

Systemic Functional Linguistics as a Strategy to Assess the Academic Writing of Students at Walter Sisulu University

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Abstract. This paper reports on the study undertaken at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) in South Africa between 2003 and 2007. It explores students' academic writing which affects their academic performance. The main focus is on the written texts of 20 students who most of them come from rural background. Their texts were analyzed using systemic functional linguistics (SFL) as an analytical tool. This paper demonstrates that there is a need to improve students' academic writing in order to improve their academic performance.

Introduction

This paper reports on the study undertaken at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) in South Africa between 2003 and 2007. It explores students' academic writing which affects their academic performance. The main focus is on the written texts of 20 students who most of them come from rural background. Their texts were analyzed using systemic functional linguistics (SFL) as an analytical tool. This paper demonstrates that there is a need to improve students' academic writing in order to improve their academic performance. The final section of this paper suggests strategies that can be used to address the problem of academic writing.

Systemic Functional Linguistics as an Analytical Tool

This paper uses SFL as an analytical tool to examine the written texts. Focus will be on the following:

1. Coherence.
2. Cohesion.
3. Endophoric and exophoric referencing.
4. Thematic development.

Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics

SFL theory grew out of a category of grammar. This theory emerged out of the proposal that the grammatical organization of all natural languages reflect the function for which language has evolved in the human species. Any language uses serves to construct some aspects of experience, to negotiate relationships, and to organize the language successfully, so that it realizes a satisfactory message (Halliday, 1994; Martin, 1992; Christie, 2002).

According to Eggins (2004), systemic functional approach to language helps us to analyze and explain how meanings are made in everyday linguistic interactions. In all our activities, language is involved. In life, we are constantly required to react and produce bits of language that make sense, which are referred to as texts.

Ideational Interpersonal and Textual Metafunctions

Systemic functional linguistics is a very useful descriptive and interpretive framework for viewing language as a strategic meaning making resource. Halliday's (1994) major contribution to linguistics analysis is in the development of functional grammar by showing how meaning, that is, ideational,

interpersonal and textual metafunctions, are expressed in clause structures and also how language is used in social interactions, that is, texts.

According to Halliday (1994), ideational metafunctions are those aspects of grammar which are involved in the representation of the world and its experiences. This ideational metafunction consists of two metafunctions, the experiential and the logical. The resources of transitivity and of lexis are involved in representing experience. The logical metafunction is involved in the matter of building connectedness between the meaning of clauses (Christie, 2002). Such connectedness is realized in those resources in the grammar which are involved in two different sets of relationships, those to do with the interdependency between clauses and those to do with the logico-semantic relationship between clauses brought about by expansion (Halliday, 1994).

Interpersonal metafunction refers to those grammatical resources in which the relationship of interlocutors is realized (Christie, 2002). On the other hand, the textual metafunction refers to those aspects of grammar that assist in organizing language as a message and, in this, the resources of theme, information and cohesion are involved (Halliday, 1994).

Linguists, such as Halliday (1985), view language as performing three functions namely ideational, interpersonal and textual functions. Speakers are able to produce texts through the textual functions of language that are understood by listeners (Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 1995). Language connects discourse to the co-text and context in which it occurs. Speakers make choices regarding vocabulary and grammar and these choices are consciously principled and systematic (Fowler, 1979).

When undertaking a grammatical analysis, the aim is to find the ways in which meanings of ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions are realized and tracked through the text. Text analysis would help to show this aspect of realization. The goal is to interpret the meaning in the overall organization of the text that the clauses constitute. This implies that the model of grammar is text or discourse driven (Christie, 2002).

Eggins (2004) argues that all that systemic linguists are interested in is how people use language with each other to accomplish everyday social life. These linguists claim that the function of languages is to make meanings, which are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged, and that the process of using language is all about making meaning and to achieve purpose. Getting something done using language will involve more than two

moves, text and context. Thus, text carries context with it. These linguists are interested in the relationship between language and context.

Language and context are interrelated. That is why we are able to deduce context from text and to predict language from context. It is not possible to tell how people are using language if you do not take into account the context of use. Once a text is taken out of context, its purpose becomes obscured with part of its meaning lost (Eggins, 2004). Systemists divide context into genre, register and ideology.

Context: Register, Genre and Ideology

One of the distinctive features of SFL theory is the relationship of language or text and context. Any text is a condition of the context situation. Context refers to that which surrounds text. Text and context are interrelated. A context is known because of text that gives it life. A text is known only because of the context that makes it relevant (Christie, 2005). The language choices to any context situations are said to be choices of register. This explains why we will not use language in the same way to write as to speak.

Furthermore, the higher level of context is ideology. Our use of language is influenced by our ideology, the values we hold and the perspective acquired through our particular path through culture (Eggins, 2004).

Register analysis

Information obtained from the detailed analysis of text can be interpreted as a realization of contextual dimensions enabling a summarized register description. The contrastive register description of the text is based on the combined lexico-grammatical and cohesion evidence. Evidence allows us to specify similarities and differences between the texts at the contextual level.

Field analysis suggests similarities. Texts can share a common field while linguistic analysis differentiates the way the text approaches and constructs that field. Field refers to what is happening, the nature of social interaction and the correct language used in that interaction. Field focuses on the activity. Some text can be written for experts and others for beginners. The situation can either be technical or everyday in the construction of an activity focus. The technical situation could be characterized by a degree of assumed knowledge among the interactants in everyday situations. Knowledge that constitutes a field can be presented in taxonomies. When we classify taxonomies, we find differences between depth and complexity of a text.

Language in an everyday field is more familiar, grammatical structures are standard and syntax is standard. On the other hand, technical language is words only insiders understand (Eggins, 2004).

In mode a text can be formal, have authoritarian tenor, construct itself as a reflexive text, and be written by an impersonal writer to be read by an unknown distant reader. Sometimes the language of a text can indicate a relationship of friendship between interactants in face to face contacts. While writers must present the text as context independent, sometimes they minimize formality by incorporating features of a spoken interactive mode.

