Action Research on Discourse Analysis of ESL Foundation Year Students: A Case of L1 Arabic-speaking Students

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Abstract: *This essay aims to present a brief qualitative account of authentic writing samples of Arabic-speaking ESL learners, looking at various cohesive discourse devices used, and at what are the elements that make them differ in their world views. The focus of this essay is written discourse, especially the use of connectors in short medical report writing exercises; brief excerpts have been taken from submissions by students currently pursuing undergraduate degrees at a Saudi university. Writing samples from short paragraphs of free writing have been analysed to understand the nature of language perception and the way English is learnt by the students. The implications of the study throw light on pedagogical practices as well as on learners' needs. Discussion of this paper has implications for prevalent teaching practices and for areas of improvement in the students' writing skill.*

Keywords: *Discourse analysis; L1 Arabic speaking; ESL; writing skill; foundation year*

INTRODUCTION

Discourse analysis, first introduced by Zellig Harris (1952), is a way of analysing connected speech and writing beyond the structural level in order to assess the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. Harris examines language at the structural level, and describes how language features are distributed in text and the particular ways they are arranged. In doing so, he observes that context plays a significant role in the arrangement of language features. He rightly says, "connected discourse occurs within a particular situation – whether a person speaking … or a person writing a book in a particular literary or scientific tradition" (in Paltridge, 2012, p. 13). Guy Cook calls context a "search for what gives discourse coherence" (1989, p. 6). As the focus here is on written discourse, it is understood that this form of discourse has its own particular features that differentiate it from spoken discourse. As Michael McCarthy points out, spontaneity and immediacy are elements lacking in written discourse (1991, p. 25). The focus of the texts for analysis here implies the same, as the students had time to decide on their written content and on the overall structure of the texts, possibly revising any errors they detected before submission. Furthermore, unlike with spoken discourse, here the teacher is the silent participant, unable to interrupt or differ. The features of the text in study here will be explained in the following

section before the analysis of connective devices and coherence in the students' texts.

The aim of this essay is to observe the patterns of connectors in students' written discourse, and how the students view and use them to connect their ideas logically in their texts. Pedagogically, these generalisations will have implications for the teaching of writing and for giving feedback to students who try to develop their language skills in general and writing skill in particular on this course.

Selection of Texts

Course Outline and Text Description

In the present essay, seven random submissions were selected from authentic homework assignments of students on the English Language Skills 2 course offered during the preparatory year for undergraduate students specialising in pharmacy education. The course book offered to the students as study material is Oxford Headway Plus for upper-intermediate level (Middle East edition) in the second semester of academic year 2020-21. This course is offered to students who have already passed level 1, i.e. those who have completed Oxford Headway Plus at Intermediate level. The English language skill courses are compulsory components in the students' eligibility for the desired course. The course focuses mainly on the productive skills of the students; however, they are exposed to the full range of language skills. Basic explanatory writing on various topics is taught in class, and the related grammatical elements are discussed in detail. Similar kinds of activity are also encouraged in speaking; of course, the communicative form of language is encouraged among the students. Alongside producing texts, the students are expected to develop their range of communicative or informal vocabulary, and their sensitivity to the register of academic writing. This, however, is not something the instructors focus on; rather they emphasise communicative language skills. The students are formally assessed at C1 (proficient level) as per the standards prescribed by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR-Appendix 1). It is worth mentioning that the learners are all male students, as samples from female students could not be included for analysis, due to the gender segregated educational set-up at both school and college level.

The selected texts are the unrevised drafts of each submission, written in the tenth week of the course as part of a second writing assignment. The rationale for the text selection is that the sample essays present a general picture of the students' current level of language skills, as the upper-intermediate level course is the maximum level offered in the preparatory year at this particular Saudi university. The essay was expected to reveal which textual structure and linguistic elements students find more or less challenging as they progress to an advanced level. For this unrevised draft, detailed feedback was given to the students on the content and its organisation, as well as on their language use – although not very strictly, as more subject-specific (pharmacy) writing drills or exercises would be made available as students write more in later semesters on various other courses.

The text type assigned to the class was explanatory writing, written on a prescribed topic. Actually, they were given two topics and they were asked to write

on either one. The topics, 'Why do people live and work abroad?' and 'Driving fast is dangerous for all?' were given to all 33 students in the class, but only five were selected randomly for analysis in the present essay, and they had all chosen to write on the first topic. Each student was expected to write a minimum of 250 words in two paragraphs; however, only 145 words were examined in the present context.

