Topical Structure in Argumentative Essays of EFL Learners and Implications for Writing Classes

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Abstract

The literature on the topical organization of essays suggests that there are four possible types of progression from the topic of one clause to the topics of the following clauses. These are parallel, sequential, extended parallel, and extended sequential progressions. Essay writers' ability to create cohesion and coherence can be evaluated on the extent of their capability to use topical progression appropriately and adequately. In other words, essays in which topical structuring is properly accomplished are more cohesive and coherent. Based on this fact, this study aims to analyze the topical structure in argumentative essays written by Turkish learners of EFL. Our objectives in doing this are (1) to assess Turkish EFL learners' ability to construct topical links between clauses, (2) to identify the type of progression mostly preferred by them, and (3) to find out the range of linguistic structures that they use to create progression. To this end, the researchers have conducted Topical Structure Analysis (TSA) on essays produced by 81 ELT students from three different universities in Turkey (Gaziantep, İnönü, and Hakkari). The analysis illustrated the fact that Turkish EFL learners are not as skilled as they should be in topical structuring. It also revealed that they usually prefer to use parallel and sequential types of progression, while extended progression has been observed to be less common in their essays. Finally, we found that the participants of the study mostly use pronouns for parallel progression, whereas they switch to new noun phrases for sequential progression.

Keywords: argumentative essays; coherence; topical progression; parallel; sequential

1. Introduction

Due to inherent difficulties underlying generating and organizing ideas, and putting these ideas together in a harmonious way, writing is considered the most difficult of the four skills. As with other skills, writing is not a unified skill but a composite of several sub-skills highly complex in nature. Writing involves 'coherent' combination of higher-level skills such as planning and organizing with lower-level skills like spelling, punctuation and word choice. When we think of the need for higher-level skills, we can better understand why writing becomes even more pronounced if learners' language proficiency is weak (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

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In addition to posing difficulties to students and writers, examination and evaluation of written products is another challenge for language teachers. When analyzing and evaluating spoken or written discourse, it is common to look at the integrity of discourse in terms of cohesion and coherence throughout the discourse (Yule, 2006). Cohesion in discourse seems to occur on a more concrete level than coherence does. Halliday and Hasan (1976) have described five kinds of cohesive devices in English: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion, which are relatively easy to apply and detect even for less proficient learners.

As for coherence, there are various considerations among researchers. For example, Kane (2000) differentiates between coherence and flow. The researcher states that two related but distinct concepts form paragraph unity: coherence and flow.

Coherence means that ideas fit together. *Flow* means that the sentences link up so that readers are not conscious of gaps. Flow is a matter of style and exists in specific words and grammatical patterns tying one sentence to another. Coherence belongs to the substructure of the paragraph, to relationships of thought, feeling, and perception (Kane, 2000).

McCarthy (2000) while considering cohesion as only a guide to coherence argues that the reader creates coherence in the act of reading the text. McCarthy (2000) describes coherence as "the feeling that a text hangs together, that it makes sense, and is not just a jumble of sentences." Yule (2006) seems to disagree with McCarthy when he says: "The key to the concept of coherence (everything fitting together well) is not something that exists in words or structures" (p. 126); yet he comes to parallel lines with McCarthy when he reminds us of the abstract nature of coherence stating that coherence exists in people and it is the readers, not the writers, who make sense of written or oral discourse. From a radically different perspective, Wennerstrom (2001), while focusing on the role of prosody in speech, asserts that "prosody also provides cohesion and coherence to a text; not only pitch boundaries but also pauses provide information about how lexical conjunctions are used to organize constituents."

The problem of finding a way to examine the text-based features of coherence of a piece of discourse through a concrete means seems to be resolved with a topical perspective. The sequences of sentences in a discourse are expected to form a main idea called a discourse topic. A discourse topic is developed through the subordinate ideas or subtopics, both directly and indirectly. Thus, hierarchically organized subtopics contribute to the development of the discourse topic and it seems likely that most sentences making up one subtopic form a sequence whereby the discourse proceeds (Lautamatti, 1987).