Mode is the role that language plays in interaction. In written language, there is no visual contact with the intended audience, thus language is used to reflect on some topic. Written situations in our culture call for rehearsal which includes drafts, edits, rewrites and writing of the final draft. On the other hand, in the spoken discourse, what is going to be said is not rehearsed, it is informal and it depends on the context since both parties are in the same place at the same time. Sentences do not follow standard grammatical conventions. A written text on the other hand needs to be context independent. A written text has the beginning, middle and end. Students who are competent in academic writing follow the pattern of thesis, evidence and summary (Eggins, 2004).

On the other hand, tenor refers to who is taking part, that is, the nature of the participants including their roles and relationships and the types of speech roles they are making. The variables of tenor are power, solidarity and interpersonal relations. Tenor refers to the social role that one plays and has an effect on the language in terms of formality, politeness, and reciprocity. This involves vocabulary choice. In informal situations, we tend to use slang and abbreviated form of words. In formal language, we use the complete lexical items and are polite. In informal language, the clause structure is imperative whereas in formal language it is interrogative (Eggins, 2004).

Text analysis

Eggins (2004) argues that SFL linguists concern themselves with the analysis of text. Halliday and Hassan (1976, 1985) define text as any passage spoken or written that forms a unified whole. They say that text refers to any passage of coherent language. It is also a meaningful passage of language that hangs together. Text can be distinguished from non-text by texture. Texture is what holds the clauses of a text together to give them unity. Texture involves the interaction 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. The result of the interaction of coherence and cohesion is a piece of language which is using linguistic resources in a meaningful way.

On the other hand, not all uses of language constitute a text. The occurrence of letters arranged in words is not sufficient to constitute a text when the words do not hang together. Words in a text are made meaningful because the text uses them within lexico-grammatical structures. Lexico-grammatical structures refer to the sequenced arrangement of the words and structures. The pivotal unit of lexico-grammatical structures is the clause. A number of clauses form a sentence and a number of sentences that are related form a text (Eggins, 2004).

According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), a text is regarded as a semantic unit of meaning which has clauses that are contextual properties that hang together. A text must also have cohesion, which refers to the way we relate or tie together bits of discourse. Further, Halliday and Hassan (1976) state that cohesion is like glue, since it sticks the elements and meaning together. It also expresses the continuity that exists between one part of the text and another. Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the discourse are dependent on that of another. In cohesion, there is a semantic tie between an item at one point in a text and an item at another point within the same text. This makes one item depends upon the other for its interpretation. For example, the noun is dependent on the preceding noun for its meaning. The absence of semantic ties between elements prevents the text from hanging together internally as a piece of language (Eggins, 2004). For a text to have intelligibility it must have coherence and cohesion.

Theme and rheme

Theme, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) is the starting point of the message, that is, what the message is going to be about. Theme contains well-known information which has already been mentioned before in the text. It also comes first in the clause. Theme also functions as the subject of the clause (Eggins, 2004; Martin and Rose, 2003).

On the other hand, rheme is part of the clause in which the theme is developed. Theme contains the familiar and rheme contains the unfamiliar. New information is contained in the rheme. In a sentence, once the theme is identified, it becomes easy to identify the rheme since it is everything else in a

sentence which does not form part of the theme (Martin and Rose, 2003).

Theme and textual meaning

Thematic choices realize meanings about the communication event, that is, how the text hangs together and how it relates to its context. Theme offers us choices of what meaning to prioritize in a text, what to package as familiar and as new. Textual choices alone cannot create text without content and it would also be impossible to interact with it. Text needs to be structured first so as to initiate interaction. This means that we need to construct mood structures by making interpersonal and experiential choices, which refers to how the text relates to the context. Once the thematic structure of the text is scrambled it becomes difficult to follow. Textual choices are essential to the text's making sense. Thematic selection results in a text which hangs together (Eggins, 2004). There is no doubt that what distinguishes competent and incompetent writers is in mainly determined by how they deal and develop theme. As will be apparent in this paper, the majority of the incoherent texts were scrambled in structure ending up with texts that made no sense.

Different types of themes

Competent writers consciously or unconsciously are aware of the different kinds of themes and how they relate to textual meaning. This enables them to manipulate textual structures to achieve particular thematic effects and developments. Different kinds of themes and their functions are discussed below.

1) Topical theme

According to Eggins (2004) and Martin and Rose (2003), topical theme functions as the subject of the clause. In the topical theme, we can attach transitivity role such as actor, behavior, sensor or circumstances. Every clause can contain one topical theme and the remaining clause constituents can be assigned to rheme. For example, in the following sentence:

In Greece they give you nothing.

In Greece is theme and *they give nothing* is rheme.

2) Hypertheme

Hypertheme functions as the topic sentence. Hypertheme gives us orientation to what is to come, that is, the frame of reference, and predicts how the text will unfold (Martin and Rose, 2003). Competent

students are better than the not-so-competent students in the use of hyperthemes, as is demonstrated later.

3) Hypernew

After the hypertheme any new information accumulated from the hypertheme is referred to as a hypernew. Hypertheme tells us where we are going and hypernew tells us where we have been. It takes the text to a new point (Martin and Rose, 2003). This, as presented later in this paper, is one of the major difficulties that the not-so-competent students face. They are unable to contextualize the topic in their texts, thus making it difficult for the reader to distinguish where the argument is going.

4) Macrotheme

Martin and Rose (2003) state that macrothemes are higher level themes predicting hyperthemes, whereas macronews are higher level news distilling hypernew. Layers of news develop the text focusing on expanding the ideational meaning. Sometimes macrothemes and macronews are given their own paragraphs. Macrotheme comes before the topic sentence, explaining and orientating the reader on what to expect.

On the other hand, periodicity involves the flow of information from one setting in time to the next. It is also sequential development of events. This covers hypertheme and hypernew in orientation, record of events and reorientation (Martin and Rose 2003). No doubt again, better writers are able to handle macrothemes because they are better able to develop their topic sentence.

