

Discourse-creating Features of Pre-tertiary Learners

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KEYWORDS Micro Analysis. Macro Analysis. Predicator. Learners.Essays. Literal Level

ABSTRACT Creation of meaning, by learners, is predominately, through their written work. An analysis of learners' written work indicates, not only of their communicative levels but also their manageability of the language of instruction (English), literacy skills, their overall performance and ultimately, the quality of their success. The aim of the present investigation was, first, to outline the attributes of selected Grade 12 learners, potential University of Venda (UNIVEN) students, through an analysis of their essays and secondly to interpret these findings in relation to discourse creation and teaching and learning. Through a qualitative approach, features of learners' works were isolated both at micro (technical) and macro (discourse) levels. The results informed that at both levels of analyses, learners exhibited language capabilities at the literal levels of discourse creation.

INTRODUCTION

Success at tertiary level is dependent on many variables ranging from socio-economic to academic (Duff 2010; Evans and Morrison 2011; Cummins 2000, 2014; Kaburise 2014a). These variables impinge on the education process for learners in mastery of content subjects as well as the language of instruction, English (Stephen et al. 2004). This has necessitated the constant screening of learners to ensure that only a certain caliber of students continues into higher education. Grade 12 learners wishing to pursue tertiary studies, thus, must satisfy English language requirements through some kind of assessment, which in South Africa, is the matriculation (matric) examinations. This is a common practice throughout the world but the quality of matriculation results in South Africa seems to generate some controversy, particularly results from the less-urban provinces. Oliver (2003) and Jansen (2003, 2013) have gone so far as to suggest that matriculation results of certain provinces are regularly 'modified' resulting in many under-prepared learners gaining access into tertiary institutions which in turn affect the status of their participation and the quality of degrees, diplomas and certificates they obtain (Strydom et al. 2010). UNIVEN, the site for this investigation, is located in a rural environment, therefore, the sentiments of Oliver (2003) and Jansen (2003, 2013) can be said to have some significance here. Although, Oliver (2003) and Jansen (2003, 2013) had been speaking about learners' general under-preparedness, by extension, these authors are also making adverse comments about learners' preparedness in English, the language of

instruction (Kaburise 2012). Under-preparedness in an education context usually refers to literacy levels and covers a multiplicity of factors amongst them learners' unfamiliarity with discourse creation, the focus of the present research (Abola 2012; Donohue and Erling 2012; Wahi et al. 2012; Harrington et al. 2014).

Dropout and failure rates from universities in South Africa are unacceptably high (Scott et al. 2007; Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2011). Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) figures of 2009, confirmed the unacceptable figures of the attrition levels in higher education. It has been established that, although, attrition rates differ from institution to institution, especially between highly selective full time institutions and others, like open and distance education institutions, attrition levels may be as high as 50 percent (Giannakopoulos and Buckley 2008). The wastage in time, effort and money as well as the strain on universities' resources because of students spending five to six years doing a three year qualification is problematic (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2011; Parry 2012). The emotional and psychological impact on students who had to drop out and the economic consequences on the country's development are unquantifiable. It is obvious that something is wrong. Many culprits can be identified, but of interest to the present investigation, is the poor level of pre-tertiary students' written discourse.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, lecturers in tertiary institutions have expressed concern over the low lev-

els of discourse-creating ability demonstrated by first-entering students, particularly those coming from non-urban secondary schools (Kaburise 2012; Krugel 2014). Intervention strategies in the form of writing centers, peer mentoring, remedial and foundation support, extended degrees have had limited success. Another strategy being considered, currently, is a generic 4 year degrees. In an attempt to address these concerns a series of research have been undertaken to identify the discourse status of Grades 10 - 12 learners (Kaburise and Phalanndwa 1996; Kaburise 2009). The present study, reports on a research undertaken in 2009 into the writing characteristics of Grade 12 learners in UNIVEN's feeder schools with the aim of establishing their exact characteristics, which should then underpin language support to be offered to first-year students in UNIVEN.

Theoretical Framework

Success in tertiary studies depends mainly on the student's ability to create written and oral academic discourse in response to research findings, assignments, projects and presentations (Lea and Street 1998; Street 2000; Macken-Horarik et al. 2006; Ho 2011; Kaur 2014). Hyland (2009) noted that academic discourse refers to the ways of thinking and using language which exist in the academy. Discourse at any education level does not represent only a writer's command of the language; it is a composite picture of various influences such as, experience, world knowledge and values, socialization and identity, reading habits as well as the learning environment for which the discourse is intended (Duff 2010). Creating discourse has been shown, over the years, as a process controlled by theories as well as involving discrete, although, sometimes overlapping steps (Donohue and Erling 2012; Cummins 2014).