Genre

Systematic functional linguistics (SFL) deals with the relationship between the context and the linguistic aspects (Halliday & Mattheisen, 2014). It is concerned with how language is used by people in a particular context and how speakers or writers make systematic choices in their language use patterns within a specific context (Halliday & Mattheisen, 2014). For example, an email to a friend would be different in its lexico-grammatical functions from an email inquiring about a job. Thus, the choice of meaning-making is determined by the context of language use. The following table shows how choices of linguistic features are linked to the context of a situation to form register (Nagao, 2019).

Table 1. *Genre*

Context	Field	Tenor	Mode
Register variables	What is going on in the text?	What is the relationship between writers and readers?	How is the text organised, in spoken or written text?
Linguistic realisation in meta-function	Ideational meaning: when, how, who, where, and what	Interpersonal learning: politeness, modality, and evaluative terms; attitudes, positions, and social roles	Textual meaning: Theme and rheme as well as new and old information.
Lexico-grammatical features	Vocabulary, grammar, and tense	Mood, modalities	Theme; this, it, and that

Swales (1990, p. 58) identifies the key concepts in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as "discourse community, communicative purpose, and genre". Here, genre is a category of communicative events holding some communicative purpose. Therefore, understanding social purposes and contexts helps us to determine the meaning of the language and specific social actions (Fakhruddin & Hassan, 2015). To put it simply, genre means the classification of written and spoken discourse, which are classified on the bases of context, language, form and purpose. Tardy explains, 'Genre embody a social group's expectation not just for linguistic form, but also for rhetorical strategies, procedural practices and subject-matter or content, among other dimensions, and the unique ways in which the dimensions interact with the genre' (2011, p. 54).

Categorisation of particular text type helps in identifying the nature of communicative strategies used by the students for a particular type of communicative setting. In discourse analysis, 'genre' is defined as 'the social

expectations of how a text of a particular type should be constructed' (Biber, 2013, p. 193). Paltridge defines it as 'a class of communicative events with set of shared purposes' (2013, p. 11). This means that a specific type of discourse consists of structures and content very specific to a particular type of genre within a certain community, for example through the acceptance of specific features and conventions because of frequent exposure to them. In this essay, genre is defined as the type of written text in order to help in understanding the relationship between the text's social purpose and structure that influences writers' choices of linguistic pattern.

This essay analyses the task of writing explanatory essays, and these have been referred to previously as a text type, a term that refers to different writing forms or 'patterns of discourse organization that occur across different genres' (Paltridge 2001, p. 63). An explanatory essay has two elements: why? and how? (Pircher, 2020). In such writing, students are expected to use previous knowledge based on their experience to write about the topic in a manner that involves actions and taking positions to arrange their arguments; for instance, they settle on a position if they believe something is or is not the case, based on their gathered knowledge or previous experience. Here, the students are required to write about their views on the topic based on their knowledge, without looking into the topic in detail. Such text type provides the students with what Paltridge calls 'generic competence' (to construct, use and exploit generic conventions to achieve particular communicative ends) (2001, p. 7). Here, generic competence refers to communicative and linguistic competence to 'both interpret and create contextually appropriate texts as instances of a particular genre' (Paltridge 2001, p. 7). Following this definition, these texts should include more formal vocabulary and grammar, among other genre-specific features.

In teaching upper-intermediate level, such text type is a natural and very common activity to prompt students to transform their ideas in the target language. Moreover, language use at this level is similar to that used in university-level courses (Hinkel 2003, p. 12). Hyland, too, refers to such essay type as 'central to academic enterprise' (2009, p 1). Students are expected to be able to convey comfortably their views on various issues concerning their academic and non-academic endeavours after completing levels 1 and 2 English language skills courses in their preparatory year. Such opportunities also familiarise students with the structural differences between their native language and English.

To generalise the genre feature of such text type, students' logical flow of argument with sufficient support is considered the primary requirement. To form the text as a coherent whole, cohesive markers should be used effectively in order to maintain easy readability. Cohesion poses challenges for students and the present essay addresses the patterns of such difficulties.

Grammatical Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the grammatical and lexical link with the text that holds the text together, and which contributes to the making of meaning in the text as a whole. For this, logical organisation of ideas is a prerequisite to exhibiting cohesion. McCarthy (1991, p. 35) defines cohesion as a term that 'refers to the way individual clauses and sentences are grammatically linked in a text'. Haliday and Hasan (1976,

in Schlepegrell, 2012, p. 24) identify a set of cohesive devices that are 'non-syntactic in nature, but they make the text hang together', and these devices are reference, repetition, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction. Looking at the occurrence patterns of one of these devices – conjunction, for example – helps learners to understand how cohesive devices work.