5) Marked themes

Marked themes are rare in casual conversation. Marked themes can include circumstantial elements, such as place or time, or they may be participants that are not the subject of the clause. Marked themes are often used to signal new phase in a discourse, a new setting in time, or a shift in major participants. They serve to move the reader from incident to incident and from incident to interpretation (Martin and Rose, 2003).

6) Method of development

The concept "Method of development" refers to how thematic elements succeed each other. The basic way to keep a text focused (cohesion) is to reiterate a thematic element. Repetition is an effective way of creating cohesion. Having the same participant on a regular basis provides the text with a clear focus, for example, the repeated use of a term in a text.

Egins (2004) argues that there is also thematic shifting. This is called thematic progression. There are two thematic progressions, the zig-zag and multiple themes. In the zig-zag theme, an element which is introduced in the theme in clause one gets promoted in clause two to become a theme. The zig-zag pattern achieves cohesion in the text by building on newly introduced information. This gives the text a sense of cumulative development. On the other hand, in multiple themes, the theme of one clause introduces different pieces of information. Each piece is picked up and made a theme in the subsequent clauses.

Texture and scaffolding

Texture of the text involves explicit scaffolding. Scaffolding involves the erection of a hierarchy of periodicity beyond the clause, with layers of themes and news, telling us where we are coming from and where we are going. Paragraphing is a tool used in this hierarchy for phasing information, marking shifts of gears as far as phases of meaning are concerned. Texture also holds the clauses of a text together to give them unity. Texture involves coherence and cohesion or its (what?) relationship to its extra textual context and the way the elements bind it together as a unified whole (Halliday and Hassan, 1976; Martin and Rose, 2003).

Foregrounding and co-articulation

Foregrounding is also important for coherence and cohesion in a text. Foregrounding is the tendency for texts to make some meaning stand out against others (Martin and Rose, 2003). As a text shifts gears from one phase to the next, certain options get taken up more often than they were before, such as the repetition of a certain word in a text. On the other hand, co-articulation refers to systems working together to produce a particular effect such as using conjunctions to co-articulate the sequence of events by using first, then, when, later, as, before and finally.

Collection of Data

For the purposes of this paper, an essay was given to two groups of 80 students who had joined the WSU for the first time. These groups were Adult Basic Education and Public Relations Management. The group that is in East London had students who are from model C (that is, schools that used to cater for white students only, and had English as the medium of instruction) and township schools (with Xhosa or Xhosa-English code switching as the medium of instruction). The Butterworth group was composed mainly of students who are from rural

schools whose medium of instruction was similar to township schools. The essay topic was "Challenges Facing Education in South Africa". The essay was written as part of the normal class assignment in the Communication Skills class. Out of all the essays, 20 that met the purposive criteria were analyzed. Out of the 20 essays, I classified 10 as being from competent students and 10 from the not-so-competent students in academic writing. The essays were selected purposefully since they had problems the researcher was looking for. Purposeful is defined as the power of seeking the desired end. Patton (1990) argues that the power of purposeful selection of sample lies in selecting samples that are rich with information needed for the research and are fit for the study. Morse (1991), in support of Patton's views, says that when obtaining a purposeful sample the researcher selects participants according to the needs of the study. Coyne (1997) further suggests that the description of purposeful sampling is directed by a desire to include a range of variations of the phenomenon in the study. Sampling is, therefore, not varied according to the emerging theory, but is selected for the information-rich data it can yield. For this reason, I used 'impression' marking to judge the competency in academic writing of 80 students from which 20 essays were selected for further analysis. The final categorization, according to the competent and not-so-competent, was done after reading the essays relying on impressionistic procedures sometimes applied in marking an essay. Following Bachman and Palmer (1996), while the procedure relies on the general flow of the text, certain usages are identified to either show whether the students planned their essays well and also the strategies that they used in writing the essay. I underlined all the errors that affected coherence and cohesion. Bachman and Palmer (1996) further recommend that broad specifications be used to define the criteria by which the quality of the essays is evaluated. In this case, the following broad specifications were used:

- i) Contextualization of the topic.
- ii) Coherence.
- iii) Cohesion.
- iv) Thematic development.

The two groups of students wrote the assignment of two pages in length. One of the aims of the essay was to enable students to use language creatively as they normally would in such an exercise. The essay provided the students with an opportunity to explore their level of communicative ability, that is, their ability to

construct functional sentences as well as expose their underlying systematic errors. Bachman and Palmer (1996) say that an essay writing task can encompass a wide variety of prompts that can differ in terms of audience, purpose and organization patterns. In order to reduce the degree of variability in students' performance, a common essay topic was chosen. The topic required them to discuss "Challenges Facing Education in South Africa", as mentioned before.

Analysis of Essay Data

Twenty essays were marked. In marking the essay, the scoring was guided by how well the students were able to express their ideas correctly and link the sentences to form a piece of coherent text which communicates their ideas and thoughts accurately, fluently and imaginatively. This procedure conformed to Bachman and Palmer's (1996) recommendations that require students to produce extended responses that may be scored using scales of language ability.

To be able to use the scores from a language essay for making inferences about individual's academic writing skills, the researcher must be able to demonstrate a framework that enables the use of the same characteristics to describe what the researcher believes are critical features in academic writing, such as coherence and cohesion. One way of doing this is to analyze their written tasks and derive specific characteristics such as grammatical devices of reference (Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

The essays used for this study were meant to assess strategies that are used by black ESL students at WSU to cope with academic writing. This essay was meant to be objective, valid and reliable as a measuring instrument. In the essay, students were required to use writing skills. The essay was also meant to meet critical outcomes of Outcomes Based Education.

Findings

The findings show that competent students were able to write coherent texts compared to the not-so-competent students.