Usual pre-tertiary writing has been dominated by three main conceptions of writing: traditional rhetoric, expressivism and social constructionism (Murphy and Sherwood 2011). Traditional rhetoric focuses on the language or the surface structure of the writing. Here there is strict adherence to technical correctness of the writing; the text is of importance and attempts are made to follow the established structure and formats. Texts of this nature respond positively to remedial assistance where teachers can ac-

tually isolate discrete problems and create intervention strategies. For instance, support can be targeted at the grammar flaws, lack of an introduction, the inclusion of new points and materials in the conclusion or lack of details in a descriptive or explanatory text. This is an objective, quite formalized type of writing and it is appropriate with certain types of texts, like reports.

Expressivism is an attempt to 'include' the writer in the text; the text is seen as a 'means of self-discovery' (Murphy and Sherwood 2011). Within this paradigm the writer's ability to create a picture for the reader is lauded. The writer attempts to take the reader on the same 'journey' so a bond is established from the commonality of their shared experience and creativity is rewarded. This philosophy highly values the development of a writer's individual unique voice and views writing as solitary activity involving communication of personal experiences, values and identity.

The belief that discourse is for a wider audience and should also be relevant to the environment saw the categorizing of writing as a 'social construct' which emphasizes the text as a collaborative effort and within disciplines, communities or institutions; therefore, social constructivism refers to a level of competence for an individual to successfully function in all situations of society, including the schooling system (Macken-Horarik et al. 2006). This is in line with new literacies concept of literacy and discourse which is the interconnected social, linguistic, conceptual and surface skills needed for analyzing, constructing and communicating knowledge within pre-tertiary and tertiary settings (Duff 2010).

Discourse creation in the schooling system involves engagement with different literacies and learners need to familiarize themselves with the different norms required in terms of language and specialized content (Gopee and Deane 2013; Cummins 2014). Knowledge of these norms should be used by learners to create types of discourse which demonstrate high levels of cognitive behavior. Bachman and Palmer (1996) have comprehensively outlined under 'organizational knowledge' the grammatical and textual requirements of discourse. The organizational knowledge of a language ensures accuracy in formation and use of constituents, right from the word level.

Writing is a process and although one may not be consciously aware of this, a good piece of work is the result of definite steps. The moving away from the notion of writing as single act began in the 1970s and has resulted in the process approach to writing particularly in its teaching. The process of writing – prewriting, drafting, revision, editing and proofreading and publishing or publishing – have now found universal approval (Zaid 2011). Now, we know these steps sometimes do not occur in that sequence; they may overlap, some are combined and some steps may be omitted for certain types of text. Despite these variations, a certain amount of time must be spent in preparing, writing and reviewing the finished product each of which calls for skills in language and discourse creation.

The connection between reading and writing is not contested (Abola 2012; Gopee and Deane 2013; Nordin et al. 2013). Reading feeds into writing and experience contextualizes and creates a relevant frame for the knowledge obtained during reading. Reading exposes learners to the rest of the world, it upsets their cognitive equilibrium; it enables writers to develop sophistication in interacting with topics. Such writers can objectively, informatively and constructively engage with topics all of which improve their ability to create discourse. A reading-impooverished learner is also a poor writer (Duff 2010; Tengku and Maarof 2012).

METHODOLOGY

Discourse analysis can be undertaken in various paradigms. The evaluation of potential Univen students' attributes was based on an adaptation of Bachman and Palmers (1996) construct of language ability. In their model they regard language ability as competence arising from knowledge of structural and social norms (language knowledge) and cognitive norms (strategic competence). Although, Bachman and Palmer's model basically sees language competence as arising from these two pillars, the researcher's point of departure is that the pillars are seen as language ability at *micro level* which corresponds to organizational knowledge, and *macro level* which is a combination of pragmatic and cognitive attributes. This adaptation was necessary for this type of analysis as at micro level the researcher examined smaller units at sentence levels, for instance, nature of vocabulary and syntax while at macro level the researcher

investigated bigger portions of language to evaluate, again, for instance, expressions, registers as well as argument structure which would fall under Bachman and Palmer's (1996) heading of 'meta-cognition'.

The samples were collected from 100 Grade 12 learners between the ages of 18 and 19 from four schools; 25 from each schools. These schools were randomly selected but they, in the last five years, have had their learners enrolled in UNIVEN, according to the University's admission records. The learners were also randomly selected but were classified by the class teacher as 'above average' and 'average' performers in English as these are deemed 'potential' students for UNIVEN. The English teacher explained the nature of the research and obtained consent from the learners. Each participant wrote three essays on the topics: *Taxi violence*, *Prevention is better than cure* and *The Place I stay*. 300 essays were collected but some samples were discarded because of various irregularities. The researcher finally analyzed 240 essays of approximately a page to page and a half; 70 on *Taxi violence*, 75 on *Prevention is better than cure* and 95 on *The place I stay*.

