



Enhancing Sensitivity to Audience Demands through Given-New Strategy

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Abstract

Writings produced by some L2 writers, especially novices, may be at times difficult to read, not only because of their author's insufficient control of the English language, which results in global and local errors, but also because of the writer's lack of understanding of audience demands, which affects the organization of information in their writings. Focusing on the latter problem, specifically by providing these writers with some linguistic tools corresponding to audience awareness, may help them approach their writings in a systematic way and subsequently enable them to effectively revise their own writings. This paper reviews the issue of audience in composition studies and demonstrates an application of a given-new strategy – a linguistic tool which constitutes cohesive ties, topic-comment analysis, and topical developments. This strategy can ultimately help L2 writers achieve higher quality writing through the organization of information that corresponds more closely to expectations of their general audience.

Keywords: given-new strategy, L2 writing, audience, cohesion, topic-comment analysis

Introduction

The process writing tradition has been employed in L1 and L2 composition classrooms for several decades. It reflects a problem-solving model of writing in the cognitivists' theoretical framework (Flower, & Hayes, 1981). This framework emphasizes the complex nature of the writing process in which writers coordinate what they know with the complex demands of the writing tasks. Specifically speaking, they process their own knowledge about topics, audience, plans, and sources stored in their long-term memory, and consider this knowledge in relation to the topic, audience, and exigency specified in the assigned writing tasks (Flower, & Hayes, 1981).

To many L2 students, writing is still considered a great challenge and poses considerable writing problems. L2 students, whether characterized as novice writers or experts, bring with them to the

writing classes diverse linguistic backgrounds and different writing experiences. Novice writers, or knowledge-tellers, employ a strategy known as knowledge-telling (Bereiter, & Scardamalia, 1987) and produce a "writer-based prose" (Flower, & Hayes, 1981). They tend to use a content-driven, retrieve-and-write procedure and thus produce list-like writing that reflects their self-centered focus (McCutchen, 1988). Their writing may seem well-organized to the writer but is unclear or underdeveloped for the reader. On the other hand, expert writers are knowledge-transformers. They are likely to pay attention to major questions readers of their texts might have, and tend to employ a hierarchy organization which illustrates a clear relationship between or among ideas and guides readers into different perspectives on the text (Bereiter, & Scardamalia, 1987). This, as a whole, is essentially a reader-based approach (Flower, 1981). While expert writers engage themselves into



a more effective hierarchical, reader-cueing organization, novice writers seem to write for themselves without an attempt to connect with readers.

At this point, one may reasonably conclude that the quality of the finished writing product depends considerably upon how, and how well, L2 writers approach and interpret their writings during the composing process. It is to this end that writing teachers should help and guide their students, especially novices, being mindful of the fact that truly effective writing moves beyond the knowledge-telling process – the writer-based approach – to the more effective knowledge-transforming process, or the reader-based approach.

Bearing this in mind, the aims of this paper are to clarify the issue of audience in composition studies and elucidate how to organize writing that is in accordance with audience's expectations by basing it on the given-new strategy. This paper is structured around the following topics: the issue of audience in composition studies and given-new strategy, which comprises cohesive ties, topic-comment analysis, and topical developments. This paper ends with some suggestions about the application of the given-new strategy to writing classrooms.

The Issue of Audience in Composition Studies

For decades, research has recognized an impact of "audience" on the writing process. According to Cohen and Riel (1989), audience consideration can affect content, organization and the use of language in writings. It makes writers exclude some important details in the text when the writers believe that their intended audience is a "knowledgeable, familiar, and sympathetic" person (Miller, & Charney, 2007, p. 587). It makes writers elaborate on their ideas less when they feel more familiar with their intended

audience (Wolfe, as cited in Miller, & Charney, 2007, p. 587). Audience consideration also helps motivate writers to work harder in their writing process and be more attentive to the overall quality of the finished product (Mitchell, & Taylor, as cited in Cooper, 1986, p. 372; Ward, 2009, p. 76).

Attention to audience is considered "an important element of good writing" (Zainuddin, & Moore, 2003) and "a crucial component of learning to write" (Clark, 2003, p. 158). It also has been noted that "...individuals who can think in more complex ways about how other people think ought to be better writers" (Kroll, as cited in Cooper, 1986, p. 371). In the process-based composition instruction, students are advised to pay attention to an audience constructed in their minds because an audience is an entity that "judges writing" (Mitchell, & Taylor, as cited in Cooper, 1986, p. 372). Therefore, students are introduced to activities that enhance their sense of audience such as collaborative writing assignments, computer-based writing assignments (e.g. via list-serv and email), peer review sessions, and student-teacher writing conferences (Clark, 2003).