Themes

Competent students show a degree of thematic planning to make their texts coherent. They use topical themes which function as the subject of the clause to give orientation to what is to come, that is, the frame of reference and also to predict how the text

will unfold (Eggins, 2004). On the other hand, the not-so-competent students do not use topical themes since they are not competent in academic writing. This makes their texts to be incoherent. Let us consider the following extract from the not-so-competent students:

I think the level of education in South Africa is higher than any other country. The education system we follow makes education an endless experience.

The student uses topical theme effectively foregrounding from one phase of the essay to the next. What has been foregrounded in this paragraph is 'education'. This repetition enhances the main focus of the paragraph which is 'education'.

Competent students also use marked themes to signal a new phase and to move the reader from incident to incident. This appears to be a realization of a careful written mode, which requires planning the rhetorical development of the text to allow foregrounding of circumstantial information. Again, the following extract gives us a good illustration of how competent students are also able to move the reader from incident to interpretation. Consider the following example:

I think money is the biggest challenge facing South African education. Children don't go to school because fees have to be paid. Parents have to buy expensive uniform, shoes and books.

Not-so-competent students hardly used marked themes in their essays. This clearly shows that there was no careful planning of the rhetorical development of the text. Let us consider the following example:

Many years ago in the rural areas schools there is no there but now there are schools. And Adult basic school. If you not study and now you are employee is the chance of you now. Because Mining Works there's Adult school there.

In the example mentioned above, it is difficult to identify any particular theme. In fact, what we can say is that there are three of four incomplete themes, (1) Rural schools, (2) Adult basic education, (3) Study and employment, and (4) Mining and adult schools.

Both competent and not-so-competent students do not use interpersonal themes which are the unfused finite verbs and also all four categories of

modal adjuncts (mood, vocative polarity and comment). For competent students this does not have a negative impact on their texts since they use other strategies like topical themes and marked themes for coherence. On the other hand, for the not-so-competent students this affects coherence in their texts since they do not use other strategies in their texts to enhance coherence like the competent students seem to do.

It is also noteworthy that both groups do not use dependent clauses which show that the main clause depends on the clause that follows, for coherence. This affects coherence in the text of the not-so-competent students as described elsewhere, they do not use other thematic structures. On the other hand, dependent clauses for the competent students do not have a negative impact on their texts, for they use other thematic structures to create coherence. For example, consider the following extract from the competent group:

The expense of education also puts a strain on South African Advanced schools are expensive and not everyone can afford them. It is mostly private school that offer almost every equipment needed for a better education which comes at an expense.

In the essay quoted above, we can identify the topical theme 'It is mostly private schools'. This topical theme is followed by two marked themes 'that offer almost every equipment needed for better education which comes at an expense'. Also in this essay, we can identify two dependent clauses joined by 'which' and 'that' in the same sentence. This does not cause a problem since the student uses another structure 'it is' followed by a marked theme to neutralize the problem.

The same cannot be said about the not-so-competent group. For example, let us consider the following extract

If you see in South Africa education is very poor a special in rural Areas. When you go to college and finished you go back to your home cause have no jobs for teaching that means have not their is no different between education people and uneducated.

In this paragraph, there is no topical theme. What is supposed to be a topical theme 'If you see South Africa' is incomplete because the dependent

clause is missing. The student uses 'if' which should be followed by 'then' in order to introduce contrast. In the second sentence, the student uses two possible themes but both are qualified by unrelated information.

As a way of summary, it is interesting to note that thematic structures of competent students are more than those of the not-so-competent students. This could also be seen as evidence that competent students are knowledgeable about the strategies used in academic writing compared to the not-so-competent students.

Conjunctive cohesion

Competent students use conjunctive cohesion of elaboration, extending and enhancing to add to the texture of the text in order to create semantic unity and cohesion. Elaboration is a relationship of restatement by which one sentence is the representation of a previous one. On the other hand, extending is a relationship of either addition or variation and enhancement refers to ways by which one sentence can develop on the meaning of another in terms of time, composition, cause condition and concession (Eggins, 2004). This is a clear demonstration that the competent students are aware of how elements in a sentence relate to each other, as well as the world outside. In this regard, they are better able to connect aspects of the context of situation to intended textual meaning.

The use of conjunctive cohesion by competent students shows that the students have conceptualized the meaning of the essay topic. Furthermore, they are more experienced about the issues around the topic compared to the not-so-competent students.

On the other hand most of the not-so-competent students do not use conjunctions in their texts and if they do, they sometimes use them incorrectly and this results in texts that lack cohesion. For example, they often use causal conjunctions where there is no cause, or where the relationship is not causal. The following example shows this problem:

*Education is to give more and information in our peoples **because** if the Department of Education is not created in South Africa many people were died **because** space of jobs development education Department and now developing Adult schools in South Africa.*

In the example mentioned above, the student gives 'lack of jobs', 'people dying' and 'development in adult education' as reasons for the lack of

information. The student starts one topic or hypertheme, instead of completing it, the student starts a completely unrelated topic or hypernew and gives this as a reason or complement of the initial topic. It is clear that there is no relationship between the clauses.

Both competent and not-so-competent groups do not use explicit and implicit conjunctions. This does not affect cohesion negatively. In fact, this sometimes enhances coherence and cohesion as illustrated in the extract below:

South Africa is growing as a country and part of its growth is education. The level of education in South Africa is not up to standard as compared to developed countries like the USA and Europe. There are various reasons for Challenges faced by South African Education.

In this example, the student has used conjunction 'and' to connect the hypertheme (South Africa is growing as a country) and the hypernew (part of its growth is education). On the other hand, the not-so-competent students do not use conjunctions, and if they do sometimes use them incorrectly and this affects coherence and cohesion in their texts. The following example taken from an essay of the not-so-competent students shows this problem:

There are the first alite like the boys Jomo Kenyada that realized that oppression or domination after they got education. Even the people like Mandela has played the major role fighting for freedom in South Africa. Education in South Africa is very important because of now we know our rights because even South Africa is controlled by the black person that is the president.