The investigation involved analysis of the essays at micro and macro levels of text. The criteria for the analysis were based on - technical grammar skills (micro level) and expressions, paragraph and argument construction and content knowledge of the topics (macro / text and discourse levels). The results will, therefore, be discussed under these criteria, sometimes, with a few examples given to illustrate a point.

RESULTS

Micro Level

At the micro level learners' handling of discrete units of sentence construction were investigated. The results in this section are discussed under *relational devices*, *time and aspect markers*, *quality of vocabulary*, *handling of individual constituents of sentences* and *modification*.

Relational Devices

Relational devices such as concord which requires that, for instance, singular units must refer to a corresponding singular antecedent, posed some problem because of the variety of

possible qualifying agents and their individual behaviors. Pronouns which did not refer correctly to their antecedent were also a source of concern. Pronouns must substitute in number, case and gender for the antecedent nominal. If these restrictions are not observed, non-referencing occurs which may distort the intended meaning, or at least render sentences ill-formed such as, **'When parents does not give socially acceptable life they resulted in being street kids.'* Prepositions were another area where a number of students had problems. This study was not able to isolate particular prepositions as the main culprits. Generally, the issue was either learners omitted prepositions or inserted wrong ones or added unnecessary ones. A tendency was, however, seen in an over-fondness for the prepositions *on* and *to*. The latter was related more to learners' practice of using the infinitive form of the verb when it was not appropriate. *Other* / *another* as referencing markers was misapplied as learners allowed lexical items which are in paradigmatic relations to co-occur and used pro-forms without a previous mention of an antecedent. Learners seem to acknowledge only some of the conditions governing the use of *other* and *another* and in some cases they treated them as ordinary descriptive units. They used *another* instead of the article *a* / *an* (**Another man came here*—) when no other person / object had been previously mentioned; and chose *another* when *other* (as a final item) should be used.

Time and Aspect Markers

A number of problems were observed with time and aspect markers and the following discussion is just a summary of the most noticeable traits. Non-observance of the stative and dynamic classification of verbs meant that some verbs of perception were declined in the continuous aspect. The habitual present was underutilized so that some actions were reported as if they had ceased while they were still in operation. The distinctions between the uses of the simple past and the present perfective were also not brought out, particularly the necessity for the present perfective to have a current reference. Tenses which required auxiliaries and also a morphological change in the main verb posed some problems, resulting in instances of wrong auxiliaries being selected and / or the participles

being malformed. The modal *can* featured over-extensively in learners' work. *Can* has three basic uses but learners used this modal on occasions when other modals like *will* / *would* or *may* / *might* would have been more appropriate. The samples demonstrated that learners were familiar with the concept and construction of sentences involving modals, although, there were some instances where instead of the bare infinitive in such constructions, there were attempts to use the infinitive as time markers. Generally, time and aspect markers were a source of unease for learners.

Vocabulary

There was evidence of paucity in the range of the vocabulary that the learners used, hence the use of semantic-impoverished words like *thing*, *good* and *bad* as well as the repetition of phrases like *the bad things of the place I stay* and *the good things of the place I stay*. Handling of lexical items was naturally very individualistic as a result of levels of learners' reading, listening and speaking in English. The high incidence of homophones and polysemous words in English, as well as the irregular nature of English spelling were a source of problem. Incidences of learners using incorrect lexical items and applying wrong morphological processes were limited.

Handling of Constituents of Sentences

There are definite rules for the construction of constituents functioning in the different roles in sentences. Constituents being flexible, because of the possible forms they take and the functions they can perform, affected some learners' output. The samples showed wrong words classes and / or wrong forms of words being included in the various constituents (**The place where I stay is good situated*). These violations include learners replacing nouns with adjectives, verbs with adjectives, nouns with verbs, and so on. In addition, another feature was the omission of either whole or parts of constituents. Samples, therefore, showed verbs without their auxiliaries, nominal groups with no obligatory modifying elements like determiners. Ill-formed constituents and sentences occur if obligatory words or phrases are not included in them. English follows a basic word order for the various

sentence patterns unless an individualistic stylistic effect is intended. Samples showed a departure from these sequencing style when it came to the positioning of modifiers. There was evidence of learners' unwillingness to use pre-modifiers and other types of post-modifiers apart from the 'of-construction'. Learners' preferred constructions like *'The violence of the taxis'* rather than *'The taxi violence'* and *'—usingstoves of electricity'* rather than *'using electric stoves'*. Problematic for learners also was the order in sentences involving a reported speech or an embedded clause. This adversely affected students' ability to transform into declarative statements, questions (*'I don't know why is he doing that'* instead of *'—— why he is'——*).

