



The Effect of ESP Courses on Students' Achievement of Coherence in General Academic Writing Tasks

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Abstract:

This study investigates the effect of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses on students' ability to achieve coherence in general academic writing tasks. Writing is a complex process that requires not only grammatical accuracy but also cohesion and coherence across sentences and paragraphs. Previous studies have shown that thematic and topical progression play a central role in producing coherent texts. However, many students at the Arab International University struggle with presenting elaborate ideas and maintaining coherence in general academic writing, despite being able to produce grammatically correct sentences. To address this issue, the present study examined whether exposure to ESP courses could enhance students' general writing performance. A total of 120 undergraduate students from Civil Engineering, Arts, and Information and Communication Engineering were divided into experimental and control groups. The study employed a pre-test, an ESP instructional intervention, and a post-test. The pre-test and post-test writing tasks were evaluated based on content, form, and coherence. Findings revealed that students who completed the ESP course demonstrated greater improvement in producing organized, coherent, and content-rich paragraphs compared to those who only took the general academic writing course. These results suggest that integrating ESP with academic writing instruction can help students bridge the gap between discipline-specific and general writing skills. The study highlights the pedagogical value of combining ESP practices with general writing instruction to enhance students' academic literacy.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes, academic writing, coherence, thematic progression, higher education*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is generally defined as a complex cognitive and social process of generating, organizing, and expressing ideas in a written form that is appropriate to the communicative context. Hyland (2016) emphasizes that writing is not only a means of recording ideas but also an act of interaction, in which writers construct meaning for specific audiences. Grounded in the grand theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994), writing is viewed as a meaning-making process where textual cohesion and coherence are achieved through thematic progression and the effective structuring of clauses. The existing literature regarding the topical organization of essays indicates that there are four distinct types of progression that can occur from the topic of one clause to subsequent clauses: parallel, sequential, extended parallel, and extended sequential progressions. These patterns are essential in assessing students' ability to establish coherence and cohesion.

In the context of the Arab International University, it has been observed that students encounter persistent difficulties in writing. Their paragraphs often lack elaborated content, detailed explanation, and logical connectedness between ideas. Many students can produce grammatically accurate sentences and use basic connectors; however, they struggle to achieve coherence at the paragraph level, and their ideas often appear fragmented rather than

unified. These weaknesses are more evident in general academic writing tasks than in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tasks, where students show relatively stronger performance due to discipline-based vocabulary and familiarity with the content.

This study is motivated by these challenges and the recognition of writing as a vital academic skill for university success. I became particularly interested in conducting this study because students' ability to produce coherent and cohesive texts is directly linked to their academic achievement and future professional competence. Investigating the effect of ESP courses on students' writing coherence is important because it not only contributes to theoretical discussions on thematic progression and writing pedagogy but also provides practical insights for curriculum design. By integrating ESP skills with general academic writing, this research seeks to help students overcome their difficulties, enhance their writing proficiency, and better prepare for academic and vocational demands in an increasingly globalized context.

Thematic progression

The concept of thematic progression refers to the techniques that writers employ to connect the themes and rhemes within a clause to those in adjacent clauses. It plays a crucial role in the organization of information, serving as a link between sentence-level and discourse-level structures, thereby enhancing both cohesion and coherence.

The recognition of the multimodal nature of academic and business discourse

Numerous studies have highlighted the multimodal characteristics of various academic and business genres, demonstrating that spoken or written language constitutes merely one of the numerous resources utilized to convey meaning. Particularly in the context of persuasive oral genres within business and academia, semiotic elements such as gestures and intonation are essential in shaping a persuasive message. This is evident in formats such as conference presentations, research dissemination talks, and product pitches, where speakers employ multimodal persuasive strategies to enhance the effectiveness of their presentations.

Rheme and thematic progression (T/TP) play a crucial role in how speakers formulate their messages, ensuring they integrate seamlessly into the ongoing discourse. Research has demonstrated the value of analyzing T/TP to pinpoint the writing challenges faced by English learners, advocating for its inclusion in English writing instruction to enhance students' coherence. However, there has been a scarcity of practical guidance for educators on implementing T/TP theory, and few studies have created or evaluated teaching resources based on T/TP principles. This study presents an instructional framework focused on T/TP for Chinese EFL learners, drawing on Systemic Functional Grammar theories and pertinent literature. The activities within this framework aim to enhance students' understanding of coherence and T/TP, equipping them with additional grammatical tools to refine the coherence of their writing. Furthermore, students will gain insight into the T/TP patterns that are esteemed in English writing and will have the chance to apply this knowledge to enhance their writing skills.