Some scholars feel that most students have a very limited sense of their audience, who are generally perceived as their own writing teachers, and they do not realize that audience consideration "affects other aspects of a text, such as purpose, form, style, and genre." As a result of this, students should be encouraged to widen their perspectives about who or what their audience might be (Clark, 2003, p. 141). They also should be taught how to "[write] for an audience" if we, as teachers, are to help them become better writers" (Brooke, & Hendricks, 1989, p. 18).



Given-New Strategy

To promote a reader's understanding of the text, it can be vital for any writer to construct information in his/her writing by following a given-new strategy. First introduced by Clark & Haviland (1977) in the field of psycholinguistics, structuring information into given-new strategy (also called the "known-new" contract) plays a crucial role in promoting unified or cohesive and coherent paragraphs, which have long been considered as a key element for effective written communications.

The given-new strategy encompasses a linguistic concept of given-new contract—an agreement made between writers and readers that dictates the available means for connecting previously known (given) information to unfamiliar (new) information (e.g. Clark, & Harviland, 1977; Kent, 1984). The given-new strategy encourages "cohesion of thought" in writing, which has much to do with the expectations that writers set up for their readers. Readers understandably demand those expectations to be filled, and in effective writing, a kind of "contract" is made between the writer and the reader which requires that new information be linked to something that is known. The given-new contract assumes that readers read more easily if each sentence starts with (or at least contains) what readers have already been introduced to in the text (what they "know") and proceeds on to what they do not know (what is "new"). And violations of the given-new strategy decrease the readability of a text. These violations occur when writers place given and new information improperly in related sentences or when they attempt to combine unrelated, frequently undeveloped, ideas in the same paragraph.

Concentrating on the conceptual framework of the given-new contract, writers have an obligation to fulfill their readers' fostered expectations. Therefore,

effective writers need to understand different means through which cohesion between sentences can be initiated and maintained through fulfilling the expectation contracts that are forged with their readers. Such linguistic tools as cohesive ties, topic-comment analysis and topical progression or development are among the most frequently used strategies which help writers exercise their control over the presentation of information, whether given or new.

1. Cohesive Ties

The expectations held by readers towards the structuring of information in any written text basically involve the given-new contract. If writers are to respond to this demand, they should carefully construct and implement the use of cohesive ties while working with their writings. As Halliday (1985) stated, cohesive ties are textual-forming devices, which are part of textual cohesion. Cohesion can be referred to as a grammatical and lexical relationship which links different pieces of information within a text. Cohesion depends largely upon lexical and grammatical relationships that allow sentence sequences to be understood as a connected discourse rather than as autonomous sentences. Cohesive ties consist of 5 major devices: reference, conjunction, substitution, ellipsis, and lexical cohesion (Halliday, & Hasan, 1976). A writer's ability to employ these devices relies in large part upon the knowledge of given-new strategy. For instance, in order to properly use reference or substitution, writers need to understand which particular piece of information can be assumed to be known by the readers, and how they can connect it to what has already been discussed in a previous context.

The text given below was produced by an undergraduate EFL writer. It clearly illustrates the problem this writer had with grammatical cohesive



ties, especially the use of anaphoric references, as seen in the underlined parts below.

¹In my opinion, riding a motorcycle is a problem of UBU. ²I have three reasons to support my opinion. ³First of all, students ride motorcycles on the wrong side of the road. ⁴This is a main cause of accident in there. ⁵Moreover, this is a problem that UBU cannot solve. ⁶Then, they do not wear helmets. ⁷Although UBU has traffic rules that people which ride a motorcycle in UBU must wear a helmet, but still many do not wear them. ⁸It is very important because a helmet can protect your head and your brain from an accident. ⁹Third, there are usually more passengers than two on a motorcycle. ¹⁰That is very dangerous because people who ride that thing cannot control him well.