Modification and Complementation

Modification in sentences is achieved in a number of ways, including the addition of specifying elements. There are rules regarding the manner in which these combinations or relationships can be achieved. For instance, relationships can either be syntagmatic or paradigmatic. The observance of these rules allows us to lawfully increase the complexity of a sentence indefinitely. In the case of some of the analyzed essays the presence of multiple constituents within a single sentence ignored either the syntagmatic or paradigmatic relationship requirements. Hence, there were instances of nominal phrases followed immediately by their substitute pro-form without any intervening units or restructuring of the sentence (*'Lufuno, she takes a taxi ——'*). The researcher also had instances of unnecessary multiple adverbs, determiners, conjunctions, etc. While some of these constructions did not substantially affect the intent of the utterances, in some cases they resulted in tautology and even contradiction.

Lacking such technical background, as is presented above prevents learners 'fine tuning' their texts; the message may be communicated but the aesthetic considerations in essay presentation will not be present. It makes for teachers' difficulty in reading the essay and does not allow the full potential of the learner to come through. Such technical inadequacies tend to disadvantage the learner as teachers become too impatient and frustrated to go beyond the essays' surface characteristics and decipher the arguments the learner is presenting. The situa-

tion is further exacerbated by the bigger classes and the broader span of abilities now present in an average classroom in rural areas.

Macro: Discourse/Text Level

Discussion of a person's linguistic ability is not restricted to his/ her correct construction of sentences but also to the semantic, pragmatic and discourse value of these texts. The present research study now reports on the broad features of the samples under the headings: *expressions, paragraph and argument construction, knowledge of the topic area, and general comments*.

Expressions

Second language learners of any language usually express themselves in a way which reflects their total linguistic richness. Such expressions, if analyzed multi-dimensionally, provide valuable clues to the thought processes of the learners, the intricacies of the spoken and written versions of the learners' previous languages, as well as the unique nature of the target language (Kaburise 2014c). For instance, challenges were posed for the learners partly because of the semantic features of certain words, for example, *'environment'* and *'nature'*, are very similar, however, since both words are polysemous, one has to be careful with the context clues so as to clearly indicate which meaning is intended. What one can also see from learners' expressions is that sometimes just one inappropriate word causes the confusion, while in some cases a whole phrase may be the culprit. It is also noticeable that these examples are their individualistic nature so that one cannot isolate a common thread in them.

The above challenges are a result of factors like vocabulary limitations, inadequate grammatical technical skills and more importantly the processes these learners undergo to create a text in English. Many of these learners have to decode English into their mother tongue and then code it back to English. Considerable misinterpretation is possible in this process as a one-to-one fit may not exist in the languages explaining some of the expressions seen above (Tengku and Maarof 2012). Richness of vocabulary and expressions is also governed by a reading culture existing in learners' school and home. Rural

schools and homes are noted for lack of reading resources resulting in low levels of reading ability and minimum exposure to varied categories of vocabulary. In a study, conducted with rural learners, Bohlman and Pretorius (2002) found that half of the research population had less than 20 books in their homes and 40 percent did not read beyond their prescribed books. Vocabulary of the kind present in these samples is likely to hinder learners' competent understanding and production of discourse. Critical thinking is enhanced in an information-rich individual (Grabe and Stoller 2001; Nordin et al. 2013). It is not in the academic tradition to offer and support opinions and rule on points with no supporting evidence. When that happens one becomes subjective offering one's personal views as world ones. It is a mark of a well-reasoned discourse to research then objectively analyze, evaluate and present the facts. Expressions such as those seen in the students' work are the result of an English-impooverished environment and the production of such a blend of vernacular and English expressions is frowned upon in tertiary discourse.

Paragraph and Argument Construction

Structure of a text would include appropriate choice of words, logically-argued points, relevant and accurate information, exploiting of various discourse strategies with each part cohesively related to the preceding and succeeding sections (Abola 2012). Learners' paragraphs demonstrated some of these features in varying degrees. Paragraphs mainly consisted of simple sentences; compound and complex ones were created simply by just inserting coordinating or subordinating conjunctions. There was hardly any attempt to construct other complex types of sentences or even vary the middle position of conjunctions. Not only was one type of sentence oversubscribed but even the words were similar. These similarities may have arisen because learners start their essays and paragraphs with the topic and there was little attempt to begin with any other kind of introduction or stylistic devices.