Conjunction and Text Analysis

Halliday and Hasan (1976) refer to connectors as conjunctions, while they are dubbed as 'linking words' by Swales and Freak (1994, p. 22). These connectors help writers to establish relationships between ideas, and to communicate effectively the logical relationships between parts of a text (Eggins, 2004, p. 47). To maintain cohesion among the parts, connectors determine 'the way in which what to follow is systematically linked to what has gone before (Halliday and Hasan 1976, p. 227). Conjunctions have been classified into four categories: additive, adversative, causal and temporal (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, in Flowerdew, 2013, p. 33).

Student 1 – In sample 1, additives like and and also can be seen in the draft. Grammatically, coordinating conjunctions like for (in the sense of explaining why; although less common than because), or (for an alternative) and and (the equal without showing any contrast) are used successfully in reflecting links between elements, and in extending the meaning made in preceding clauses. Use of additives like in addition in the sentence 'In addition, they would like to make new friends' has not been used correctly; as 'In addition to … (what) …' does not reflect clearly any link to the previous sentence. Conjunctive adverbs seem to be problematic, as in place of 'furthermore', where a coordinating conjunction is actually needed. In the last two sentences, there is a clear indication to express cause and reason, but use of proper subordinating conjunction is missing. For example:

> '…some people like living abroad to help their children get better education. They can be employable.' (Appendix 2: Student 1 [last two sentences]).

> 'Some people like living abroad to help their children get better education so that they can be employable' (corrected).

Another striking feature of the text is the absence of correlative conjunctions (e.g. not only…but also, neither…nor, either…or, whether…or, both, etc.) and subordinating conjunctions. Students are exposed to more common expressions used by mostly non-native speakers, which could be a possible reason for the lack of variety in their choice of expressions; sentences used are mostly simple and compound ones. By looking at the categories of conjunctions, classified as suggested by Halliday and Hasan (1976), it is obvious that – other than additive categories such as adversative, causal and temporal – continuatives are completely missing from the text, which implies a lack of linkage between ideas and cohesion in the whole text.

Student 2 – Barring errors in punctuation marks throughout the text, the text is quite different from that of student 1 in its presentation and use of conjunctions. Coordinating conjunctions like and, for and 'but' have been used successfully and have extended the meaning of the sentences very effectively. Use of but in the fifth

line of the text has effectively and correctly created cohesion between the logical ideas. Additives such as and and also have been used correctly. Use of subordinating conjunctions like while and when indicate successful expression of time. Concerning the topic, there is a lot of scope to express conditions in a variety of contexts. People live and work abroad for various reasons and under many conditions, and this could have been exploited well with appropriate use of conjunctions. However, in the text there is no use of correlative or conjunctive conjunctions. Overall, the sentences are arranged in isolation, as there is no cohesion among the various reasons why people prefer living and working in a foreign country. Due to the lack of conjunctions, the text sounds more like a list of all possible reasons, rather than a cohesive text wherein all the elements contribute to the topic.

Student 3 – Here the structure and overall approach towards the text is the same as with student 1 and student 2. Use of 'In addition…' in the fourth sentence is problematic; instead of using 'in addition to…', it has not been used correctly, failing to connect this sentence to the preceding one. Mostly coordinating conjunctions are used, with the other possibilities completely overlooked during teaching, or the student has not been exposed to the use of advanced structures. For instance, the sentences below show the lack of the student's vocabulary.

'Some young men like to travel abroad to get engaged to native girls. They usually do this to live abroad for so long' (from the text).

'Some young men like to travel abroad to get engaged to native girls so that they can stay to get nationality, or stay there for a longer time' (possible correction).

Such instances show a complete absence of correlative and conjunctive conjunctions in use by the students. Moreover, few subordinating conjunctions are used.

Student 4 – As with other students, coordinating conjunctions like and, and but are successfully used and have effectively contributed to the general meaning of the text. Halliday and Hasan's classified categories – adversatives, causals and continuatives – are found to be missing from all of the texts. Although these categories are missing in the fourth sample, there is evidence of lexical cohesion, which means reiteration of a lexical item to create cohesion in the text (Flowerdew, 201, p. 40). In this sample, the student has used 'relocate' to link the points developed in the text. Moreover, there are instances of lexical changing, with 'new culture' and 'local culture' to add freshness to the text and to connect the ideas in the paragraph. Even if the student has reached beyond conjunctions to find alternative ways to maintain cohesion, this is quite encouraging in terms of language use. However, missing conjunctions do leave gaps in the written text wherein continuous flow is interrupted, and the absence of conjunctions creates gaps in meaning for the readers.