A text such as the above surely demands its readers to employ a great deal of effort in their mental processing of its overall meaning and argument. The antecedent for “there” in sentence 4 cannot be easily identified in the immediately preceding sentence. Similar problem occurs with other references in the text: the word “they” in sentence 6, “them” in sentence 7, “your” in sentence 8, and “him” in sentence 10. In these instances, antecedents seem to be missing, or their corresponding pronominal references are not appropriately used. This kind of writing clearly violates expectation the readers have brought to the text. To make this text more readable, changes should be made in the text so that the antecedents of the problematic references can be found in the previous, adjacent sentences or in current sentences, or that appropriate pronominal references of the antecedents are used—the attempt to organize information based on the given–new strategy that corresponds to the readers’ mental processing of information—as shown

in the underlined parts below. It is noted that words written in square brackets are suggested changes that should be made in subsequent revisions of this draft.

¹In my opinion, riding a motorcycle is a problem of UBU. ²I have three reasons to support my opinion. ³First of all, students ride motorcycles on the wrong side of the road. ⁴This is a main cause of accident in UBU. ⁵Moreover, this is a problem that UBU cannot solve. ⁶[Next], students do not wear helmets. ⁷Although UBU has [a] traffic [rule which states] that people [who] ride a motorcycle in UBU must wear a helmet, but still many do not wear it. ⁸[This] is very important because a helmet can protect their [heads] and their [brains] from an accident. ⁹Third, there are usually more passengers than two on a motorcycle. ¹⁰That is very dangerous because people who ride that thing cannot control themselves well.

Encouraging writers’ understanding of cohesive ties both grammatically (e.g. reference) and lexically (e.g. reiteration), to a certain degree, will ensure the comprehensibility of the text by raising their awareness of how information is distributed in sentences.

2. Topic-Comment Analysis

When topic–comment analysis is considered, writers should be encouraged to grow more aware of the fact that a topic is an element of a clause that serves as a point of departure and carries a message of what the sentence is about (Daneš, 1974). As a general rule, in English, the topic usually occurs in the subject position of the sentence and contains old or given information, “information that is expressed in, recoverable from or is relatively more accessible in prior sentences of the text” (Daneš, 1974, p. 25). A comment, on the other hand, is the remainder of the clause—it is what is said about the topic. The



comment basically carries new information. Halliday (1985) pointed out that “the tendency in English is for recoverable (i.e. given) information to occur in the topic, which always appears in the first part of the sentence.” Less recoverable (i.e., new) information tends to occur in the comment, the latter part of sentences. As a consequence, the text should contain an information structure that guides the reader into an understanding of how information is organized, and how the topic of the text is developed. In so doing, this involves the giving of old information before new information. Therefore, cohesive and coherent texts usually agree with the basis of giving old information before new information.

The following text was written by an undergraduate EFL student. By analyzing topics and comments in the text, we can observe that what is chosen to be the topic carries new rather than given information, resulting in generally less incoherent overall interpretability. The topics are underlined as shown below.

¹In the past, a physical punishment was commonly used by parents to discipline their children. ²In Thai schools, teachers were treated to be the second parents for the students. ³They were supposed not only to educate students but also their moral conscience. ⁴In the present, Thai values has changed quickly since the development of information and communication technology.

The text surely baffles readers as to what topic should be considered the focus of the text. This makes it difficult for the audience to effectively process the text’s overall direction or argument. In sentence 1, readers seem to be encouraged to firmly establish in their minds that “a physical punishment” will be what the text is about. However, as the topics of subsequent sentences are changed to new topics:

“teachers” in sentence 2, “they” in sentence 3, and “Thai values” in sentence 4, readers have to work harder in reading (and even rereading) the text in order to track the topics and try to understand what topic is actually the main focus of the text. To solve this kind of problem requires a rearrangement of topics following the given-new contract; given information should be placed before new information. Thus, the new, revised version of the text, as shown below, may help reduce the burdens of information processing readers initially confront. More topics become given information, as they are easily traceable to the comments of the preceding sentences. It is also noted that words written in square brackets are suggestions for subsequent revisions of this draft.

¹In the past, a physical punishment was commonly used by parents to discipline their children. ²In Thai schools, children consider teachers to be their second parents. ³These teachers [are] supposed not only to educate students but also [to teach them about] moral conscience. ⁴In the present, Thai values [have] changed quickly since the development of information and communication technology.

It should be worth mentioning here again that the attempts to structure information as shown above is called the “unmarked sequence” of information structuring in English (Halliday, 1967, p. 211). In this sequence, topics are placed before comments since topics carry given information, and comments convey new information.