Background

Setting

This study was conducted at the Arab International University, a leading private university in Syria. The university has eight faculties that teach eight fields of study; law, arts, dentistry, pharmacy, architecture, business administration, information technology, communication engineering, and civil engineering.

Curricula

A good percentage of the faculties' curricula is in English and is based on internationally acknowledged modules and sources. This is why the university is keen on elevating students' proficiency in English including the four skills; listening, reading, writing and speaking. This is because it stresses the importance of students' fluency in English in all disciplines in order to achieve mastery in their fields as English will grant them access to academic and scientific resources around the world. In addition, students will need to be fluent in English to establish international connections that will serve them in their academic and vocational future.

The Foreign Languages Center

The Arab International University has an academic center that is specialized in teaching foreign languages like English, French, German and Spanish. However, the focus of this paper was on the English Language.

The foreign languages center offers four levels of remedial English courses in accordance with the Common European Framework (CEFR); starting from A1 (The elementary level) and ending with B2 (the upper-intermediate level) which is mainly an English for specific purposes course. Students are enrolled in these courses upon their first year admission to the university and after sitting for a placement test. Students are placed in the matching level of study according to their scores on the placement test. However, some students will be exempted from the remedial English courses if they got a high score on the test. If the students finish the B2 course or they are being exempted, they can enroll in the general academic English writing and research course (which is a mandatory course). In addition, the center offers two selective (optional courses) which are the communication skills course and the advanced conversation course. This paper focused was on two courses, the B2 ESP course and the general academic writing and research course.

The B2 ESP Course

This course focuses on teaching and providing students with the necessary jargon of their discipline and field of study. The Center has adopted the Career Path Esp series by Express publishing company. Thus, every faculty and discipline at the university will have their specific discipline –based B2 text book.

The General Academic Writing and Research Course

This is an obligatory course and it is a pre-requisite for students' graduation project in all faculties. The course teaches students how to write different kinds of academic essays. In addition, the course familiarizes students with the basic skills of writing a research paper in English according to the 7th APA manual.

Research Problem and Significance

It was observed that when students did writing tasks on general topics in English, their writings tend to have a poor content and weak coherence. On the other hand, when students do writing tasks on ESP topics, their writings tend to exhibit a good coherence, a rich content and a variety in the use of jargon based vocabulary.

The purpose of this study was to help students produce cohesive and coherent English texts by integrating their ESP writing skills with those of general English writing skills.

2. METHOD

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 120 undergraduate students from the Arab International University, all of whom were between 18 and 22 years old. They were categorized into three groups based on their field of study: 40 students from Civil Engineering, 40 students from Arts, and 40 students from Information and Communication Engineering.

Study procedures

The study was carried out through three stages which extended over 20 weeks. The first ten weeks were allocated for the ESP course and the second ten weeks were allocated for the General academic writing and Research course. Before the first stage, all of the students were asked to go through a pre-test. In the second stage (the experiment), 20 students of each group were enrolled in an ESP course that matches their discipline while the remaining 20 students of each group weren't enrolled in the ESP course and were considered as part of the total control group. In the third stage, all of the 120 students participating in this study were enrolled in the General Writing and Research course and were asked to do a post-test following the end of the course.

The instrument

This study employed three types of instruments: a pre-test, an instructional treatment (the ESP course and the General Academic Writing course), and a post-test. The pre-test required all participants to write a paragraph on a general English topic, which was assessed for content, form, and coherence in order to establish a baseline of students' writing ability. The instructional treatment served as the main experimental instrument and consisted of a ten-week ESP course followed by a ten-week General Academic Writing course. The ESP course utilized discipline-based textbooks that included multiple task types, reading texts, comprehension questions, vocabulary exercises, listening activities, speaking tasks, and

integrated writing assignments, designed to develop discipline-specific language use and writing skills. At the end of the ESP course, students were also required to write a paragraph on a discipline-related topic to assess their progress. Finally, the post-test instrument required both the experimental and control groups to write a paragraph on a general non-discipline-based topic after completing the academic writing course. The pre-test and post-test provided measurable data on students' writing development, while the instructional treatment functioned as the core intervention to examine the effect of ESP courses on writing coherence.

The Pre-Test

All of the participants in the three groups were asked to do a writing task. The task was writing a paragraph on a general topic in English. The paragraphs were assessed according to content, form and coherence. The results analysis was presented in a separate section.