In standard texts, similar ideas can quite comfortably be combined. In other words, ideas in sentences and paragraphs should have some collocation, unless some poetic effect is intended. The relationship between parts of a text is achieved by connective devices which fall into

categories, such as structural, sequential, thematic and rhematic. A paragraph is a unit in meaning and organization and includes sentences which are united in ideas, arguments and coherent with a clear systematic explanation of facts developed to defend a central stand. Noticeable in learners' text were sentences with some unorthodox combinations, or unusual sequencing of points. Students used some strategies to bring order and coherence into their writings, hence some samples started with attempts by learners at formulating plans, and continued with headings in the main sections. These attempts or devices were not always successful as some paragraphs showed learners' inability to argue and develop points systematically and logically. These samples showed literal levels of reasoning and argumentation. Sophistication in argument moves a discussion to inferential levels where given information is used to debate, arrive and create new knowledge or form new concepts. Arguments at Grade 12 level are not obvious and simplistic; one is required to critically engage with issues, argue logically and justify a stand. Weideman (2003a/b) outlines some ways of moving an argument along.

Learners seem not to have any problem with handling the topics given, and could offer supporting arguments. Their general knowledge on these topics has a direct link to the socio-economic context in which these learners operate. The effects of taxi violence are more visible in urban areas and this is reflected in how the learners treated the topic. A broader impact on the economic and social quality of life was not brought out. Taxi violence was mainly seen as causing inconvenience in terms of creating transport problems and posing physical danger to the communities. The topic which seems to have been misunderstood was *Prevention is better than cure* as some learners narrowed the meaning of the topic to teenage pregnancy prevention. Here also the social context must have contributed to this. Learners, in urban setting might have included issues like substance abuse, homelessness and other social ills.

CONCLUSION

An exercise of this nature is not an end in itself, for its results should be interrogated in its contribution to the prevailing education landscape. These samples demonstrate the need for

a certain type of intervention. The sampled learners' paucity in initiating and sustaining an argument and in their description of every day events are indications of lack of reading, writing and exposure, a usual picture in non-urban communities. Intervention would have to be both remedial as well as the incorporation of innovative teaching and learning. There is a need for interactive approach as most teachers in resource-lacking classrooms adopt teaching and learning styles like memorizing, non-individual teaching and seeing learners as passive participants in the learning process. Memorizing and not being interrogative of issues, not only creates a certain argument style but also an obvious slant to reasoning and sameness of points which these samples demonstrated. On the other hand, an innovative classroom allows learners to be involved in extended interactive simulated activities in the form of role play, debates, presentations, simulations and problem solving, vital in developing critical discourse abilities.

The researcher is of the firm opinion that attainment of remarkable transformation of these samples, to exhibit satisfactory discourse levels, demands not only support underpinned by literacy theories but also a certain type of needs-oriented support. Internalization of permanent change is usually long-term, and it must occur at an opportune period. Language proficiency which will translate into quality discourse should be provided holistically, with flexibility and over a sustained period of intervention at least from Grades 10 - 12. Interventions in this situation should not only be a 'deficit model' or remediation but rather an integrated intervention as theorized by the models of ideological and new literacies which acculturates the learner to discourse creation in its totality and such support should be initiated throughout all levels of pre-tertiary preparation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Written discourse is the main assessment tool at tertiary levels hence it is imperative that students structure their discourse well to fully communicate their abilities. Teachers at the high school level need to actually teach writing skills and not operate on the assumption that students will pick these skills as their competence improves in the other areas of language study. It might be necessary for the process approach to

writing to be introduced to assist teachers to break down the writing process into manageable segments. The connection between all aspects of language, teaching and learning strategies and assessment needs to be stressed. Hence teachers should be able to see the relationship between listening, speaking, reading and quality writing. In addition, certain teaching and learning styles which foster discussions, debates and individual knowledge creation will enhance writing, in opposition to learning styles like memorization, wholesale acceptance of facts and non-rewarding of innovative thinking.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation to the present study is the observed similarities among the sample essays. The researcher gets the impression that the teacher might have discussed the topics in class before the learners did the activity. This usually arises from teachers' apprehension when any research is carried out in their classrooms and also from teachers' desire that learners perform 'well' in any activity which researchers might scrutinize. Secondly teachers were requested to provide samples from learners who would be classified as *above average* and *average* in performance, however, the similarities in the sampled essays raise some doubts as to whether this selection process was adhered to. This sameness in the essays prevented the researcher from linking any particular features of essay writing to any competence levels.

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