

Topical structure of paragraphs written by filipino students essay sample

[Countries](#), [Philippines](#)



Macro skills – reading, listening, speaking and writing – depend on how critical, logical and coherent ideas are presented and weaved in, for instance, a reading material, discussion or written output. In writing, in particular, much weight is given to these three areas in most cases, since these three criteria demonstrate what and how the student learned a particular concept. According to Almaden (2006), one challenge in writing faced by writers, skilled and beginners, is achieving coherence. As defined by Moore (1971), coherence is “ the rhetorical quality by which all of the parts are clearly and smoothly joined to each other” (p. 115, as cited in Almaden, 2006, p. 127). Consistency or articulation of ideas leads to conveying understandable and readable messages.

Coherence does not only exist between paragraphs, but also within these – “ both novice and non-novice writers can only claim a written text is successful if it is able to found a relation between the writer and reader, and between clauses, sentences, and paragraphs” (Almaden, 2006, p. 127). Coherent discussion of ideas helps the writer clarify and concretize his or her purpose in his or her written discourse. The author took note of observations such as students working on “ lexical and sentence level” (Almaden, 2006, p. 128) issues rather than higher order concerns such as coherence, and that only by integrating sentence construction and key concepts in discussion will students achieve coherence or logical thought progression. However, given specific factors, advanced and beginner writers face certain levels of difficulty in terms of demonstrating such skill.

The author wanted to analyze and understand how Filipino ESL student write, concentrating on the topic progression of their paragraphs. The study focused on investigating the types of progressions used by the respondents. Additionally, the research aimed to analyze how these specific types of progressions were employed by the respondents in their written outputs. The research was carried out in De La Salle University - Manila, from May to August 2005. The author studied 60 paragraphs from “ lifted from the definition essays that were part of the student’s portfolios” (Almaden, 2006, p. 127). Definition essays are written compositions that define a single term, a phrase or a concept, using the student’s understanding of the term, phrase or concept. The in-class essays, written by Filipino students of English One, were randomly selected. These essays were provided by four different teachers. The paragraphs examined were not edited by the teacher, but these were reviewed by peers, which mean that the paragraphs that were analyzed were already revised by the students. Specifically, the researcher analyzed the body paragraph of the essay - the second paragraph of the essay - which contained the meat of the composition. The second paragraph was chosen because it normally contains the student’s explanation of the concept, involving more clauses, thus showing progression.

Using Lautamatti’s topical structure analysis (TS), the author analyzed the internal topical structure of the paragraphs, which entailed frequency analysis. Her method is described in detail below: The independent clauses in each paragraph were first numbered, after which the topical subject in each clause was underlined. After finding the topical subjects, these

elements were plotted onto a table. The clause number was indicated on the leftmost part of the table. The topical subject in the corresponding clause was written across each clause number and was numbered according to the frequency of occurrence. Each topical subject was indicated as topical depth. All words that had equivalent meaning fell under one topical depth. The more topical subjects there are, the higher the number of topical depth. All new topics were indented to the right. (Almaden, 2006, p. 134)

The author looked at how many times keywords and key phrases were repeated in the paragraphs. From these frequencies, she used TSA to provide insights as to the coherence within and between paragraphs. Data were coded, and Almaden (2006) explained her coding system in specifics below: Two coders worked with the researcher in determining the topical subjects and the types of progression used in the paragraphs. The coders coded 30 paragraphs, half of the corpus. These coders have background knowledge in discourse analysis and were also briefed on how to do topical structure analysis prior to the coding. They were first given sample paragraphs and asked to underline the topic subject in each independent clause. They were told that the mood subject is not necessarily the topic subject. Instead, they should focus on what is being talked about in the clause. After identifying the topic subject, they were asked to plot the table and determine the progressions employed in the paragraphs, after which they indicated the number of occurrences of each type of progression. (p. 135)

However, the researcher encountered one challenge while conducting her study. Her coders faced the difficulty of properly aligning the topic subjects “ according to topical depth” (Almaden, 2006, p. 135). Proper alignment, according to Almaden (2006), was to code similar topic subjects “ under one and the same line for a clear representation of a topical depth” (p. 135). In this study, similar topic subjects means the lexical form of the topic subject does not have to be the same, but if directly relevant to the discourse topic. The author asked the coders to plot the topic subjects until all is in proper alignment, as a corrective measure. Results showed that the respondents employed four topical progression types – parallel progression (PP), extended parallel progression (EPP), sequential progression (SP) and extended sequential progression (ESP) – and these topical progressions were reflected in 57 paragraphs. Only three paragraphs were developed without topical progression. The respondents most frequently use parallel progression in writing their paragraphs. According to Almaden (2006), the use of parallel progression by the students “ indicates that the writers choose to string ideas close together rather than link them across paragraphs” (p. 149). The next used progressions are extended and sequential progressions.

