical tool.

Several studies have been conducted concerning academic writing basics but few have been made using SFL as an analytical tool of assessment. In order to analyze 2ⁿᵈ year LMD students at Mostefa Benboulaid Batna 2 University written samples, 40 students were asked to write an essay on a general topic, and the results showed that more than half of them were unable to write academically, henceforth gaps have been found in many aspects that require further investigation and analysis.

When analyzing the students' samples, it has been found that some of them are not aware of the basics of academic writing, and unable to reach the proficiency level expected in higher education. Higher education learning requires learners to adapt to different modes of learning including academic writing basic tools.

"According to Lea and Street (1998), these new ways of acquiring academic writing skills can be challenging, particularly to undergraduate students. However, academic writing skills are necessary for higher education students since much academic knowledge is constructed and available as written texts (Bzerman, 1998)" (cited in Tshotcho, 2014, p.425).

Other researchers agree that students need to gain knowledge from written texts or they will face difficulties in learning in general, and may be considered as incompetent. Coffin et al (2014) further add that it's the students' ability to build extended written texts that can be taken as a measure of higher education proficiency. Therefore, higher education teachers must

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help learners enhance and develop their academic writing abilities due to their importance in the learning process in general.

Systemic Functional Linguistics

In this research paper, the researcher analyzed learners' written samples using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a tool of assessment. The benefit of SFL is that it helps understand how meanings are made in daily linguistic situations since language is used every day as a means of interaction. Eggins (2004) notes that people are required to interact and to produce bits of language that are meaningful and that are referred to as texts. Tshotsho (2014) states that "SFL is a very useful and interpretive framework for viewing language as a strategic meaning making resource" (p. 426).

The renowned linguist Halliday (1994) who developed SFL as an analytical tool also contributed to the domain of linguistic analysis by developing systemic grammar and functional grammar. Functional grammar deals with how ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions are built in the structure of clauses, along with the use of language in social communications; which we call a text.

So, according to Halliday (1994), "Ideational metafunctions are those aspects of grammar which are involved in the representation of the world and its experiences" (cited in Tshotsho, 2014, p.426). Ideational meta functions comprise two aspects; one is experiential and the other is logical. The logical metafunctions deal with the connectedness building between clauses and meanings (Christie, 2002).

Interpersonal metafunctions deal with the grammatical resources where the interlocutor relationship is realized (Christie, 2002). On the other hand, the textual metafunctions deal with the grammar aspects that help in the organization of language, also where the theme resources, cohesion and information are involved (Halliday, 1994).The aim of the grammatical analysis is to understand the way in which textual, ideational and interpersonal meanings are made and exist in the text so that the analysis of text can help determine this aspect of realization.

The goal is to interpret the meaning in the organization of text, which is made of clauses. "This implies that the model of grammar is text or discourse driven" (Christie, 2002,) cited in Tshotcho, 2004, p.426). According to Eggins (2004), SFL is mainly concerned with the way people use language to socially interact.

SFL linguists argue that the language function is to develop meanings that are affected by cultural and social contexts in which they are produced,

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and the language process is about developing meaning in order to achieve a purpose. To achieve something using a language , there have to be a text and a context that's why several linguists are interested in finding out the relationship between text and language(Tshotsho, p.426).

Language cannot be separated from context, this is why it is easy to understand the context from the text and likewise, to predict the language from the context. For a clear understanding of how people use language, context needs to be taken into consideration. SFL linguists are generally concerned with the text analysis, Halliday (1976) defines text as any written or oral passage that constitutes a unified whole. Other linguists define text as a coherent and meaningful passage that is held together as a whole.

A text is different from non-text in the aspect of texture that binds clauses together, and that involves both aspects of coherence and cohesion. "Coherence is the text's relationship to its extra textual context and cohesion is the way the elements within that text bind it together as a unified whole" (Tshotsho, 2014, p. 426). According to Halliday and Matthiesson (2009), all texts must have a theme; which is in other words what the text is about. The theme contains enough information and has already been established in the text, and it is usually found first in the clause.