In the paragraph mentioned above, the hypertheme of the first sentence is not related to the hypernew. In this example, the student has used 'that' to connect the hypertheme 'There are the first alite like the boys Jomo Kenyada' and the hypernew 'realized that oppression or domination after they got education', though these two clauses are not related.

Reference chains

Competent students tend to use reference chains effectively to show the reader the major participants in the text. They are also able to link reference markers to produce highly cohesive texts. They use

more homophoric and esphoric references. Homophoric reference involves information found in cultural knowledge that the reader and the writer share. This shows that the competent students are more familiar with the culture of writing texts (that is, knowledge of genre and register) than the not-so-competent students. This knowledge could be due to their superior reading experience.

On the other hand, the not-so-competent students' texts are not linked with reference markers. Their texts do not have a significant number of major participants compared to the competent students. Their texts show categories of non-retrieval from cultural context. This could be because of poor education background, lack of reading culture or lack of access to reading materials at home because of poverty. There are indications of certain characteristics of a spoken mode in their texts. Unlike the competent students, this shows a lack of generic and registerial knowledge on the part of the not-so-competent students. This is also supported by an analysis of results discussed elsewhere. This problem of reference ties results in texts that lack cohesion.

The following example taken from the essays of the not-so-competent group shows a lack of textual cohesion:

In South Africa there is a lack of schools. Many children are having there interested of learning. Some of the student they got no money to go to school.

These three sentences are potential topic sentences or hyperthemes. With effective use of textual cohesion, the three sentences could be done in one sentence. Alternatively, using appropriate textual cohesion markers at the beginning of the three sentences could have helped make the relationship between them more apparent than is the case.

Competent students on the other hand, show competence in academic writing by using some of the strategies of foregrounding and co-articulation which are, for example, 'first', 'then', 'when', 'later', 'as before' and 'finally', to connect specific evidence (Martin and Rose, 2003) as in the example below.

Let us consider the following example, where the writer has used these strategies:

Firstly, challenge that mostly affects education in this country is the lack of properly trained teachers. Secondly, its schools that are not built properly.

It is also noteworthy that the competent students produce more head items and participant chains than the not-so-competent students. They also have richer and more differentiated head item chains. This seems to further support my argument that the competent students have superior vocabulary and morpho-syntactic knowledge of ESL.

Lexical cohesion

Competent students also use lexical chains effectively in their written texts. These lexical chains are nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and events sequence. There is a high proportion of words that enter into strings in the texts of competent students thus indicating a tightness of focus and careful selection of lexical items. These chains relate the text consistently to its area of focus.

The following example is from the essays of the competent group:

The expense of education also puts a strain on South African Education. Advanced schools are expensive and not everyone can afford them. It is mostly private schools that offer almost every equipment needed for better education.

In the above essay, chains that link this text are the following words 'expense', 'expensive' and 'equipment'. The student focuses on educational material and affordability by using words like 'expense' and 'equipment'. The student also uses synonyms, for example, 'advanced schools' and 'private schools' in another chain. However, I need to point out that what is clear here is that it is not so much the number of chains but more so how and where certain lexical items are fitted in the chain.

The not-so-competent students do not use these lexical chains correctly in their writing, ending up with texts that are not focused. The following example is taken from essays of the not-so-competent group.

In our school we need a good security because there are soo many criminals in this country so these criminal breaking the walls of school in order to take the propartise of school. We need to get the support of government. Because we want to be safe. The government of this should be honest their people and give the free education to the children of this country.

In the first sentence, even though the student uses 'school' in the chain, this is not put in the logical chain. Also, the sentence 'because we want to be safe' is just left hanging. Furthermore, 'free education' is not fitted logically in sequence to 'security' and 'support of government'.

Cohesive characterization

Competent students tend not to use many causal relations. This does not have a negative impact on their texts since they are able to use other academic writing strategies to create coherence and cohesion in their texts. They also rely on superior knowledge of cultural context for retrieval of referent identity.

On the other hand, the not-so-competent students do not use many conjunctions and when they do, they sometimes use them incorrectly. They sometimes use causal conjunction where there is no causal relationship. They also fail to use the cultural context for interpretation of the referent identity (cf. Eggins, 2004). Since they lack vocabulary, they just use any conjunction to link two clauses. This results in texts that lack cohesion. The following example has been taken from essays of the not-so-competent group:

Education is to give more and information in our peoples because if the Department of Education is not created in South Africa Many people were died because space of jobs development Education Department and now developing Adult schools in South Africa.

The student talks about education which gives information and then uses a causal conjunction 'because' to give a reason, which in actual fact is not a reason. Furthermore, the student discusses 'death of people' as being caused by 'space of jobs' and 'the development of adult education'. These clauses are not related, leading to the paragraph being incoherent.

The findings show that the most commonly used reference is homophoric reference, especially by the competent group, since it is retrieved from the cultural context. As mentioned before, the competent group is more familiar with the issues around the topic. This could be because they do a lot of reading as compared to the not-so-competent group.

It can be said that, both groups do not use many cataphoric references which occurs when the referent has not yet appeared but will be provided subsequently, nor do they use esphoric reference, which occurs when the referent occurs in the phrase immediately following the presuming referent item (Eggins, 2004). The implication, particularly for the

competent group is that, although their skills might be characterized as competent in terms of writing, they have not yet reached the levels of what could be characterized as accomplished writers.

Register analysis

In register analysis information obtained from the detailed analysis of text can be interpreted as realization of contextual dimensions enabling a summarized register description. The contrastive register description of the text is based on the combined lexico-grammatical and cohesion evidence. Eggins (2004) argues that evidence allows us to specify similarities and differences between the texts at a contextual level.

The information obtained from the detailed analysis of register shows that there are similarities in field between most of the texts of competent students since most of them were able to contextualize the topic, unlike the not-so-competent students, most of whom could not contextualize the topic.