The experiment

Each of the sub experimental groups mentioned earlier were enrolled in a ten week ESP course that matched their discipline and that was adopted a discipline based English course book. The lessons of the course were structured in accordance with the organization of the contents of the text books' units. Each unit starts with a reading text which introduces and highlights new terms and words. Then a couple of WH questions assess the students' comprehension of the text. Following, a vocabulary exercise is introduced. In most of the units the vocabulary exercise assesses the students' ability to match the new words with their definition. Another vocabulary exercise assesses the students' ability to use the right words in the right context by asking students to complete the sentences by filling in the gaps with the suitable words. Next, a listening exercise introduces students to real life and context based conversations e.g. conversations between an employer and an employee at a technical company or between two IT engineers or between a site manager and a worker at a construction site or a conversation between a designer and a client. Then, the students' comprehension of the conversations is assessed by a task which tests the students' memory by asking them to fill in the missing words after listening to the conversation. Another task asked was students to choose the correct answer or decide if the information is correct or not. Next, a speaking exercise will ask students to mimic the conversation in the recording of the listening task or to produce a conversation using synonyms and related phrases on the same topic of the original conversation. At the end of the unit, a writing task employed was all of the previous tasks to train students to produce a piece of writing that deals with an issue related to their discipline or workplace, such as raising a problem to a manager, suggesting solutions, and writing professional correspondence.

At the end of the ESP course, students were asked to write a paragraph on a special discipline-related topic. The analysis of the results presented was in a separate section.

The second part of the experiment was enrolling those students that have finished the ESP course in a ten week academic writing course and they labeled were as the study group (experimental). The other participants at this point was those students who weren't enrolled in the ESP course but were directly enrolled in the academic writing course. Those students labeled was as the control group.

The post-test

At the end of the academic writing course, all the students in the experimental and the controlled group asked were to write a paragraph on a general non- discipline based topic. The results was presented in a separate section.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-test

After analyzing the results of the pre-test in which all experimental and control groups sat for before the enrolling in the ESP course, the following results were found.

The students' paragraphs were thoroughly analyzed and several issues were detected. First, the students' writings had some good aspects that were exhibited in having grammatical sentences with good structure and simple ideas. The students were able to write complete simple to medium complex sentences with good grammar paying attention to sentence parts and tense. In addition, the students were able to organize their ideas to fit the paragraph structure with an introduction, main and supporting ideas and a conclusion. Furthermore, the students were able to achieve cohesion by using the right connectors on a sentence level. However, some bad aspects were also detected in the students' writings. First, the students were not able to present or tackle elaborate or complicated ideas, explanation or details. Second, the students couldn't achieve coherence on a paragraph level. This means they couldn't present connected ideas. In other words, they couldn't connect separate sentences in a meaningful way.

The experiment

After the ESP course, the students were asked to write a paragraph on a special discipline related topic. After analyzing the students' writings, it was noted that the students were able to present a rich content with a good variety of jargon based vocabulary. In addition, they were able to achieve coherence in presenting connected ideas. For instance, the students were able to objects, procedures, and point out the advantages and disadvantages of objects. However, the students' writings also exhibited some negative aspects. First, the students were unable to present their ideas in a good structure. They couldn't follow a clear organization while writing their paragraphs as they failed to have a clear introduction, main and supporting details and a conclusion. In addition, the students' writings didn't have good grammatical structure and they also had a lack of cohesion on a sentence level. Thus, the students appeared to be more focused on content than on form. Thus, they couldn't fit their complicated content into the simple structure they used.

The post-test

It was mentioned earlier that both students' groups, the experimental and the control one were enrolled in the General Academic writing a research ten week course after the experimental group finished their ten week ESP course. At the end of the academic writing and research course, the students were asked to write paragraphs on non-discipline based topics.

When comparing the writings of the students in the experimental group with those of the students in the control group, the following issues were noted. First, the students in the experimental group were able to present a paragraph with a good organization and structure with clear beginning, middle and end. Second, the students were able to introduce elaborated content with rich jargon based vocabulary. Third, the students have used good grammatical structures. Finally, the students were able to achieve both cohesion and coherence through using the right connectors on a sentence level and through introducing ideas that are connected meaningfully and logically.

3. CONCLUSION

As it was perceived in the results analysis, the students who were enrolled in the ESP ten-week course were able to integrate and employ the skills they have learnt during the course in their writings of general topics in the academic writing and research ten-week course. Thus, they were able to develop their simple rich content sentences into complex well-structured sentences. In addition, they were able to achieve coherence and cohesion on both sentence and paragraph level. Furthermore, they were able to fit their content and ideas in a paragraph structure with clear organization of the main parts. On the other hand, it would be a good idea to apply this research on an essay level and analyze students' abilities in producing essays with content and structure.

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