Student 5 – the problems are the same as for student 4.

Textual Inferences

Several generalisations can be made from the above samples. Firstly, only a very limited number of coordinating or additive terms have been used in all of the texts. Unlike in Azzouz's (2009) observation of second-year Arabic-speaking students, who reflected very impressive use of temporal and adversative conjunctions, the students in this case show only very limited use of additives. Most of the linguistic elements in the texts occur in isolation, and a clear link among the sentences is lacking, which makes it difficult for readers to find connections. Improper use of 'in addition to…' in student 1's text shows that the student is quite sure about the phrase, but needs to understand how to make use of it in a context. Crewe (1990, p. 36) highlights the misuse of links: 'if the links are misused, the argument as a whole becomes difficult to process and may even appear illogical'. Here, in these samples, misuse of conjunctions is not found in any of the texts, implying the students' limited understanding of conjunctions and their importance to the language. Hence, the students need to be made aware of the connectors, and the vital importance of links in written text; such awareness would encourage the students to improve cohesion in their written work.

Secondly, it is quite evident from the patterns that the students are exposed to only certain kinds discourse patterns. The texts here most commonly use additives to reflect relations among sentences or between paragraphs. This is in line with the findings of Fareh (1988) and Abu-Ali (1993), who register similar tendencies in the writing samples of students joining American universities for master's programmes.

CONCLUSION

A closer look at the patterns of occurrence of conjunctions reveals that Arab learners at the pre-university or foundation level have limitations in the variety of connectors they use in their writing. This is evident from the samples in the present study, where the students use only additives, and are completely unaware of the structures supported by the use of adversatives, causal, and continuatives; these are completely absent from all of the texts. Use of temporals is also found to be very limited. These patterns provide instructors with insight into gaps in the students' writing activities which might form the bases for improvisation in their teaching strategies. It is quite interesting that the points related to the topic are written in isolated sentences, while links among the different elements are completely missing, which affects cohesion in the texts. Thornbury (2005, p. 34) proposes exposing learners to the text as a whole, not as isolated sentences, so that they can realise what binds the text together.

One way to address these learning problems is to provide comprehensive feedback to the learners about the structural elements that combine meaning conveyed within individual sentences with meanings communicated through various sentences. A range of exercises could help learners to learn cohesive devices, such as the functions of conjunctions. Nation (2008, p. 46) suggests that students be asked to underline the connectors and identify their relationships with the other parts, which would help them to develop a sense of cohesion and further improve their writing skills. Moreover, students can also be asked to improve their own writing exercises through peer review, and to further discuss all the possible ways to enhance the cohesion and coherence of their texts.