In mode and tenor, competent students used high formal, authoritarian tenor. They constructed their texts as reflective written texts by impersonal writers to be read by unknown distant readers. On the other extreme not-so-competent students used highly informal language, non-standard grammar, incomplete clauses, incorrect spelling, and highly interpersonal language. Their language incorporates features of a spoken interactive mode (Eggins, 2004). Out of field, mode and tenor, mode has proved to be the most problematic.

Textual choices alone cannot create text; the text would have no content, nor would it be possible to interact with it. Thus, the knowledge of the context of culture and situation (field, generic and registerial competence) are critical in this regard. Meaning cannot be prioritized until those meanings have themselves been chosen in context. Thus, we see the competent students construct transitivity structures by making experiential choices, segmenting and linking those experiential choices through logical relations. The following example has been taken from the essays of the competent group:

The first challenge that mostly affects education in this country is lack of properly trained teachers. These days no one wants to be a teacher because of certain reasons and this results to few teachers. We all know that teachers play the most important role in education so they need to be taken care and natured in order to improve the standard of

education in this country. Secondly, in schools we can have teachers but if they are not properly trained---

In the above mentioned essay the student has contextualized (that is, the field) the topic by mentioning the lack of trained teachers as one of the challenges. The student also uses formal language (that is, mode and tenor). Furthermore, the student uses lexical chains 'education', 'teachers' and 'the standard of education' to link the text. The use of the strategies of foregrounding, 'the first' followed by 'secondly', in the next paragraph are an indication that the student is competent in writing. Hypertheme 'The first challenge in this country is lack of properly trained teachers' and hypernew 'that mostly affects education' can be clearly identified. A causal conjunction 'because' has been used to give a reason though the reason is not mentioned.

On the other hand, the not-so-competent students do not use transitivity structures to link experiential choices. The following example is taken from the essays of the not-so-competent group:

The country has improve to merged the blacks and whites in their schools which was no allowed in the 20th century. In many years ago the blacks were not allowed to attend the sports like cricket rugby etc but now you'll find that the sport is for everyone according education. Look now we have black lectures which was few of the by that time and even as we are in tertiary so it shows that tertiary level is not for whites only as they did before.

The paragraph mentioned above clearly shows that it is difficult to understand the essay because this student has failed to choose or prioritize meaning. The student does not have a repertoire of vocabulary and construction types, that is, grammar and morpho-syntactic knowledge, in the L2 to enable him to construct transitivity structures needed to make logical relations of experiential choices in different contexts. The student has used informal language (look now) used in the spoken mode. Thematic structures cannot be clearly identified. Furthermore, the student has used cohesive conjunctions incorrectly.

The findings show that competent students do not have problems with themes, conjunctive cohesion reference chains, lexical cohesion, cohesive characterization and register analysis since they do a lot of reading.

On the other hand, the not-so-competent students have serious problems with all the aspects mentioned above. In their essays themes cannot be clearly identified. They also do not use cohesive conjunctions and if they do, use them incorrectly. Furthermore, textual cohesion markers which help to indicate relationships in the text, have been incorrectly used. All these problems could be associated with the fact that black students from rural schools do not read due to lack of reading materials at home.

Recommendations

Black students need to be encouraged to read academic texts to help them improve their writing skills. One way of doing this is encouraging a culture of reading at home. Black students need to be taught how to structure information through manipulation of intertextual knowledge and other discourse knowledge. It should be brought to their attention that it is important to organize at both sentence and text level. In other words, students need to be taught how to write coherently through text organization and storage of relevant information. Coherence problems in the writing of students may be due to not knowing how to organize the text or how to store the relevant information.

According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), revision is also important and is a demanding task because it involves definition, evaluation, strategy selection and modification of the text in the writing plan and the ability of students to analyze and evaluate the feedback they receive on their writing. Students should be encouraged to edit their work. However, it is also apparent that revision will not help the not-so-competent group as they have no access to the contexts of culture and situation as well as the linguistic capacity in the ESL to create meaning.

In order to facilitate the writing process, students can develop the writing strategies. The strategies include the metacognitive, such as planning the organization of written discourse; cognitive, which is using known linguistic information to facilitate a new learning task and using new vocabulary; and social strategies, that is, intertextual knowledge (Fairclough, 2004), which involves peer revision (O'Malley and Chamont, 1990). Interaction and input also play important roles in the writing process. Black students need to receive adequate L2 input in order to form a new hypothesis about syntactic and rhetorical forms in the target language, hence, students need to be apprenticed to academic writing and be taught grammar.

Model of academic writing

The model discussed in this section and summarized below is aimed at benefiting ESL, as well as first language speakers of English. For black students writing in ESL, the model is even critical as it could help mitigate the shortcomings arising out of their inadequate command of English grammar.

Outside the text

Before starting to write the actual text there are activities which must be performed outside the text.

Pre-writing activities

This section considers activities that need to be performed before the actual writing start. These include conducting research, brainstorming, identifying the context of situation and culture, theme construction and development, writing the first draft, revising for cohesion and coherence, and finally editing.

Conducting research

Students should be helped to read extensively about the topic before starting to write. This can be done by conducting library research and reading any other text with information related to the topic.

Brainstorming

Teachers need to help set up mixed brainstorming groups of competent and not-so-competent students. Brainstorming the topic involves context and themes. This can be done by stating the subject at the center, linking all major ideas to the subject, and then linking all minor ideas to the major ideas.

Identifying the context of situation and culture

With little or no culture of reading and writing in their homes and communities and poor education background, students have little or no experience with regard to registerial and generic aspects of academic writing. Classroom practice, as it relates to academic writing, needs to focus on the following questions relating to context:

1. What is the context of the text?
2. What register is used, and should be used in writing?
3. What genre is used?
4. Which ideology is influencing the use of language?
5. Are there simpler or other texts written on the topic or unrelated topic (intertextuality)?
6. What can be learned from these texts with regard to 1-5 in the given task?