The meaning of the text is realized by thematic choices which hold the elements of the text together and relate it to its context. Linguists agree that to differentiate between competent and incompetent writers is to look to the way they handle and develop a theme. It is said that competent writers are somehow aware of the several types of themes and how they relate to the context; this particular skill allows them to manipulate textual structures in order to gain and develop specific thematic effects.

Objectives of the Research

The objective of this research paper is to highlight the most important strategies used for coherent English academic writing for EFL learners at Mostefa Benboulaid Batna 2 University. So, the aim of this paper is to identify and analyze the strategies adopted by EFL learners at Batna 2 University when dealing with academic writing.

Methodology Design

The researcher adopted a qualitative approach to analyze students' written samples. Based on the objectives of this paper, 40 participants were asked to write an essay about 'the effects of technology on students'

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academic achievement'. The essay question was administered during regular class assignments in the written expression session. 30 essays were collected for the analysis and were divided into 15 as being written by competent students and 15 as being written by incompetent students in academic writing. The essays were selected based on thematic problems that the researcher was looking for.

Data collection tools

The researcher used academic writing principles as a judging tool of the participants 'competency, and the categorization was made after a careful reading of the essays. The participants wrote an essay of two pages long, and the objective was to motivate them to write about something that they felt related to- technology. In addition to that, the researcher provided the participants with a chance to be creative and to check their communication abilities. The aim was to find out how they can develop a theme, and how they can relate between ideas after constructing them.

Data Analysis Procedures

During the analysis of the 30 essays, the scoring from 1-30 was made based on the way students could express their ideas clearly and link them in a coherent way that delivers ideas in an accurate manner. This procedure follows Bachman and Palmer's (1996) suggestions that ask students to develop extended written pieces that can be scored using language ability scales. The essays enabled the researcher to have an idea about individuals' writing abilities, and help them to get a conclusion.

The first thing the researcher did was to determine whether or not the essays were coherent and cohesive. To fulfill this task, meaningfulness is the key factor. The researcher did not only use coherence and cohesion as an analysis criterion, but rather they followed other measures like the grammatical accuracy, contextualization, themes and the use of references. The collected writing pieces were meant to evaluate the strategies adopted by EFL learners at Mostefa Benboulaid Batna 2 University in writing academically.

Results and Discussion

The final analysis of the 30 essays showed that the ones evaluated as **incompetent**** faced difficulties when they tried to develop the theme;

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whereas, the **competent*** ones easily did the task.Competent students followed a clear plan and they used topical themes which function as the clauses subjects that will direct the readers to what will come next. Incompetent students did not follow any topical theme; their essays lacked coherence because they are incompetent in academic writing.

In addition, competent students also used marked themes to smoothly take the reader from one idea to another; this aspect showed their effectiveness in planning and in organizing ideas. Essay number 3, below, clearly show the organization of ideas where the author was able to correctly move from one idea to another:

> *"…Technology has become an integral part of our lives and there's no doubt that social media had a huge impact on student academic achievement. Today, students have become dependent on technology in their education without knowing its possible negative effects on their learning skills."*

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*Competent students: Students, who are able to develop a theme, create cohesion and coherence and are able to link between sentences and paragraphs to create a meaningful, academic piece of writing.

**Incompetent students: Students, who are unable to develop a theme when they try to write academically. Also, incompetent students are those who fail to create coherence and cohesion and are incapable of linking between sentences and paragraphs to create a meaningful text.

Students who were considered as incompetent barely used any marked themes and that showed their inability to plan and organize as in the following example from essay number 12:

> *"…Online social net works can disturb students way of living, learning activity affected by may technology and many reasons. Some students use the Internet for computer viruses, oven cheating or bad purposes."*

The analysis of the 30 essays indicated that there was somehow a lack in the use of dependent clauses in building up coherence and holding the text together. This lack of dependent clauses affected the essays of incompetent students because they did not use other structures to compensate for this error. However, this did not affect the essays of competent students considering their use of other thematic structures to create coherence. Let's consider the following example of an incompetent student, essay number 6:

> *" …technology can shock the conscience of students or even more worse most thing of internet is it poses a real*

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threat for society especially students internet users works day and night to steal , hack , pirate and violate people privacy."