The least used type is extended sequential progression. In conclusion, the author’s findings were found inconclusive in terms of generalization since only 60 paragraphs were examined, but findings show that the respondents’ paragraphs exhibit progressions commonly found in Spanish and English paragraphs. This was noted by the author stating that the similarity exists possibly due to the consistent use of English “ as a second language and a

medium of instruction” (Almaden, 2006, p. 150). Comparing the results of her study with the results of similar studies, the author noted that the results are reflective of Laumatti’s TSA that shows paragraphs employ more of the parallel progression, with several uses of extended progression, and topic sentences most frequently containing the topical subjects. The author recommended that teachers be knowledgeable of these progressions and possess understanding of student cultures and sub-cultures, in order to teach students revise compositions not only based on grammar and sentence structure but on critical thinking and logic. Critique

It is true that topical progression can reveal the series of thoughts of students in written texts. However, it should also be noted that redundancy could be an issue to be resolved and avoided in writing. The study can be strong and weak in terms of its variables, sample selection, study material selection and data analysis.

First, while the variable topic progression was clearly identified, it was not mentioned as to which variable topic progression is being pinned against or with. The author was drawing conclusions and recommendations from cultures and sub-cultures, but the cultural and sub-cultural backgrounds of the respondents were not presented and discussed. Will the topical progression be different if specific cultural and sub-cultural background were considered? The reasons why paragraphs of the participants were compared to English and Spanish paragraphs were also not explained. Was it because the Philippines was conquered by the United States of America and Spain? It could have been stronger if another variable, such as cultural background of

the respondents or participants were also identified. Additionally, the study exhibits strengths in sample selection in a way that the author was able to eliminate teacher bias. Data were gathered by examining 60 paragraphs from definition essays of students coming from four sections, who are taught by four different teachers of English One.

According to Quazad and Page (2012), student achievement can be affected by teacher characteristics - efforts may be equivalent to inputs given by the teacher. While the students are taught by four different teachers, the essays did not undergo teacher editing, thus decreasing the chances of the teachers incorporating their ideas in the students' essays. However, the essays underwent peer evaluation, and the paragraphs that were submitted were part of second drafts already, and this might indicate that the original topical progressions of the students were not taken into account. Fryer & Torelli (2010) and Akerlof & Kranton (2000) state that "students' behavior responds to a change in peer group characteristics in a way that impacts educational achievement" (as cited in Quazad and Page, 2012, p. 2). With this, it can be noted that the topical progression of the paragraphs examined could have been influenced by the peers who reviewed them. If so, the topical progressions analyzed by the researcher could have been a mixture of topical progressions used by various students, not of the sample that she used in the study. This could indicate that the study has issues in internal validity. Moreover, the study material or the selected paragraph could pose strengths and weaknesses for the study.

The selection of the second body paragraph is logical – the detailed discussion of the topic subject can be found in this paragraph. However, topical progression might not only be present in the second paragraph. According to Smarthinking Inc.©, topical progression starts in the first paragraph of the essay, where the thesis statement of the essay is located. Structurally, the second paragraph only enforces the topical progression set by the thesis statement. On the contrary, there are essays that do not follow the structure of the thesis statement (Smarthinking Inc.©, 2011). This means that the topical structure might be present in the second body paragraph, but the second paragraph might not follow the thesis structure, which still makes the essay incoherent. This could have been noted or examined by the author as well, since topical progression should be an offshoot of the thesis statement.

This could be an issue in external validity, assuming that the author did not have control as to what definition essay was written by the students, and the teachers could have initiated inputs prior to composition writing. Moreover, it can be noted that specific topic subjects might require specific topical progressions (Langan, 1010). The study didn't mention if the topic subject was the same for all essays. With this, the students might have used different topical progressions as presented in the results because the topic subjects call for specific topical progressions such as parallel progression. This might be the cause of inconclusiveness of the study since uniformity in terms of topic subject was lacking. Thus, generalizations even of the sample cannot be drawn.

Lastly, the study might be strong in terms of data analysis in using Lautamatti's TSA, since this enabled her to record the frequency of the keywords and key phrases used in the paragraphs. However, frequency analysis could be limited to tallying, and a more detailed analysis could have been used. For instance, the second objective of the research is to find how the progressions were carried out in the paragraphs. On the contrary, the results discussed how the progressions were coded. The coding system might be helpful, but this didn't present a complete view of how students really progress their ideas. The author could have validated the students' topical progressions by surveying their reasons for using such progressions. Since this is qualitative, more in-depth data could have been gathered.

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