Two main types of progression in discourse, called "topical progression" by Lautamatti (1987), are claimed to be at work: parallel progression and sequential progression. When the topic of a sentence and subtopic of the following sentence(s) are the same, we talk about a parallel progression and when the predicate or the comment part of sentence serves as the topic of the following sentence, sequential progression is observed. However, when we observe a return to an earlier topic that has been temporarily interrupted by a sequential progression, we call this type of progression "extended parallel progression" (Schneider & Connor, 1991). Thus, in Lautamatti's topical structure analysis, there are totally three types of progression as parallel, sequential, and extended parallel progressions.

Following the model of Lautamatti, Alptekin (2008) explored the interaction of culture and rhetorical conventions through the examination of expository essays written by American, Turkish, and bilingual (Turkish/English) Turkish university students who were assigned the same topic. Results of the topical structure analysis provided insights into the favored organizational patterns of thematic progression by three different groups of students.

The comparison of essays written by different native speaker groups was the topic of Simpson's (2000) study. The researcher analyzed 40 paragraphs selected from articles published in academic journals in English and Spanish. According to topical structure analysis, English paragraphs tend to have a high use of internal coherence, while Spanish paragraphs do not generally tend to use immediate progression as a device for coherence. Simpson also suggests a new alternative to Lautamatti's three types of progression model. In the new model the researcher adds another type of progression to the model which is titled "extended sequential progression" because the researcher observed this kind of topic progression both in English and Spanish texts.

Another researcher employing Lautamatti's model was Almaden (2006), who investigated the topical progression in paragraphs written by Filipino ESL students. She found that parallel progression was most frequently used in paragraphs, followed by extended and sequential progressions, with extended sequential progression least used.

In our study, we investigated the essays written by ELT students who took courses in writing and are familiar with genres and structures in essays. Dissimilar to previous studies, we focused our attention on to what extent there is smooth flow of ideas across essays.

The contribution of topical progression analysis to the field of teaching writing cannot be undervalued. Agreeing with the criticism regarding the drawbacks of this analysis, Schneider and Connor (1991) have no doubts as to the benefits of TSA:

Although the three topical progressions -parallel, sequential and extended parallel- are only gross indicators of text-based coherences, the extension of TSA to ESL writing represents a promising step. It has enabled ESL researchers and teachers to describe student writing by going beyond the sentence to the discourse level. By examining the meaning relations between sentences, it has also encouraged the evaluation of coherence based on textual features and the revision of texts with faulty or inappropriate topic progression (Schneider & Connor, 1991; p. 423).

Besides, Todd, Thienpermpool and Keyuravong (2004) are also in favor of conducting topic based analysis in writing despite its being a complex and laborious process for this kind of analysis may be of value to researchers who wish to attempt to assess the coherence of texts as part of their research; topic-based analysis could be made use of in scoring the essays objectively; and training in topic-based analysis may help teachers regarding issues of relevance to coherence.

1.1. Aims of the study

The present study aims to analyze argumentative essays by ELT major students, who have received a substantial amount of instruction in academic writing in order to find out about the topical structure of their essays. Problems at structural and semantic levels in student essays in Turkey have been thoroughly investigated. However, research on the discursive properties of essays written by Turkish learners of English is rather scant. Therefore, what we aim to discover as a result of the analyses we conducted on the topical progression of the sampled essays is whether or not Turkish learners of English are skilled at the topical organization of coherence in their essays. Having stated the general purpose of our research, we can now stipulate the specific research questions to which we will try to find answers:

1. Can Turkish learners of English create coherence in their essays by constructing topical links and progression between clauses?
2. Which type(s) of topical progression is/are generally preferred by the participants?
3. What type(s) of linguistic structures do the participants use while they are creating topical progression between clauses?

2. Method

You should provide sufficient detail to allow the work to be replicated. Methods already published should be indicated by a reference. Only relevant modifications should be described here.

2.1. Sample / Participants and Data Collection

The study was conducted with the participation of 81 ELT students from three Turkish universities: Gaziantep, Hakkari and Inonu. Sophomore and junior students from these three universities were asked to write essays on an intriguing issue: child euthanasia. The students were told to discuss views against and for this topic. All the essays were written by students inside the classroom.