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APPENDIX 1
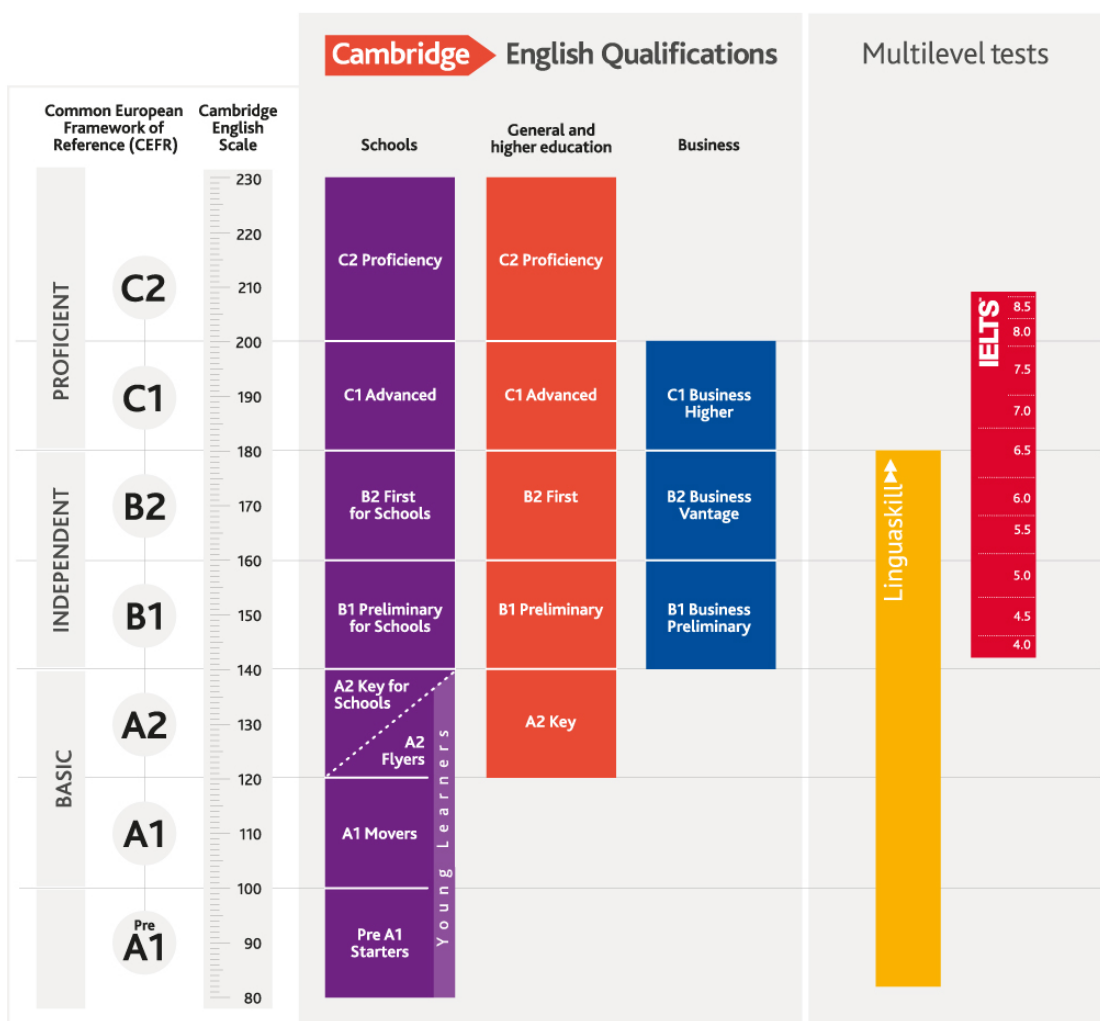
English Language Proficiency levels as per Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR), (Online, accessed on 19th May 2021)

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APPENDIX 2

Students' texts

The following five extracts of 145 words each are submissions made by the students in April 2021 on the topic mentioned below:

"Why do people like to live and work abroad?"

Student 1

People like traveling abroad for many different reasons. One common reason is to live there. Living abroad has many advantages for so many people. Some people prefer to live abroad to learn a foreign language especially the English language. Another reason is that they want to explore new places and cultures. In addition, they would like to make new friends. Also, they might go abroad to live with their friends or relatives . Other people might travel abroad to escape poverty and injustice. Some young men like to travel abroad to make new families. Furthermore. some people like living abroad to help their children get better education. They can be employable.

Another important reason why people travel abroad is to work there. People usually go abroad to improve themselves and get good experience. They can find better jobs at international institutions or companies.

Student 2

Traveling to new places, meeting new people and cultures For some people, moving abroad is a necessity, while for others it's a choice People are more willing to relocate abroad for work, relationships or just a new adventure and When you move to a new country, you'll be faced with challenges on a daily basis from finding somewhere to live to developing friendships in an unknown city, These new situations and settings may seem daunting at first but it is the best way to grow as an individual and Relocating to a foreign country will result in you making a wealth of international connections You'll meet locals, fellow expats from all around the world and other like-minded individuals, Making new friends will result in you broadening both your professional and personal network, living in a new country offers many new activities and interests that you may have never discovered.

Student 3

People like traveling abroad for many different reasons. One important reason is to live there. Living abroad has many advantages for so many people. Some people prefer to live abroad to learn a foreign language especially the English language. Another reason is that they want to explore new places. In addition, they would like to make new friends. Also, they might go abroad to live with their friends or relatives. Other people might travel abroad to escape bad circumstances. Some

young men like to travel abroad to get engaged to native girls. They usually do this to live abroad for so long. Furthermore. some people like living abroad to help their children get better education. Another important reason why people travel abroad is to work there. People usually go abroad to improve themselves and get good training. They can find better jobs at international institutions.

Student 4

When you move to a new country, you'll be faced with challenges on a daily basis – from finding somewhere to live to developing friendships in an unknown city. These new situations and settings may seem daunting at first but it is the best way to grow as an individual, relocating to a foreign country will result in you making a wealth of international connections. You'll meet locals, fellow expats from all around the world and other like-minded individuals. Making new friends will result in you broadening both your professional and personal network. Immersing yourself in the local culture is the ultimate learning experience. Being exposed to new cultures in such depth will give you an invaluable perspective in all aspects of life including work, new and exciting travel destinations become available when you relocate but the concept of 'travel' doesn't have to be a plane ride away, this could be exploring your own neighbourhood.