Theme construction and development

Tertiary institutions assume that students are familiar with aspects of academic writing such as theme construction and development. It is clear in this paper that a significant number of black students have difficulty with essay writing. Teachers therefore need to help black students with the following aspects of theme development:

- i) Identify the main theme, should it be single or multiple themes?
- ii) Identify topical themes, which function as the subject of the clause and rheme, which are the remaining clause constituents.
- iii) Identify hypertheme, which functions as the topic sentence.
- iv) Identify hypernew, which is any information arising from the hypertheme.
- v) Identify macrotheme, which is any information that comes before the topic sentence orientating the reader on what to expect (Martin and Rose, 2003).

Francis (2000) suggests that one way of doing this is for teachers to start with a simple narrative text, where students can be guided to identify the themes. Thereafter, they can be introduced to specialized writing using some of the themes identified earlier on in the lesson.

Write the first draft

In writing the first draft, the ideas that came up in the brain-storming phase should be converted into sentences. The goal at this stage should be to state the main idea clearly and support it with supporting ideas. Students should make it a point that each main idea constitutes a paragraph by identifying the thematic structure.

Revise for cohesion and coherence

Revising means rewriting the text, building upon what has already been done in order to make it more focused. When revising the following questions need to be asked:

- i) Is there any coherence in the text? That is, is the text unified?
- ii) Is the hypertheme clearly stated at the beginning of the paragraph?
- iii) Are the hypernews which are supporting ideas, truly supporting the main idea?
- iv) Are there any separate macrothemes supporting points for each main idea?

- v) Is there any texture in the text (that is, scaffolding)?
- vi) Are there any cohesive devices that are visible in the text to link ideas, for example, conjunctions (Langan, 2002)?
- vii) Is there any nominalization used in the text?
- viii) Are there any marked themes which are circumstantial elements such as place or time or they may be participants that are not the subject of the clause?

Editing

The last stage is editing, that is, checking the text for coherence and cohesion which involves checking grammatical errors, and punctuation and spelling mistakes. However, to be effective, editing should be made part of the classroom practice. The weaker students may need help from the teacher in order to edit their texts.

Inside the text

Inside the text, the students have to be taught and apprenticed into developing writing skills in the following.

Hypertheme: Topic sentence development

Teachers need to help students on how to decide on the hypertheme, which is the topic sentence of each paragraph. The hypertheme gives orientation to what is to come, that is, the frame of reference, and predicts how the text will unfold. The hypernew should support the hypertheme. This is any new information accumulated from the hypertheme and also supporting it.

Hypernew: Supporting evidence development

Teachers need to help students on how to decide on the hypernew which supports the hypertheme with specific and relevant evidence. Supporting evidence is needed for the purposes of coherence. The evidence that supports the point in a paragraph consists of overt markers such as 'first of all', 'secondly' and 'finally'. The evidence is also made up of reference chains showing the major participants in the text. These are used to link clauses and ideas, and to create a text that has coherence and cohesion (cf. Martin and Rose, 2003).

Foregrounding: Connect specific evidence

Teachers need to help the students on how to connect specific evidence for coherence in their texts. The reader of the text must move smoothly from one bit of supporting information to the next. Students need to be taught how to use transition

words such as, ‘also’, ‘on the other hand’, ‘firstly’ and ‘then’, which are strategies of foregrounding and co-articulation.

Tracking participants

Teachers must guide the students to identify key words and pronouns which should be repeated to tie ideas together, to form reference chains and also to indicate major participants and their importance. To do this, one has to identify presuming referent in a text and then seek to link all mentions of that participant. Students find this a daunting task, and yet teachers often assume that identifying participants is rather obvious and not worth spending valuable teaching time on.

Expectancy relations

Teachers must guide the students on how to use chains of clauses and sentences to relate the text to its area of focus. They must also be guided on how to use expectancy relationships (that is, the relationship between the doer and the action) to create lexical cohesion. There is no doubt this could be hampered by students’ lack of requisite vocabulary and grammar. Encouraging students to read outside set

texts and retell and recount in their own words what they read, could be a useful tool in this regard.

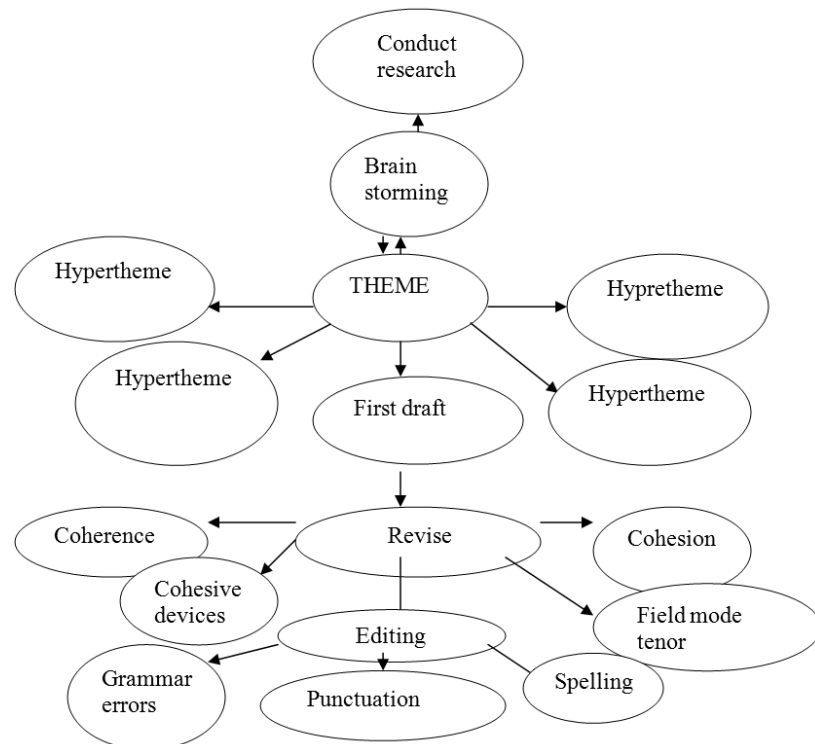
Cohesion: Consistency with verbs

Teachers should guide the students on how to be consistent with tense. Students should not shift tenses unnecessarily. If the student starts in the present tense, there should not be any sudden shift to the past tense because this will affect cohesion. Again, this is also a function of experience with texts. This also entails exposing students to different text-types from newspapers articles and scientific reports. Teachers can then draw attention to how a change in tense, for example, in legal documents, could have implications for the whole case.