2.2. Data analysis

In the analyses of the essays for topical progression, a three-step procedure was employed:

1. Numbering each independent clause and identifying topical subjects
2. Plotting topical subjects onto a separate table for each essay
3. Adding up the number of occurrences for each type of progression

The first step in the Topical Structure Analysis (TSA) was to number the independent clauses in each essay, which was essential for the determination of potential progression points in the essays. This made it possible for us to generate an *actual progression/potential progression* ratio, giving us an idea about the systematicity or haphazardness of topical organization in the sample essays.

In the second step, the topical subjects in each clause was identified and plotted onto a table. In the table, clause numbers were listed on the leftmost column and topical subjects were written across each clause number, and each was given a topic number. Each topical subject formed a layer of topical depth. This was done to understand how many new topics were introduced in each essay. As a final step, different numbers of asterisks were added next to the topic numbers that indicated different types of progression (i.e. *: Parallel progression (PP), **: Sequential progression (SP), ***: Extended parallel progression (EPP), and ****: Extended sequential progression (ESP)). Every new topic was indented to the right for the sake of ease of recognition on the table.

In the final step of the analyses, calculations were done to determine the number of occurrences for each type of progression. This provided us with our participants' preferences regarding topical progression in their argumentative essays. We also classified the linguistic structures used for each type of progression into three groups: Nouns, Noun Phrases and Pronouns. Our intention in doing this was to try to form associations between the progression types and linguistic structures that are used for each progression type.

A sample progression plot is provided in Table 1:

Table 1. Plot of progression of a sample paragraph

Clause No.	Topical Depth	Topic No.
1	euthanasia	1
2	it	1*
3	people who struggle extreme pain	2
4	the loss of brain function	3
5	people who want euthanasia	2***
6	euthanasia of children	4
7	child euthanasia	4*

As can be observed in Table 1, the sample paragraph taken from one of the essays start with "euthanasia" as the topical subject of the 1st clause. Then, the 2nd clause is connected to the 1st one with parallel progression with the pronoun "it". In the 3rd clause, a new topic is introduced. The 4th clause has another new topic, which indicates a lack of progression between the 3rd and 4th clauses. There is extended parallel progression between the 3rd and 5th clauses, which can be seen to have similar topical subjects referring to the same entity. Finally, the 6th and 7th clauses have different statements of the same topical subject in a parallel progression. To illustrate the calculation of progressions in the analysis, we can summarize that there are 7 clauses, 4 topics, 2 parallel progressions and 1 extended parallel progression in the sample plot of progression in Table 1.

3. Results

Table 2 summarizes the topical development in the 81 essays written by the participants of this study.

Table 2. Summary of topical development in the participant essays

	f	%
Number of clauses	2289	-
Average number of clauses per essay	28.25	-
Potential progression points	2208	-
Number of topics	354	-
Parallel progression	151	32.4
Extended parallel progression	57	12.2
Sequential progression	223	47.9
Extended sequential progression	35	7.5
Total progression	466	100
Average number of progressions per essay	5.75	-

Table 2 illustrates that there were a total of 2289 clauses in the 81 student essays analyzed in the scope of the current study. This leads us to the conclusion that there are 2208 potential progression points for writers to construct different types of progression. We can also observe that the students created a total of 466 progressions, which accounts to 5.75 progressions per essay.

The first important finding that the table indicates is that the *actual progression/potential progression* ratio is 0.21105 (466/2208). This basically means that the participants formed progressions on only roughly 21% of the potential progression points. The extract below from a student essay clearly presents an instance in which the participant has not been able to form progressions on all potential progression points.

Participant 56

For all these reasons, <u>child euthanasia</u> isn't a solution for sick children. <u>We</u> believe <u>the God</u> has a power over all the world. <u>Miracles</u> can occur. <u>I</u> think <u>nobody</u> has a right to give a decision about someone's life. <u>You</u> only accept the fate and <u>you</u> should be patient.

In the above extract, the topics of the clauses are underlined and the lack of progression (child euthanasia > We > the God > Miracles > I > nobody > You > you) between the topics or the comments of the clauses is obvious. This extract supports the quantitative finding that we presented regarding the realization of progression on potential progression points.