3. Topical Developments

The concept of topic-comment analysis has been extended to different kinds of text analysis (e.g. Almaden, 2006; Arunsitot, 2013; Guijarro, 2001, 2003; Sakontawut, 2003; Shi, 2013). Daneš (1974) stated that “the given/new principle may take different textual forms from one paragraph to



another, even within a single paragraph, resulting in different patterns of topic development" (p. 29). According to Daneš, there are three main patterns of paragraph development in written discourse. The first pattern is called "simple linear progression," which consists of a chain-like effect because the given information in each sentence topic refers anaphorically to the new information in the last occurring comment. The following text written by a Thai student illustrates this type of topical development. Clearly, the word "uniforms" that appears in the comment of sentence 1 becomes the topic in sentence 2 (Sakontawut, 2003, p. 68).

¹**Thai students wear uniforms to school.**

²**The uniforms may be in white shirt and black or blue trousers or skirts.**

The second pattern of progression features "a constant topic pattern." Here, the topic portions of each sentence in the paragraph all share the same given information as a referent. The following text written by a Thai student illustrates this type of topic development. It is noticeable that "most of Thai people" categorized as topic in sentence 1 is also maintained in sentence 2 in the form of personal pronoun "They" (Sakontawut, 2003, p. 67).

¹**But most of Thai people don't know this point exactly and clearly.** ²**They judge these tourists that they make Thai culture have a lot of filth.**

Finally, the third pattern is known as "hypertheme." In this case, the topics of each sentence are individually different, but they can still be considered "given" since they are all derived from the same overriding theme (Weissberg, 1984). The following text written by a Thai student illustrates this type of topic development. As can be seen, the word "Thailand" that appears as topic of sentences 1 and 3 is interrupted by "The weather" in sentence 2 (Sakontawut, 2003, p. 68).

¹**Thailand is in tropical zone.** ²**The weather here is hotter than yours.** ³**Thailand has many beautiful beaches.**

In applying Daneš's three patterns of topical progression, writing teachers may keep in mind that in understanding a text, readers may have to rely on the linguistic knowledge that links incoming information to the previously introduced one (Weissberge, 1984) and that known information is usually fronted in the topic position of the sentence while new information appears at the end. By considering how topics repeat, shift, and return to earlier topics, topical progression captures linguistic aspects of coherence and, to a large extent, assists readers in comprehending students' writings. Although these topical patterns are only an indicator of text-based coherence, the extension of them to EFL compositions may be a promising step since they have enabled EFL teachers to describe student writing by going beyond the sentence to the discourse level. By examining the meaning relationships between sentences, topical progression can also encourage the evaluation of coherence based on textual features and the revision of texts with inappropriate topical developments.

Teaching Suggestions

The given-new strategy enables L2 writers to improve their writing quality by taking into account the reader-based approach to writing, as the students examine what they write systematically through cohesion, topic-comment analysis, and topical developments. Some suggestions for writing teachers who wish to implement this strategy in their own writing classrooms are as follows:

Firstly, since the overall concept of a writer's audience is under revision and refinement, and, in practice, may not be clearly established in the mind



of L2 writers, writing teachers should help their students to clarify their personal ideas of audience before writing. Class sessions should be reserved for extensive discussions about, for example, who an audience might be and what information audiences possibly may expect to encounter in the students' writings.

Secondly, model texts should be made available for students that clearly show how information corresponding to the demands of expected audience can be organized. Students should also be asked to investigate a set of writings that violates these expectations and should be invited to revise the texts to improve writing quality. However, texts selected for novice L2 writers who possibly have limited linguistic proficiency and rhetorical backgrounds should not contain difficult vocabulary or sophisticated, diverse rhetorical structures. Otherwise, class time may be wasted to the explanation of unknown words and rhetorical structures in the texts rather than to the examination of cohesive ties, topic comments, and topic developments.

Conclusion

The process writing emphasizes writing as an interactive and problem-solving process in which writers attempt to organize their writings that respond best to their audience's demands. L2 writers should be encouraged to develop their sensitivity to an audience in order to bridge the gap between writer and reader-based approaches. To this end, the given-new strategy, which consists of cohesive ties, topic-comment analysis, and topical developments, provides a systematic analysis of a written text. It enhances the comprehensibility of the text, as information is distributed in sentences in a way that general audience most expects to see. As Weissberg

(1984, pp. 3-4) concludes, knowledge of how information is distributed in English may "help [writers] increase the comprehensibility of their [own] writing, compensating, in part, for other formal errors they may make." This given-new strategy, therefore, can be considered another promising pedagogical tool for solving L2 students' writing problems.

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