What the researcher also noted is the use of conjunctions to create cohesion and unity by competent students. Halliday and Hassan (1976) note that the function of cohesion is similar to the function of glue because it bounds the elements of a text together. The use of cohesion by competent students showed their awareness of the importance of the way elements within sentences are related to one another as well as how sentences are related together.

Consider the following example of a competent student from essay number 1:

"...The negative effect of technology on student's academic achievement is the dependence on its sources that can be associated with the risks of online communities. Also, and sometimes the students waste a lot of time on social media in order to communicate with the others but forgot about their homework."

The majority of the incompetent students did not make use of conjunctions. The few of them who did were not able to conduct it to achieve cohesion.

Competent students knew how to use reference chains in order to highlight the participants in the text, along with an accurate use of reference markers to produce a cohesive essay. Contrary to competent students, the incompetent ones didn't know how to use reference markers as their texts didn't clearly highlight the participants in the text and this resulted in a production of un-cohesive texts.

Competent students showed a certain competency in academic writing; they used transitive words that function as articulatory expressions like firstly, secondly, however, moreover…etc. to move from one idea to another like in the

following example from text number 14:

"…Addiction of technology can have negative effects on students.

Firstly, technology has an impact on students because it may lead them to waste their free time for playing online games instead of studying.

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Secondly, another effect of technology is that it can reduce students' learning and research capabilities caused by doing their assignments at the last minute, and they rely more on the information that is easily accessible in the web.

In addition to that, technology reduces the command over language use and creative writing skills, so students should not depend on it."

When the researcher made a detailed analysis of the register in essays of competent students, it has been found that there were similarities between their texts due to their abilities to contextualize the topic. The following examples from texts number 5, 11, and 13 respectively are good illustrations:

"…Technology is one of the most dangerous things especially on students who are surrounded by this dilemma that makes everything worse.One of the reasons behind students decline in academic achievement is the effects of social media…".

The experts have already made it clear that social media affect students' academic achievement .It does helpto establishing relationships with real people using several devices as Facebook and Twitter. However, technology provides students with various tools and methods that can affect their learning abilities."

"…Students today have begun to rely on the accessibility of information that is available on the social media platforms specifically, as well as the web in general in order to get answers; this means that there is a reduced focus on learning as well as on retaining information."

However, that was not the case in the essays of incompetent students since they were not able to contextualize a topic.In addition to that, the researcher noticed that incompetent students used ungrammatical structures, incorrect spelling, colloquial language and incomplete clauses.

The final analysis showed that competent students didn't face difficulties in writing in general, and in contextualizing themes, creating cohesion, using conjunctions and formal language in particular. The researcher, being the teacher of these students believes that their writing

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abilities are enhanced due to their reading habits and their motivation for mastering the English language.

Unlike the incompetent students, their writing inabilities were due to the lack of reading and the lack of writing practice. These students faced difficulties in the identification of themes, in the use of conjunctions and also in creating cohesion.

Conclusion

University teachers assume that university students are familiar with the various aspects of academic writing. However, in this research paper it has been found that many students are facing difficulties from developing a theme to constructing a meaningful text. Therefore, teachers may wish to help their students and one way of doing so is to start by a simple narrative essay then moving onto all different types of essays.

The results of this study , along with the gap found in students' academic writing, are clear evidence that teachers should pay more attention to this module, and then to teach students all the strategies needed for an academic writing procedure. Teachers need to work on enhancing their students' writing abilities given the importance of academic writing at the university level.

In fact, improving students' writing skills is a slow but difficult task that takes more commitment, dedication and patience. It is a process that needs more attention from students, parents, teachers, educators and policy makers.

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