Another striking fact is that, in the 2289 clauses the participants of the study formed in their essays, they introduced 354 new topics. These two findings lead us to conclude that Turkish learners of English produced essays in which the clauses did not adequately hold together to create coherence and cohesion and they mostly involved novel topics. If we examine the distribution of different types of progression constructed by the participants, we can see that there are 151 parallel, 57 extended parallel, 223 sequential, and only 35 extended sequential progressions in the analyzed essays.

The next analysis we conducted was on the types of linguistic elements used for each type of progression. By doing this analysis, we aimed to understand what kind of linguistic structures were mostly used by our participants in their formation of different types of progression. Firstly, we looked into the instances of parallel progression. Table 3 shows us the types of linguistic elements used for parallel progression:

Table 3. Summary of linguistic elements used in parallel progression

	f	%
Nouns	22	14.5
Noun Phrases	35	23.2
Pronouns	94	62.3

One can clearly observe from Table 3 that more than half (*f*:94, 62.3%) of the parallel progressions produced by the participants were done using pronouns, which makes sense considering the referential nature of pronouns. Table 4 summarizes the linguistic elements used in sequential progression in the participant essays:

Table 4. Summary of linguistic elements used in sequential progression

	f	%
Nouns	34	15.1
Noun Phrases	138	61.8
Pronouns	51	23.1

Table 4 points to a significant difference between the linguistic structures preferred to create parallel and sequential progression. Most (*f*:138, 61.8%) of the sequential progressions in the analyzed clauses were realized using new noun phrases that refer to the same idea or entity expressed in the comment of the previous clauses. Pronouns (*f*:51, 23.1%) were also used in some sequential progressions, yet were relatively low in percentage. The next type of progression analyzed was extended parallel progression. Table 5 shows us the summary of the linguistic elements used in that type of progression:

Table 5. Summary of linguistic elements used in extended parallel progression

	f	%
Nouns	4	7
Noun Phrases	10	17.5
Pronouns	43	75.5

As can be observed in Table 5, extended parallel progression lead participants to the use of pronouns (*f*:43, 75.5%) as they did with parallel progression. It is safe to assume, then, that parallel progression requires or is more in harmony with the use of pronouns. Finally, instances of extended sequential progression have been evaluated with respect to the choice of linguistic structures; the findings are displayed in Table 6:

Table 6. Summary of linguistic elements used in extended sequential progression

	f	**%**
Nouns	6	17.1
Noun Phrases	24	68.6
Pronouns	5	14.3

Although not many instances of extended sequential progression have been detected in participants' essays, we can look into the findings to see whether the choice of linguistic elements used for extended sequential progression presents a similar pattern to that for sequential progression. Table 6 points to the fact that a majority of extended sequential progressions were done using noun phrases (*f*:24, 68.6%).

4. Discussion

Based on these findings, the research questions posed for this study can, thus, be answered relying on the analyses of the collected data.

RQ1: Can advanced Turkish learners of English create coherence in their essays by constructing topical links and progression between clauses?

The answer to this research question is that the participants of our study are not as skilled as they should be in creating coherence in an argumentative essay. We base this conclusion on the findings that they could form progression on only 21% of the potential progression points and that 354 new topics were introduced in a total of 2289 clauses.

RQ2: Which type(s) of topical progression is/are generally preferred by the participants?

In the limited number of progressions the participants created, they mostly preferred sequential (N:223) and parallel (N:151) progressions. Extended parallel (N:57) and extended sequential (N:35) types of progression were significantly less common.

RQ3: What type(s) of linguistic structures do the participants use while they are creating topical progression between clauses?

The participants preferred to use mostly pronouns for parallel and extended parallel progression, while they tended to use noun phrases more for sequential and extended sequential progressions.

Turkish learners of EFL in our sample could not create adequately coherent argumentative essays. Rather, their essays seemed to be a "jumble of sentences" (McCarthy, 2000). The potential causes for this situation may be the inadequacy of coherence training in EFL classes in Turkey, interference of other major or minor cognitive processes in the formation process of the essays, or simply a lack of focus on writing on the side of the learners. When they form topical progressions between clauses, these progressions are with the immediately following clauses, rather than extending over some clauses further. This finding is easily understandable, since forming extended topical progressions requires higher levels of cognitive and organizational skills. Finally, when participants created parallel

and extended parallel progressions, they mostly used pronouns. For sequential and extended sequential progressions, the tendency was to employ noun phrases. The reason for this may simply be stated as the function of pronouns to form parallelism between nominal elements.