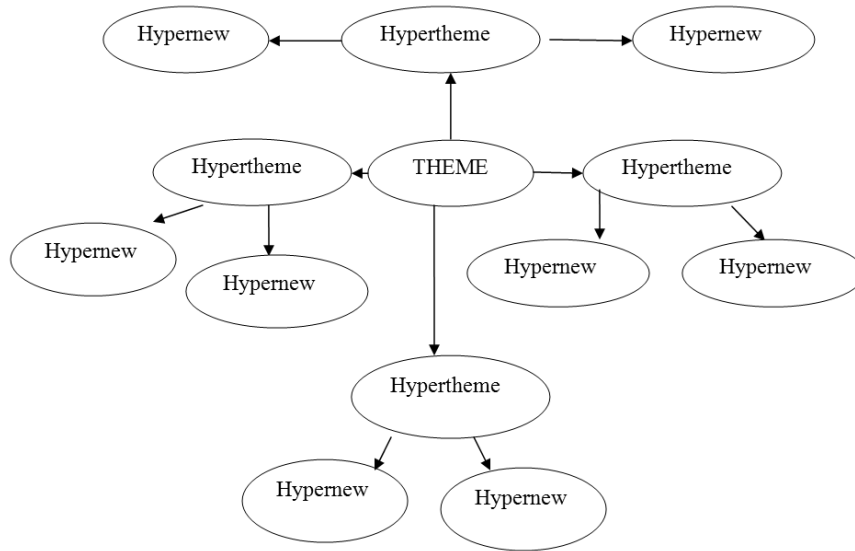
Cohesive conjunction: Combine clauses

Teachers should guide students on how to combine clauses. They should emphasize that clauses that are related or coordinated should be joined using explicit, implicit, elaborating, enhancing, and extension conjunctions to create semantically meaningful structural links between clauses.

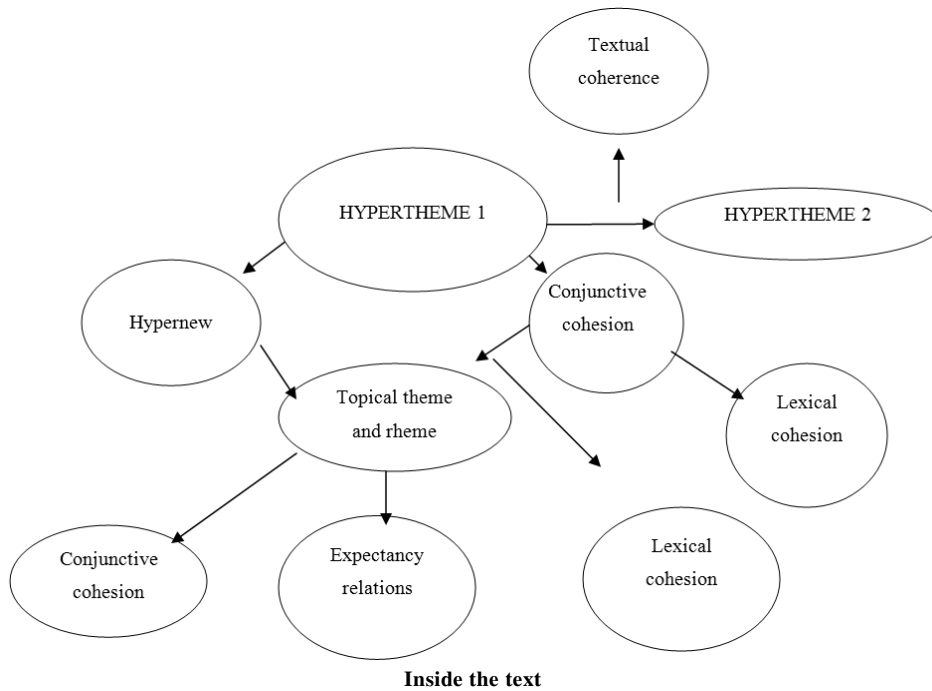
The following diagrams summarize the profile of academic writing, and hence the strategies that should be developed in ESL academic writing.



a) Outside the text



b) Outside the text



Inside the text

Conclusion

The first step towards solving the problem of lack academic writing skills among black students is for institutions of learning and government to acknowledge that black students have problems with academic writing. Teachers also have a responsibility to guide the students on how to improve on these problems. Changing students to improve their academic writing is a slow process that requires commitment on the part of the student, teacher,

lecturer, government and parents. However, it can be done, and the present paper gives some pointers.

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نظم علم اللسانيات الوظيفي كإستراتيجية لتقييم طلاب الكتابة الأكاديمية

بابا تشوتشو

جامعة جنوب أفريقيا

(قدم للنشر في ١٤٢٩/٥/٩ هـ؛ وقبل للنشر في ١٤٢٩/١٢/٢٢ هـ)

ملخص البحث. يتناول البحث أهمية استقصاء المعوقات المرتبطة بالكتابة في المجالات الأكاديمية باللغة الإنجليزية، وهذا ما ينعكس سلباً على الأداء الأكاديمي للطلاب والطالبات بشكل عام. وتشكل الخلفية الاتفاقية للطلاب والطالبات عنصراً أساسياً في مدى تحقيق الحد الأدنى من القدرة على الكتابة في الإطار الأكاديمي؛ ولذلك فإن البحث يعطي دلالة مهمة على العلاقة المتبادلة بين القدرة على الكتابة والأداء الأكاديمي لدى الطلاب.