One limitation of this study is that it could have been conducted with students from different levels of language proficiency to give it a cross-sectional aspect. However, the fact that we conducted the study with advanced learners ensures the reliability of our findings. Secondly, the study could have made use of a variety of essay types to be able to see the potential influence of the type of essay on the findings. We state this as a suggestion for further research. Another suggestion for further research might be a comparative study contrasting participants' essays in Turkish with their essays in English regarding their topical organization, which would enlighten us on the effect of participants' writing habits in the native language on their L2 writing. As Simpson's study (2000) asserts, learners' native languages can vary as to how well they can create coherence through thematic progression in their essays.

5. Conclusion

We believe that this study points to an important pedagogical deficiency in the teaching of writing in EFL classes in general, and specifically, in Turkey. For some reasons, which could be detected in a further study, Turkish learners of EFL could not adequately form coherence in their essays in English. The potential reasons for this, as stated above, can be considered as a lack of focus on coherence training in writing courses and/or a transfer of native language writing practices into L2 writing. Our suggestion on this issue is running a thorough analysis of EFL writing courses, in our case, in Turkey focusing specifically on the components of those courses such as coherence. Furthermore, writing course books should be analyzed to see whether they guide language teachers to adequate coherence and cohesion training.

This study can be said to bring a new aspect into the analysis of topical progression in L2 writing. In literature, we can see that previous studies mostly focused on learners' preferences concerning types of progression mostly employed in essays. However, the current study clearly illustrates that learners are even unable to use topical progression properly. This, to the best of our knowledge, is a new finding.

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İngilizceyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenen Bireylerin Deneme Türündeki Yazılı Anlatımlarında Konu Yapısı ve Yazma Dersleri İçin Öneriler

Öz

Denemelerdeki tümceciklerin konu organizasyonunu inceleyen araştırmalar, bir tümceciği sonraki tümceciklere bağlayan dört adet geçiş türünün var olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bunlar paralel geçiş, sıralı geçiş, uzatılmış paralel geçiş ve uzatılmış sıralı geçiştir. Deneme yazanların bağdaşıklık ve tutarlılık oluşturma becerilerini, konu geçişlerini uygun ve yeterli biçimde yapıp yapamamalarına bakarak değerlendirebiliriz. Başka bir deyişle, konu yapılandırmasının düzgün yapıldığı denemelerin daha bağdaşık ve tutarlı olduğunu söyleyebiliriz. Bu gerçeğe dayalı olarak, bu çalışma İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türklerin yazdığı denemelerdeki konu yapısını incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Bunu yapmaktaki özel hedeflerimiz, (1) İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türklerin tümcecikler arasında konu bağlantıları oluşturma becerilerini değerlendirmek, (2) onların genellikle tercih ettiği konu geçişi türü/türlerini tespit etmek ve (3) geçiş oluşturmak için kullandıkları dil yapılarını ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bu amaçla, araştırmacılar Türkiye'nin üç farklı üniversitesinden (Gaziantep, İnönü ve Hakkari) 81 İngiliz Dili Eğitimi bölümü öğrencisinin yazdığı denemeler üzerinde Konu Yapısı Çözümlemesi (KYÇ) uygulamışlardır. Yapılan çözümleme İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türklerin konu yapılandırmasında olması gereken beceriye sahip olmadıklarını göstermektedir. Araştırma, aynı zamanda, katılımcıların genellikle paralel ve sıralı geçiş türlerini kullanırken, uzatılmış geçiş türlerini daha az sıklıkla tercih ettiklerini ortaya koymuştur. Son olarak, çözümlememiz katılımcıların paralel geçiş için zamirleri, sıralı geçiş için ise yeni isim öbeklerini kullandıklarını göstermiştir.

Anahtar sözcükler: deneme; bağdaşıklık; konu geçişi; parallel; sıralı

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